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Title :

From Segregation to Integration

Abstract :

A powerful look at a personal experience of segregated education in Linda's life and that of her children.

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The first big impact of segregation came when I was sent to a boarding school down South in Basingstoke Hampshire. This meant I would only go home for the main holidays like: Easter, Summer and Christmas. Looking back now I realise it would be expected there would be a change in the relationship between myself and my sisters because I was away so much. Gradually over a period of time we grew apart or so it seems to me. Where at one time we used to play together I began to feel like an intruder as my sisters would go off with their friends. The friends I had from school were scattered over other towns and counties. The friends I'd had had moved away from the area and the ones still living around would not remember me anymore. Maybe there was the possibility my sisters were embarrassed by the fact their sister was classed as "backward" also they would not understand why I was away so much as they were quite young at the time and my other sister was not much older than myself.

Eventually I had to leave school because I became quite ill due to the fact that medical treatment was withheld and replaced by hypnotherapy which was not logical seeing as I had a medical problem. The school was eventually forced to close down.

I went back to the previous school and the foster home where I resumed the journey by taxi to school and back. This time initially I had the same activities as my sisters like Sunday School, brownies and sharing my sister's friends as we had moved to a different area. All this would constitute a normal life almost. This carried on for a while and I was fairly content.

A year or so later another change came. I was sent to another boarding school, this time right up to Scotland (what a contrast). It was just outside Aberdeen, not far from the Highlands. I spent 7 years at the school and got an excellent education. The discipline was quite good even though the staff could be strict, some could be quite harsh and at times extreme, but most quite fair. We were taught high moral values and how to speak and behave properly.

The first year I was there went fairly well and I was more or less settled. I still went to the Foster Home for the holidays at first but a year later all that changed. I started going home to my parents home for the holidays (my sisters were already there by now). This time when I went home I felt a change. I don't know why but I felt the difference between myself and my family was more noticeable. Maybe it was because they had more chance to get used to the change. Also my sisters went to the local school and had friends nearby while I went to school a hundred or two miles away and my friends were scattered over different towns and counties (again). By this time

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I had two brothers. One was born a year before I went to the second boarding school. The other brother was born just before I went home to my parents home. When I went home for the holidays I used to love helping to look after them and later to play with them. A couple of times I would look after them while my mum went shopping.

As time went on my brothers got bigger and started walking and talking and noticing more, so as I was away most of the time I would be like a stranger to them. Whilst previous holidays they would let me pick them up and cuddle them, now all they would do was struggle to get away from me - it was quite upsetting. Also when I first got home for the holidays my sisters were glad to see me and the first week or two we would get on quite well playing together and going out, but then the novelty would wear off and we would start arguing and fighting.

The first years I sometimes got a little homesick, most people do. But after a while I got used to being away, and to be honest, sometimes glad, because of home problems which segregation can bring about.

Later as the time came for me to leave I felt apprehensive, what was I going to do and what did the future hold for me? I did have hopes and dreams of what I wanted to be, but from what I was told of the plans made for me it did not sound so promising. Later it was hoped that I would return to the village part of the school which is a working village that came to nothing. Instead I was placed in an adult training centre for the mentally handicapped which I hated because it was still a form of segregation. I wanted to be like my sisters who had jobs and friends who more or less went to the local high school and also had a social life. My friends were in different towns and cities, still.

The transition and readjustment from boarding school to home was very hard and fraught with difficulty. There was always tension around because I was so frustrated. The things I wanted were no more than anyone else already had: friends, a job, a social life, to be normal and to be accepted. What was so unusual about that? Eventually because of the difficulties at home I ended up in a hostel where I spent the next few years. However I did not stay in the same hostel but was transferred to others because I could not settle down. All in all it amounted to five hostels altogether. It was during this time I got my first job with the help of my social worker, but sadly I lost that job because I was too slow. The next job which I found myself in was a cafe, this lasted a few months but I ended up leaving because of a member of staff. Being on the timid side at the time, I was not used to handling certain situations. The next job was in a school wear factory

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which lasted four years. At first there were a few difficulties to overcome but I found a friend who helped me and showed me how to deal with the teasing that goes on in factories. She told me to give as good as I got. It worked. We all ended up having a laugh now and again, in between work that is.

In the meantime I found myself a flat and will never forget my first night there on my own, I was so scared because every creak or bang made me jump. This was because I had never been alone before, as I had been part of a big family being one of seven children plus the fact being away at boarding schools and hostels where there are always plenty of people around. There were other people living in other parts of the house but they were strangers. Later on I did find a friend or two and kept in touch over the years.

For the first time in my life I had to fend for myself which meant cooking, cleaning, shopping, getting up in time for work, budgeting and keeping myself presentable. A year later I got married, we stayed on at the flat for a couple of months, then we got a house.

My first child arrived a couple of months later. This was a new life and a new situation. Now I was a wife and a mother with a child to look after and bring up. Some people wondered how and if I would cope. But it takes common sense and love and of course a lot of work. Also the fact that I came from a large family and helped out at school sometimes, because some of the staff had babies. I also had a good health visitor, doctor and a social worker who were very supportive. Family and friends would come and help too and we had good neighbours. My husband was out at work all day so I could get on with looking after my son and do the housework.

Things worked very well for quite a while, then all of a sudden my husband lost his job, so we had to manage on state benefits. After a while we were struggling financially and I ended up getting a part-time job to help make ends meet. It was around this time my son had his first serious accident - he got burned by touching an electric bar on a fire. I was so upset so was my husband. I was scared too that he would be taken into care, but my health visitor explained that most children have accidents some time or other and parents cannot be everywhere at once. She also gave us kindly advice for the future. After a while I had another child so there was another responsibility, more so because my daughter was quite delicate, also my son was on the hyperactive side and always on the go. A year later the marriage broke down and we ended up divorced which meant that I would

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be bringing two children up on my own. During the time the divorce was in progress, myself and the children stayed in a homeless hostel for a few months until we could get a home.

We got a maisonette flat a few months later which was in winter. The move was not too bad as I did not have much, but just as we moved in the central heating broke down, however that was soon fixed. Not long after we were inundated with household items and furniture plus I got a grant to get some things too. I also gained some new friends. Over the months I managed to get my home looking nice and cosy.

The next experience of segregation came when my son went to a special school which was one of the schools I went to as a child but under a different name - it was not too bad at first.

After a while I became unsettled because I felt isolated and also because there were one or two more incidents, with the rubbish chute being set alight, and being right next to my flat I was constantly scared for our safety - plus the fact that I am petrified of fire. I became depressed and found it an effort to keep up with the housework, though I did get some help from friends and my health visitor and doctor were very supportive. My health visitor got my daughter transferred to a nursery nearer to home, also she was always ready to listen and help.

At this point my social worker started proceedings to get me moved nearer to my mum's area, but I had to wait a while. In the end I got the move and ended a few doors away from my mum's. I have to be honest it was about the best move I have experienced. At that time my mum helped me making us meals and letting the children bath at her house and helping me organise my new home. It seemed we were having a good relationship and we did for quite a while.

After a while children on the estate got curious about my son going to school in a taxi and asked what school he went to. When they finally found out, some started teasing and calling him names. Up until then I felt he was no different because he had gone by taxi to his other school because it was too far to walk and too expensive to keep going by bus each day. Also at the time I attended the school I felt they had helped me to a certain extent.

After a couple of years my daughter started school nearby and she got on quite well the first year. The second year she was there other children found out who her brother was and bullied her. Her education started to suffer and when she tried to stand up for herself she was branded as violent, and I was told she needed special education which meant a special school. Meantime her brother

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had changed to a special residential school which did cater for his needs and did help him and he progressed quite well.

After a few years he had to leave because it only took children to a certain age. His sister followed to the school he had just left and she too did very well and caught up in her education.

In the meantime we started getting problems on the estate. Youths on the estate started breaking our windows and doors throwing things at us in the street and spitting at us, besides using abusive language.

While this was going on my son had started his new school and was not happy - he was being bullied, and also could not settle being so far from home and for so long (two weeks at a time). Plus he was being bullied from others at home by children in the estate. I tried to get him away but no-one would listen so he had to stay till he left.

Just before he left, his sister joined him (incidentally I had no choice in the matter) till he left in the summer. At first she seemed to like it but it was only her first term. The summer holidays arrived and my son left school. Up until the last few weeks he had attended college for two days a week to get him used to going, which seemed to work at first.

After the summer holidays problems started. Probably used to a smaller setting he would find being there full time hard to deal with and the college is a larger environment than residential schools.

At this point my daughter had gone back to school and was finding being away from home longer harder to cope with and the staff had a different approach. She did not last long there. After a while I had to withdraw her because of problems and only with a great deal of help from people. It took quite a while before her education was continued and then she still had segregated education for quite a while. This was in the form of home tuition. While her tutor was very good and supportive and friendly too, there was a vital ingredient missing. That was social contact with people her own age, and being segregated meant she had no chance of meeting people locally, which was probably the reason her brother had problems too. The fact that they were segregated was probably the reason for a lot of misunderstanding.

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One aspect of segregation is that children with "special needs" are apart from other children and don't see how others interact with each other with the community.

In my experience and those of both my children, segregation has only brought about problems and heartache, also physical and verbal abuse because of lack of understanding. I have fought for integration and understanding and have won in most areas. True we have had to move house to get away from impossible situations, but now we are settled. My daughter ended up in mainstream school, my son back at college, and my daughter is training at college to be what she wants to be. And we are living in a peaceful area and are accepted as ourselves. Through these experiences I hope to make people realise that compulsory segregation is not the answer for children and people with special needs. Parents should have a choice and should be given information and different options. A lot of special schools are good, but then some are not, and when children are placed in a school that is not suitable for their needs and kept there, it can cause a lot of problems and untold damage as well.

I think integration would and will work because children don't just need adult help to grow and mature, they need other children too.

Children can learn a lot from each other. Mixing children with special needs and other children can have a beneficial effect, because the children without special needs could learn patience and understanding towards those with special needs, and when they grow up and get jobs they will know how to deal with people with special needs and also through integration. A lot of misunderstanding and prejudices will be overcome.

By writing this article I hope to make people realise what parents and children with special needs have to go through because of being segregated and hope to help others through this work.