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What's the point of having Schools?

Abstract :

This paper begins by describing the educational changes which ensued from the Education Reform Act of 1988, the political ideas inspiring the legislation and its implications. It illustrates how these changes have operated in practice by reference to the situation of young people permanently excluded from school and examines the scope for an inclusive approach in school through the example of a project which was developed to meet the educational needs of a number of excluded pupils in Bolton.

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From exclusions to inclusion

INTRODUCTION

Going to school is an experience shared by the majority of the population of this country. Schools and what happens in them are also important matters for society as a whole. A glance at a daily newspaper will usually discover some item about the state of our schools: the teachers, the learners and the curriculum. Currently, one of the burning issues is concerned with the rate of exclusions from schools in England and Wales, which has risen sharply over the past few years. There are many factors that are attributed to this rise such as increased competition between schools following the Education Reform Act (ERA) of 1988. This Act brought substantial changes in the organisation of the educational system. Examples include the introduction of a National Curriculum (NC) for primary and secondary schools, formal testing of pupils at key stages in their schooling and attempts to diversify the types of schools through the setting up of City Technology Colleges (CTCs) and awarding grant-maintained status (GMS) to some primary and secondary schools. Schools have also been encouraged to specialise in areas such as technology or the performing arts, and to market their services, backed up by an open enrolment policy.

However, despite its intentions to improve standards and school effectiveness, and, in relation to equality of opportunity, promote greater awareness of disadvantage and a widening of horizons for all social groups, the reforms implemented have actually reinforced inequalities of various origins (Davies, *et al.*, 1992). An increased emphasis on formal testing has resulted in children (especially those with special educational needs and from disadvantaged backgrounds) being labelled as “failures” from an early age and this has been reinforced, to some extent, by negative teacher expectations. Limited entitlement to the NC for some pupils through the disapplication ruling, which refers to a set of official procedures to be followed by schools when they wish to make special provision for some pupils (e.g. those with emotional and behavioural problems), has generated a form of exclusion from mainstream schooling and, thus, a possible social disadvantage. Moreover, the re-emergence of victim-baling explanations such as working-class under-achievement, laying the blame on the home, the family and cultural deprivation, particularly (though not exclusively) by right-wing pundits, has also served to highlight the limitations of the reform. Finally, and very significantly, in terms of the ideology driving educational reform during this period, the influence of market values on education, persuading

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schools to be selective, competing for the “brightest”, and most able and highly motivated pupils, as Blyth and Milner (1996) argue:

“... it is these richer suburban schools who select their pupils from over-subscribed numbers and de-select those whom they do not want, either refusing to admit them in the first place, or, in the cases of many (particularly black pupils from inner-city areas) by expelling them in the midst of their secondary education if they require too much extra energy, pastoral attention or pose pedagogical challenge....”

(p.42)

In our opinion the themes of the ERA are central to flaming the exclusion issue and clearly there are many facets to the problem, too many to address in this paper. Therefore, it is our intention to focus on particular aspects of exclusion in a local context. We will examine a project set up to meet the educational needs of a group of excluded young people, what their experience at school was and whether those experiences contributed to their being excluded. We will seek to analyse not only the way in which they perceive themselves, but also the way in which they believe others perceive them, both of which may also be contributing factors in their being excluded. Finally the paper will evaluate the project to see whether anything can be learnt from its philosophy towards excluded young people and, thus, applied on a wider basis.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Within the field of research methodology in the social sciences there have been various strong reactions against the tradition of quantitative methods that emerged from mechanistic thought. One such reaction that was of particular importance to our concern was qualitative research, a term which seems to mean different things to different people, with various disciplines having their favourite approach.

For an educator, for instance, “qualitative” may bring to mind “ethnography” (participant observation), for a psychologist it may conjure up “phenomenology” (the study of the why people experience their world), while the sociologist may connect it with “ethnomethodology” (questions how human beings make sense of their interactions with each other). These are only a few; many other labels have been used to describe it. Evidently, the only agreement that one may find between qualitative researchers is that analysis is the process of making sense of narrative data, and this is essentially what we were endeavouring to do in this study.

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We were concerned to understand both the commentators on, and theorists of, school exclusion, and indeed schooling itself, as reflected in documentary sources, and its practical application, as reflected in the perceptions of a small sample of young people aged between 14 and 16 all permanently excluded from school and who attend an “Education Otherwise” (Bolton Youth Challenge Project - BYCP). Hence, we ultimately pursued insight rather than statistical analysis. The research was undertaken between two locations both utilised by the project. Firstly, a local college of further education, and secondly, a youth and community centre.

The approach we took had its own method(s) or framework, which guided the research process. The favoured methodologies in this case were first and foremost the completion by the young people of a personality characteristics table (cited in Fragar, 1984, p. 365). It comprised an extensive list of adjectives chosen to be accessible to them and which, essentially, reflected a number of personality characteristics. In the first column of the table, “*I am...*”, we required the teenagers to tick those that applied to them. These characteristics reflected what they knew themselves to be, whether or not anyone else may characterise them as such.

Moving to the second column, “*Others see me as...*”, we required them to do the same, but this time ticking only those qualities that they believed **others who know them** (both on a personal and professional basis), would tick for them. In the last column, “*At my best I am ...*”, we required the teenagers to tick those attributes that described them at their best. It needs to be stressed that the teenagers took full responsibility for the completion of their individual tables and apart from isolated instances there was enthusiastic and wholehearted participation.

Once completed the tables were then analysed in order to establish if there was any pattern in the teenagers’ perception of themselves and in their interpretation of how others perceived them. It is worth noting that although Carl Rogers did not specifically include the second column, (ibid.) we believed it to be of particularly importance to our research as it further clarified the ideas of congruence in the young people’s daily experiences.

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with a number of the young people, which afforded us primary source material to analyse and to compare with other sources, both primary and secondary. We were particularly interested in what school had meant in practice to this specific group of teenagers, who have been permanently excluded, what their experience was, and what might be termed, their “subjective understanding”; and, leading on, how school

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compared with their experience on the BYCP. Therefore, despite the issue of subjectivity, in terms of their own experience, it seemed to us that interviewing was the best avenue of inquiry to gain a deeper understanding of the teenager's views on school and education. As a method of inquiry, interviewing is most consistent with people's ability to make meaning through language. It affirms the importance of the individual, but also has wider implications for community and collaboration.

In seeking to obtain the consent and co-operation of the young people involved in the project, it was fundamentally important that we clearly explained the aims and processes of the research itself. It was also important that we clearly explained the form and nature of our methods and assured them of total anonymity, again especially with regard to their vulnerability. We needed to gain their trust and part of that process was to value them and their opinions. This included being flexible in our approach, more structured in some cases, less in others according to individual needs. The important thing was to involve them in the process; a point of view reiterated by Carl Rogers who commends and encourages the scientist who:

“develops a “mode of indwelling” in the world of the participants who are no longer “subjects” of research but “research partners” or “co-researchers”... it is the knowledge gained from this deep empathic indwelling that the researcher will then hope to organise in a powerful fashion so that new discoveries can be made and new approaches to the truth illuminated”.

(Thorne, 1992, p. 62)

BOLTON YOUTH CHALLENGE PROJECT

The project was established in September 1996 by Bolton Local Education Authority to cater for adolescents between 14 and 16 years who have been permanently excluded from school in the Bolton area. It is funded by both central and local government and is operated by the LEA in conjunction with Bolton Youth Service. The aim of the enterprise is to meet the educational needs of those excluded, providing them with a fresh start in education and a possible stepping stone into further education. It operates mainly from the Bolton Youth Workshop but partnerships are being fostered with the tertiary sector and private agencies.

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Currently, both Bolton College of Further Education and Bolton Institute of Higher Education (BIHE) are providing facilities for the venture, and the Rathbones Trust have created volunteer opportunities.

Presently, there are forty-three pupils on the register with twenty-four regular attendees, the overwhelming majority being boys, thirty-eight to five. Indeed, only six girls in total have been referred to the project since its inception. Provision for girls, has significantly improved since the onset of the project, particularly so after the establishment of partnership links with BIHE. As in all educational settings, the pupils are of diverse ability with a range of educational needs, but because of individual circumstances additional support of a varied nature is available. Therefore, with the needs of the pupils being of paramount importance, a flexible curriculum was adopted. Although it does not follow the NC there is a basic core curriculum covering mathematics, information technology and literacy (CLAIT), which is compulsory, but, overall, there is flexibility and the pupils receive a broad-balanced education including vocational subjects such as metalwork, plus leisure/sport and craft-based activities. Most importantly the curriculum is organised to cater for individual pupil needs.

Pupils are afforded the opportunity to negotiate most of their individual learning programmes with staff who encourage their participation, and in the process endeavour to facilitate personal responsibility. Staff/student contact time is substantial and considered necessary to build mutual trust and a beneficial learning environment. A positive approach from staff also includes encouraging close links and close co-operation with parents, as well as with pupils, to ensure the project is a collaborative venture for all concerned.

DISCUSSION of FINDINGS

On analysing the personality characteristics tables, it's interesting and significant to note that at first glance, the majority of the pupils perceived themselves in confident terms, such as, "cheerful", "trustworthy", "happy", "friendly", and "co-operative", all of which can be agreed are very positive attributes. There are exceptions and perhaps these reflect circumstances external to the project and maybe school in general. For example, only a few of the pupils saw themselves as "affectionate" and "loveable", which may have broader implications than the parameters of this research, though this constituent must be taken into consideration. It needs to be stressed that external factors are fundamentally important in determining pupil's educational

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achievements (Sharp & Green, 1975) and, therefore, cannot be dismissed when assessing the merits or otherwise of the BYCP. But, in terms of both their current and past educational experience, the positive self-regard of these young people can be seen as significant. Arguably, their current educational experience might also have influenced their views on how others (formally and informally) perceive them.

Although the pupils largely believed (fairly predictably) that others saw them in a negative fashion, it was not as comprehensive as might be assumed given their situation; possibly reflecting more positive relationships with those involved in the project. We also need to be aware, however, that some of the pupils might have interpreted some words differently and this may have put a different slant on their responses, but that does not invalidate the findings. Whether or not their responses are coloured by issues of comprehension, or personal considerations, the paper is seeking to understand why such children became disaffected with and excluded from school and why most of these young people now seem to have a fairly optimistic outlook since participating in the BYCP.

For most of these pupils, unconditional positive regard, which they have so generously been receiving from staff on the project, is probably a new experience, especially coming from authority, and may cause an incongruent self-perception. It is conceivable from our lengthy interactions and observations that these more positive perceptions may have come as a result of the beneficial experiences gained from being members of the BYCP. And in that regard the pupil's responses to our questions about the pros and cons of the project were unanimous.

"I like the people," said one pupil, *"they are kind and that, and they help you when you need help."* Kindness was a prevailing theme and so was being treated as an adult and an equal: *"They treat you a lot more like a grown up,"* commented another pupil, *"you don't have to call teachers Sir and Mrs; they are like my friends."* More than one pupil reiterated the belief that their relationships with the staff were based on friendship and trust: *"They give you more responsibility, more trust,"* was a typical response to questions about staff attitudes. Camaraderie between the pupils was also evident, as one observed of his relationship with the others, *"They are a lot nicer and a lot friendlier."* The creation of close-knit relationships based on mutual respect between everyone involved had also facilitated the creation of a positive learning ethos: *"I get more work done here; at school I never used to do that, really,"* was indicative of our queries about the educational experience and value of the project to the pupils.

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This positive perception contrasted sharply with their uniform views and experiences of conventional schooling whether in a mainstream or a special setting.

Little or nothing positive was forthcoming about the pupils' time in school and kindness was conspicuous by its absence in their memories of staff and, indeed, fellow pupils: "*The teachers were horrible, the kids were horrible,*" remembered one, "*everyone kept getting bullied.*" Another was equally succinct: "*It were horrible!*".

There was a consensus about one-sided staff/pupil relationships based on power and a lack of belief in their potential to progress: "*We were treated like children; that we didn't know anything at all.*" Whatever their own attitudes and behaviour, school had failed to inspire these pupils. It was seen as a repressive, rather than an enlightening and liberating institution and learning was a burdensome and demanding chore, with little value to them personally; scathingly dismissed by one frustrated pupil with the words, "*What's the point of having schools?*" Complaints about the pressures of school work also surfaced, as one of the group angrily recalled: "*The work they (school teachers) gave you to do in so little space of time.*" Trying to catch up seemed to be a part of their schooling experience: "*I was slow so they just gave me detentions,*" said another, "*I didn't get any help.*" Some did mention receiving help but only on isolated occasions from individual teachers, "*Just one teacher, but she took about ten hours to get there.*"

Such remarks (often reinforced by expressive non-verbal communication) perhaps give an indication of the added pressures facing teachers, pupils and schools themselves in the wake of recent educational reform. Thus, seemingly, those pupils who require too much extra energy, pastoral attention or pose pedagogical challenge are increasingly seen as encumbrances to be discarded, rather than valuable assets with potential to be nurtured and included. For these particular encumbrances, there was a marked reluctance to discuss their experience of school in any depth. In sharp contrast, there was evident enthusiasm to elucidate about the BYCP which seemingly saw them as valuable assets with potential to be nurtured and included.

CONCLUSIONS

Many factors, often outside the realm of the school gates, need to be acknowledged when exploring the vexed question of school exclusion. As previously inferred, socio-economic status

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and family background are still fundamentally important to educational achievement today, and there is much evidence to show that the attitudes and values young people bring to school outweigh those they learn in school. But, equally, there is much evidence to show that what happens inside the school gates has important implications for educational achievement and what *The Guardian Education* recently described as the school exclusion “*epidemic*” (p. 2, May 12, 1998).

Apart from the issues of resources, the demands of the NC and the spectre of league tables have conspired to encourage less tolerance of those deemed deviant or disruptive and a growing propensity to exclude (Times Education Supplement (TES), p. 8, 15th May, 1998). The National Association of Headteachers (NAHT) also blamed inadequate resources and included the “*integration of special needs pupils into mainstream schools, poor parenting and a breakdown in the community and family structure*“ in their analysis of the problem; the marketisation of education was not mentioned (Lancashire Evening Post (LEP) p. 5, June 22, 1998). The government, in the guise of Secretary of State for Education and Employment, David Blunkett MP, have acknowledged the seriousness of the situation and are now advocating preventative measures, though not in every case: “*We want to focus on prevention,*” pontificated Blunkett, adding, however, “*although there will always be cases where pupils have to be excluded for the good of other children and to allow teachers to be able to teach.*” (Guardian Education, p.2, 12 May 1998). Blunkett does argue that exclusion is not an insoluble problem and that the opportunities presented by education, “*have to be available to all children*”, (ibid.). He is of course wearing his employment mantle, probably talking purely in terms of employment opportunities.

But in order to make them meaningfully available to all children, all schools in the state sector will need to have sufficient resources and promote a culture in which exclusion is no longer seen as an option. Whilst Blunkett talks of investing in preventative measures to resolve the “*disease of exclusion*” (ibid.), he continues to tolerate the competitive culture of league tables and a NC which, argue Spalding and Florek, is “*based on discrimination - not equality ad integration*” (Booth, *et al.* p.83, 1992).

According to Will Swann, the NC discriminates because it disregards the diversity of learners and is too rigid for children who experience difficulties in learning (ibid., Ch. 7); the very sort of pupil presently involved in the BYCP. The NC is also delivered by teachers who are under

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additional pressures such as overcrowded classrooms, lack of resources and their own ideologies, which sometimes consider troublesome pupils (particularly those with special educational needs and from disadvantaged backgrounds) as incapable of learning and achieving. Indeed, the NHAT argue that the *“integration of special needs pupils into mainstream schools”* is one of the many reasons for the growing number of exclusions (LEP, p. 5 Monday, June 22 1998). Is it any wonder that those on the BYCP were so disillusioned with school! So, are there any lessons to be learnt from this particular project, which seemingly has transformed their view of education?

Firth and Horrocks argue that the starting point in attempting to resolve problems of exclusion should be the young person concerned, that is, *“listening to those who are directly affected...”* (Blyth & Milner, 1996, p. 86). The notion that we should listen to those directly affected is not new. Roland Meighan emphasised this point two decades ago and although his argument embraced all pupils, Meighan paid particular attention to those pupils labelled deviant and/or disorderly (Meighan, 1978). It seems that this lesson has still to be learnt by many people in education.

Listening, however, was, and is, certainly a starting point for the staff managing the BYCP: *“It is absolutely vital,”* maintained the project’s manager Jeff Hope, *“we don’t play lip service to this question, we encourage pupils to talk through problems rather than just dealing with behaviour.”* Listening also extends to formal counselling where specific issues can be dealt with in more depth. As we noted above when discussing the pupils’ views, this philosophy is paying dividends, and it needs to be stressed, not just for them personally.

Being listened to, treated like an adult, trusted and valued, being included has had a striking impact upon the aspirations, attitudes and behaviour of these once disaffected adolescents. It is reflected by **their interest** in education, but an education in which they have an active role. Thus, whilst the core subjects of literacy and numeracy might be compulsory, there is plenty of flexibility in the curriculum and the mechanism to negotiate a learning programme to suit personal needs and interests. As one pupil enthusiastically remarked of his personal learning programme: *“Yeah! I do cars, motor vehicles and its very useful.”* The focus is not purely upon academic attainment but on enabling the pupils to explore, create, use their initiative and judgement and freely develop their faculties and talents to the full. A key component in this process is ensuring a variety and diversity of teaching methods. The more methods of teaching

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that can be used and the more the different ways of learning are acknowledged, the greater the chances of effectively delivering the curriculum. Teaching on the project is characterised by variety and diversity and geared towards individual pupil needs. And, most importantly, teaching takes place in a positive and warm learning environment, a factor uniformly acknowledged by the pupils: “*It’s relaxed, the people are nice and it’s trillions better than school,*” was typical. Hence, their response to the BYCP has been almost uniformly typical too. The overwhelming majority of those registered on the project are moving on to training courses in FE or elsewhere, or directly into employment. The potentially wider benefits for society at large are evident, in terms of economic well-being and social integration.

Whoever the pupil is to be educated and wherever that may be, as Edmonds (1978) observes, there is not solely one model of teaching and learning for success. A policy of variety and balance is needed to reflect the variety and the humanity of pupils being taught. Different teaching approaches and learning styles all have a contribution to make to the personal and social development of pupils, but they should also “*facilitate their understanding, involvement, participation and initiation*”(Sebba, *et al.* p. 93). This essentially defines the BYCP. It’s culture embraces understanding, involvement, participation and initiation and, thus, acceptance and integration. BYCP isn’t the whole answer to the problem of exclusion and clearly there is scope for much more research to be done in this area. But, there are valuable lessons to be learnt from this particular project about exclusion and, indeed, education as a whole. And if David Blunkett wants to stem the spiralling epidemic, the culture of state education will need to more thoroughly embrace those attributes, so indicative of the BYCP. Moreover he, along with the government, will also need to heavily invest in all our pupils, both inside and outside the school gates. As Edmonds eloquently argued twenty years ago:

“We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us; we already know more than we need to do that; and whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven’t so far.”

(Edmonds, 1978, p. 112)

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