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## **Title :**

*No Such thing as a Good 'Special' School - The Expropriation of Education*

## **Abstract :**

*By sharing a vision of inclusion this paper draws upon the parallel between exclusion and the struggle for inclusion within mainstream education. This paper introduces current research that engages in the experiences of young people permanently excluded from mainstream school. This research can inform our understanding and create a vision of inclusion if we work from a premise that we are trying to create a continuity of provision where a young person is valued and accepted as having a right to education and on leaving school; a right to employment, a right to mainstream provision in college, university, a right to opportunities in adult life and opportunities to build relationships.*

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## ***Introduction***

Discussion on inclusion and education may be seen as concentrating on curriculum, pastoral systems, attitudes and teaching methods, but yet it has been recognised that a further dimension to inclusion takes on the notion of inclusion in society. In opposition to these themes is the process of exclusion that has been placed within a wider social context of exclusion and inclusion. Increasingly these opposing positions may also be reflected in the use of terminology. By drawing upon current research that engages in the experiences of young people permanently excluded from mainstream school, this paper highlights the conflicting agendas set by those who under the guise of 'professionalism' perpetuate the notion 'in the best interest of' those who are excluded. Understanding disability as oppression has informed various aspects of social oppression theories and the social model of disability. The power of professionals to dominate individuals categorised as having Special Educational Needs has created what may be referred to as the 'Special Education Industry'. Further dimensions recognise the connection between inclusion and exclusion, not necessarily limited to students with labels of 'impairments.' In this position it is important to acknowledge individuals and groups who experience oppression and discrimination who may share and describe exclusion as a common experience. Using a human rights approach to understanding inclusive education provides a challenge to the opposing values and principles of 'integration'. Critiques have viewed professional judgements within a hierarchy of knowledge and practices based upon an exercise of power and control. Sociological critiques of disability argue on the disagreement surrounding non-normative categories in constructing students' identities as 'disabled' or 'handicapped' as a moral and political struggle. By way of conclusion this paper identifies a lesson to be learnt from individual experiences and advocates a recognition that there is no such thing as a good 'special' school.

## ***From Exclusion***

The research 'Bolton Youth Challenge' (Kikabhai, 1999) examined the increasing concern about the exclusion of young people from mainstream schools. The report highlighted the recorded figures for permanent exclusion which were documented to be 13041 between 1997/1998. In particular, a growing concern arose with the disproportional representation of social and racial groups who continue to be excluded. It was recorded (OFSTED, 1996) that there were; ***“disproportionate numbers of minority ethnic pupils, in particular boys of Caribbean and African heritage (but increasingly also of boys of Pakistani heritage), being excluded.”***

It was also recorded that, ***“the permanent exclusion rate among children in care is 10 times higher than the average,”*** and young people who are labelled as having 'Special Educational Needs' are said to be ***“six times more likely”*** to be excluded, and young people who experience and live in areas of social and economic deprivation tend to have higher rates of exclusion, (Social Exclusion Unit, Truancy and School Exclusion, 1998). It is clear that this evidence alone not only supports the case that there is a racist response to 'difficult' behaviour which lies behind the exclusion, but increasingly other socio-economic factors have been linked to exclusion from school, (Bourne, 1994, Osler, 1997, Parsons, 1999).

A major contribution came from young people, parents and/or carers who participated in the research. As part of challenging the myth that ***‘parents don't care’*** the research explored the effects of exclusion on young people, families and carers. It is clear from the transcripts the lengths at which young people and parents have journeyed and the amount of stress and anxiety the exclusion process creates. A range of questions explored various experiences and in conclusion asked excluded participants for their opinions if a young person was threatened with exclusion, their responses were;

*“Don't do it.”*

*(Natasha, p.6)*

*“Treat us as people and not statistics. We know at the end of the week when they go home that's all we are. Someone they're trying to teach, who just don't give a damn, but we do, but the teachers at those schools don't realise this. Whether we're there or not they still get paid. To them it's just a job but to us it's our lives, it's our future, but they don't seem to realise it's our future. ”*

*(Philip, p.11)*

*“I'd say think of the poor kids future for Christ sake.”*

*(Adam, p.8)*

Chris Searle provides a succinct reminder through the experience of Jesse Jackson in *‘An*

*Exclusive Education;*

*“Exclusion from school has now become firmly established as a mainstream social and political issue, on both sides of the Atlantic. In the USA at the end of 1999, ex-presidential candidate and civil rights campaigner Jesse Jackson was arrested and handcuffed while picketing outside Eisenhower High School in Decatur, Illinois. He was protesting against the permanent exclusion of six black students and the ‘zero tolerance’ regime of the local school board, which was bearing down disproportionately on black students. ‘It is an honour to be arrested for a righteous cause’, he declared as he was taken to jail in a police van...Jackson continued by setting out the structure of a status quo familiar in British cities: ‘The schools are 48 per cent black and brown. The teachers and the board are 90 per cent white. This is what happens when you have these culture gaps and stereotypes and unfounded fears’ ” (Searle, 2001:2)*

It may be argued that these points challenge the notion of whether exclusion has a part to play in an inclusive society and further challenge a mind-set and practice that translate to ‘educate the few and forget the rest.’

The exclusion of young people from school runs contrary to the philosophy and practice of inclusion. At the heart of the debate about exclusion is the behaviour of children in school and what is considered acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in a particular school. Central to the position of these arguments and practices is the construction of a ‘special’ education system that is imbedded in government policy. Special education represents a plethora of interest in the power of ‘professionals’ on placing children into categories of ‘special.’

This categorising and placing individuals into ‘special’ schools may be traced back to the late 1800s. The period extending from the 19<sup>th</sup> century up to the Education Act 1944 saw the development of a growing awareness of children with disabilities and in particular on how ‘best’ to meet the individuals educational needs. This growing awareness became ‘best’ exemplified in the development and use of individual tests of ability – later to be called Intelligence Quotient (IQ). The perception and identification of educational problems as

being located within individuals may be seen as reaching a peak with categories of 'handicap' endorsed and legitimised by the Education Act 1944.

The Warnock Report (1978) witnessed the creation of no less than 11 categories of 'handicap' such as; 'educationally subnormal,' 'epileptic,' 'delicate,' 'maladjusted,' some of which continued to be used as descriptive categories beyond the Warnock era. The system of categories of 'handicap' contributed to a framework for assessment and provision and in reality saw the expansion of segregated schooling (Booth 1981 and Swann 1985, in Swann, 1983). Statistically the Warnock committee identified 20 per cent of the school population that could fall - or be positioned - into the category of Special Educational Needs, and a smaller number of pupils, estimated at 2 to 3 per cent, may by intervention require further interagency assessments by means of a 'Statement of Needs.' The Warnock Report recognised this conceptual framework to 'de-institutionalise' pupils into non-segregated settings and as a consequence introduced three levels of integration, namely; locational, social and functional. As debates for further integration emerged a growing emphasis was acknowledged for the rights of children to mainstream school, which came to be expressed as a struggle for the transfer of power through the political arena (Booth 1983:101 in Swann, 1983).

Segregated schooling may be understood in terms of the increasing recognition of difference in children. Difference which is determined by classification and labelling. This difference, within the context of education were – and still remains – perceptions of the efficiency of teaching groups perceived to think and behave in similar ways which informed and contributed to segregated provision (Cole, 1989:36). This concerted belief in the classification of individuals is reflected in the number of children identified as being 'maladjusted' in England and Wales which rose from 8833 in 1967 to 20995 in 1977, and to 22241 in 1983 (Cole 1989:150). Further, Oliver *et al* (1988:19) have argued that the idea of 'Special Education,' particularly in the area of behaviour, is a form of social control and where; ***“children are also regarded as deviant and their location in segregated establishments is thus part of the process of controlling deviant sections of the school population.”*** Extending this point, a wider implication and consequence of segregated education, as pointed out by Vlachou (1997:15–16), stated that, ***“segregated education is a major cause of society’s widespread prejudice against disabled people.”***

Disability has been regarded as an individual affliction predominantly cast within scientific and medical discourses. According to this medical model approach it is the individual, and not society, who has the 'problem' and different interventions aim to provide the person with the appropriate skills to rehabilitate or deal with 'it' and those who cannot control their bodies are categorised as failures. Similar themes of categorising individuals as 'failures' are also found within education where providing 'appropriate' intervention has meant attending 'special' schools. The theme that 'professionals know best what disabled people want' has also produced the predominant phrase legitimising educational practices on disability 'in the best interest' of the individual constructs a power discourse what Tomlinson (1982) refers to as benevolent humanitarianism and submerges into what Barton and Tomlinson (1984) refer to as a political process as a transfer of power. Within this critique it is argued that 'categories of handicap' such as; 'subnormal,' 'maladjusted,' 'disrupted,' have always included the largest number of children predominantly of working-class origin and also black children of West Indian origin, and "*this raises questions about the nature of special education – how far is it 'education', and how far is it 'social control'?*" (*ibid*).

Scientific 'truths' and 'knowledges,' plays [*sic*] in the lives of individuals and groups perceived and labelled under the pseudonym of 'other' constructs a particular form of oppression. These points may be understood in relation to the oppression of individuals labelled with categories of 'handicap' through the paradigm of medical discourses of 'professionals' who dominate the lives of individuals through the power of language, used as a tool of oppression. It has been argued by Foucault that language is not a fixed system of signs with fixed meanings, but a site of struggle, with power relations and politics, were discourses compete with each other (Foucault, 1977). The work of Foucault held the view that power is held by those who are able to draw upon discourses, which allow their actions to be represented in the light of 'knowledges' currently in society, in this sense 'knowledge' is power over 'others' and the power to define 'others' (*ibid*). What give rise to these ideas of segregation was the legitimisation through political processes juxtaposed with philosophic and scientific claims. It is within this context that it maybe parodied that segregated education is akin to incarceration, that is, there are groups of people who have been perceived to think and act the same who are provided with segregated forms of education. Within this analogy there are designated 'professionals' who are assigned roles that have facilitated the exclusion and denied disabled people a right to an education alongside non-disabled peers and participation within society.

A further concern is the increased number of exclusion at peak years and the exclusion from public exams, Thomas (1997) found that 70 per cent of special schools do not enter any pupils for GCSE, Thomas further went on to use the 1995/6 school performance league tables to show that 93 per cent of mainstream Year 11 students obtained at least one A\* - G grade, whereas only 16 per cent of Year 11 students in special schools obtained at least one A\* - G grade. This overtly revealing statistic draws concern given that the largest group of pupils in special schools are labelled as having 'Moderate Learning Difficulties,' nearly 55,000, and yet in mainstream schools students would have all entered for GCSE (Thomas, 1997).

Armstrong and Barton (1999) have argued it is these disabling barriers that need to be identified, challenged and removed, nor is this merely an attitudinal problem, ***“but one of institutionalised discrimination and oppression.”*** This point is further recognised by Barnes (1991:233) who stated that;

*“The abolition of institutional discrimination against disabled people is not a marginal activity; it strikes at the heart of social organisations within both public and private sectors. It would not be possible to confront this problem without becoming involved in political debate and taking up positions on a wide range of issues.”*

Within the educational context disabling barriers may be understood within the category of 'learning difficulties' including a range of official definitions in which the individual has no observable impairment. Labels such as Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (EBD) and the increasing use of ADD 'within' children diagnosed as 'suffering' from Attention Deficit Disorder described as a component of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). What is common to all these classifications is that the 'problem' is located *within* the individual and often paralleled with home deficit theories. 'Services for disabled people' and the idea that disabled people's needs are 'special' has become part of the uncritical dogma that informs service provision and has become part of a 'disabling culture' (Finkelstein and Stuart, 1996).

## ***To Inclusion***

The direction of inclusion has been a feature of the Salamanca Statement, in June 1994 a World conference on Special Needs Education, held in Salamanca, Spain, adopted a framework for action with a commitment to 'Education for All.' The guiding principle that informs this framework for action is that, "***schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other condition***" (p.6).

Thomas (1998:15) makes the point that inclusion is about "***a philosophy of acceptance; it is about providing a framework within which all children – regardless of ability, gender, language, ethnic or cultural origin – can be valued equally, treated with respect and provided with equal opportunities at school.***" In this sense inclusive schooling is not synonymous with integration, with respect to the time spent in a situation nor is it focused only on education with the education of students with disabilities, M.Forest makes these points;

*"Integration is traditionally seen as the amount of time a learner spends in a situation with learners who do not have disabilities...the deep meaning of integration is expressed by the terms 'inclusion,' belonging,' unity.' It is not a placement. It is a philosophy that says classrooms – and communities – are not complete unless all learners are welcome"* (Marsha Forest, The Centre for Inclusive Education in Canada).

Inclusion begins by a set of values that regard access to mainstream education as a civil right for all pupils and challenges the need for a separate system of 'special' education. Inclusion sees no role for special education.

These particular points are discussed by Oliver (1996) who provides a challenge to the concept of integration and recognises that further questions need to be asked about much wider notions of education in general. Oliver (1995:67) from a keynote address at the 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference on Special Education titled "***Does Special Education Have a Role to Play in the Twenty-First Century?***" argued that the whole system of special education has

been one of “**abject failure.**” Oliver continues by answering questions that illustrate its history of failure;

*“If we say the purpose of such provision is to provide an equivalent education to that of non-disabled children, it has failed. If we say its purpose is to provide a basis for the full integration and participation into society of disabled children when they become adults, it has failed. If we say that its purpose is to provide a special form of education to meet the special needs of disabled children, again it has failed.” (Oliver, 1995)*

Oliver acknowledges that the failure has been disastrous for all of us and makes reference to legislation that share an assumption – that it is the existing system that needs to be improved. On this point Oliver (1995:68) makes this comment;

*“I no longer believe that such ‘tinkering,’ however radical and no matter what motives it is driven by, is enough to remedy the massive failures of special education that we have witnessed in the past hundred years. I will go further and suggest that nothing short of a radical deconstruction of special education and the reconstruction of education in totality will be enough, even if such a journey takes us another hundred years.”*

Such ‘tinkering’ may be seen in various forms whether interwoven in language or practice and no doubt be evidenced in the revised Code of Practice which will come into effect and will change the way pupils with SEN are described, “**as schools move from Stages 1 to 5 of the Code to School Action, School Action Plus and Statements**” (DfES, 2001:6). The Code of Conduct is expected to be part of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 which reinforces the rights of children with particular emphasis on children labelled Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (EBD) to be taught in mainstream classes.

Barton (1999) argues that integration is based on a particular kind of ‘rationality’, referring to the ‘right’ of disabled children to attend their local schools provided the ‘rights’ of others are not threatened or dependent upon the ‘efficient use of resources’ whereas inclusive education

is concerned with the human rights of all children to attend their local school, and states that;

*“Inclusive education is not an end in itself, it is a means to an end, that of establishing an inclusive society. Thus, the notion of inclusivity is radical one, in that, it places the welfare of all its citizens at the centre of consideration. It seeks to engage with the question of belonging and solidarity and simultaneously, recognises the importance of the politics of difference”* (Barton 1998b:84 cited in Armstrong and Barton, 1999:215).

Further, Oliver (1996:86) in *‘Understanding Disability’* argues on a similar point that **“by failing to be critical, sociology can never ask the right kind of questions of integration”** and poses the questions;

*“...how can integration be achieved in an unequal society?...if integration is only the means to an end, what is that end and how might it be achieved? These, in my view, are the kinds of questions a new sociology of education must begin to ask in attempting to develop a new view of integration or inclusion, as it may become.”*

In this chapter Oliver highlights parallel experiences of exclusion and in particular makes reference to the apartheid system in South Africa and views segregated provision, which dominates the education of disabled children, as a denial of rights to disabled people in the same way. Oliver concludes the chapter and makes the point that **“the twentieth century for disabled people has been one of exclusion,”** and the twenty-first century will see the struggle of disabled people go from strength to strength in which **“segregated education has no role to play”** (*ibid*:94).

This message and denial of rights has also been iterated by CSIE (2001) who argued that the concept of SEN can be a barrier to inclusion. That is, **“if all children have rights to properly supported mainstream placements guaranteed and protected by law and schools are required and resourced to cater for diversity as proposed by CSIE, then the concept of SEN should become largely redundant.”** A similar argument has arisen in defining integration as pointed out by Vlachou (1997) who highlights the inherent ambiguities within definitions and

argues that attempts to define issues of disability and integration, “*impinges upon efforts for creating inclusive educational systems and has been used to cover the deficiencies of ordinary schools in responding to the education of all children*” (p.12). Yet it may be interpreted that these conflicts in definitions are central to understanding inclusion and inclusive education.

Understanding and interpreting disability as discrimination and oppression has increasingly fuelled the debate of inclusion as a human rights issue. Focusing on a ‘human rights’ position Armstrong and Barton (1999:215) argue that this, “*position is fundamentally different from a ‘needs’ position because it challenges power relations, structures and practices in society which are held together and sustained by the state.*” Rieser (2000) draws connection to the rejection of labels such as ‘PMLD’ ‘Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties’ that reinforce the idea of a “*continuum of fixed provision in separate schools*” and advocates that; “*we have to recognise that all children and adults have a right to be included in mainstream education and society as a fundamental human right.*”

A major focus of the debate on disability has centred on the issue of where the problems of disability is located (Oliver, 1996:61). As Oliver has argued, professionals have tended to see these limitations as stemming from the functional limitations of the impaired individual, whereas it may be argued that problems stem from the failure of physical and social environments to take account of the needs of particular individuals or groups. Oliver (1996) further poses the question, “*Is the problem of access to buildings caused by people being unable to walk or by the widespread social practice of having steps into buildings?*” A paradigm shift in understanding models of disability has emerged from the Social Model of Disability, from which there is a difference between disability and impairment. The social model of disability recognises the barriers in society and the failure of social organisation to provide opportunities for individuals to participate. The social oppression theory represents a powerful criticism of the medical model approach which underpins definitions that seek to locate both impairment and disability within the person or as ‘personal tragedy theory.’

Part of this struggle has culminated in the development of the Disability Rights Task Force (DRTF) established to identify a range of issues regarding barriers that prevent participation in society and to consider ways to bring in enforceable rights for disabled people. In the report ‘*From Exclusion to Inclusion*’ (1999) the DRTF highlighted that the Disability Rights

Commission “*should play an important role by promoting best practice policies and, where necessary, through conducting formal investigations. A new duty on the public sector should also encourage proactive measures to end institutional discrimination*” (p.9).

The SEN and Disability Act 2001 has provided a new direction that has yet to be challenged if all children are to be educated in mainstream settings. The SEN and Disability Act 2001 in part 1, alongside the increasing demands of pressure groups on disability issues, the Act has removed 2 of the 3 caveats to Section 316 of the 1996 Education Act. In practice these principle caveats on which to compel individuals to ‘special’ education have in effect, as noted by Whittaker and Kenworthy (2000:221), have come to be used as “*loopholes in the existing education legislation.*”

Through the paradigm shifts within education the language of the debate has subtly shifted from segregation, integration to inclusion. These positions whether theoretical, philosophical, practical or otherwise may be represented as founded upon ideological struggles which effect the goals of education, (Kikabhai, 2002). In summary, ‘special’ education has become a political target, from which people are questioning the role of such schools. These changes are equated with a fundamental human rights position allied with a better understanding of inclusion and inclusive schools that respect personal identities.

## ***Conclusion***

The construction of ‘special’ education may be understood as the perpetuated perceptions of ‘professionals’ whose claims to expertise and actions are framed within the terms and ideas of psychology. These ‘claims to expertise’ are grounded in scientific myths and are often situated in a power-base that dominates the lives of individuals. Social oppression theories and the power of disabled people has provided a challenge to medical and deficit models of disability by interpreting disability as a form of oppression. The formation of disability movements alongside the theorising of disability has taken on various forms and interpretations that may be interpreted as being situated in a time of widespread concern for civil rights, equal opportunities and human rights.

Language has become recognised as a site of struggle were the control and dominance of discourses become central to power. We live and have created/constructed a situation in

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which those things we discuss are dualistic – what I mean by this is that if there is ‘wrong’ there must be a ‘right’, if there is a ‘good’ there is a ‘bad’, if there is an ‘in’ there is an ‘out’. When we think of pushing the limits of language that we have constructed we find ourselves in areas and experiences of undecideability. When we think of ‘Black’ as a political statement we may begin to discuss oppression and racism. Arguments that discuss racism – because of this area of undecideability – may begin to say that all people are oppressed or that there is no such thing as racism. When we think of impairment and the language difficulties we have in describing people’s differences similar statements may be made. Within the paradigm of disability alongside our lack of understanding brings into focus areas of undecideability – we find arguments that typically argue that ‘we all have a disability’. By constructing this philosophical and linguistic position and saying that we all have a disability is the same as saying that nobody has a disability. These games we play with language diminishes and negates the individual and collective experiences of people. We negate the structural responses that oppress individuals; we negate the lived experiences of individuals who have a history of segregation, slavery and elimination.

Considering the way in which the ‘special’ school system was constructed we may think of language that impinges on the lives of individual people who find themselves forced into marginalized and restricted positions. When we think of language and think of segregated provision we begin to question the role of ‘special’ schools. There is no such thing as a good ‘special’ school; it is an oxymoron to think so, this is – in our limits of language – an area of undecideability. The underlying construction and intention of the ‘special’ schooling system was to label, marginalize and compartmentalise – this construction leads to restricting individuals to all aspects of adult life. The continuity of provision that exists consists of segregated ‘special’ schools, discrete groups in colleges, restricted access to university, sheltered/residential housing, lack of employment, all situated within a framework that constructs and creates a dependency culture.

Understanding experiences of exclusion can inform us of lessons to be learnt. When interviewed some of the young people had been excluded for serious incidents, some had been excluded for trivial reasons and some had been excluded because of their label. What was striking about the testimonies of young people experiencing exclusion is that they enjoyed attending the Pupil Referral Unit – comments about being valued, relationships with staff, respect, were common but yet one major comment that emerged out of this experience

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was the desire to be back in mainstream school; not because of their oppressive barrier but because of their opportunities to develop numerous relationships and circle of friends. It may be argued that by pushing the limits of exclusion will bring about the experience of inclusion; fundamentally though they are linguistic games we play. Words we use to describe areas of experiences, we draw upon these areas to prove a point. What we mustn't forget is what occurred in this particular PRU wasn't rocket science. However, it was about understanding young people, understanding popular culture, it was about achievement, it was about qualification, it was about family – not rocket science.

**All** special schools need to close, there is no such thing as a good 'special' school, there will be difficulties and struggles. 'In the best interest of' may be interpreted as vested interests primarily about jobs and an economic industry whose central premise is the myth of individual 'deficits'. What these organisations and arguments don't seem to realise is that we are also talking about people's lives. The right to education is fundamental to all. The expropriation of education, denial of rights and oppression continues to blight our way forward.

What is beginning to emerge from all these arguments is that we are at a dawn of a struggle of confrontation. We are led to believe that services are striving to recognise and shift their attitudes and practices to a more constructive acknowledgement of experiences within a social model of disability. These very same services are framed within oppressive practices and systems that negate identities, experiences that have witnessed the destruction of families, provision that has disintegrated the cultural cohesiveness, these services perpetuate their racist and disableist attitudes – yet these experiences are not uncommon. How are we to move forward? We can create a vision were the continuity of provision is seamless- were people have choices and exercise *their* liberty, the potential for all to have valued relationships, were people have a right to participate in the world of employment and social settings. It means our attitudes need to be challenged it means that the way we think of oppression needs to change, it means that we need to recognise the difficulties we have in using language, it means challenging what is blatantly oppressive.

What is central to this struggle for inclusion concerns issues about relationships and choices, the opportunities to fall in love, the opportunity to fall out of love, it is about relationships, fundamentally, it is about who 'We Are' not who 'I Am'.

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