

Bolton Data for Inclusion

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Title :

Inclusive Education: Past, Present and Future

Abstract :

A group of people who were invited to think and share some of their ideas and experiences around inclusion.

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Inclusive Education: Past, Present and Future

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The retreat and why it happened – a note from Joe Whittaker

Inclusive education – bringing people together

It has been over fifteen years since the language of Inclusive Education was first introduced into the UK. Bolton Institute organised and introduced the annual “Inclusion Conferences” from 1990 to 1995. These events featured educationists from Canada and North America, including Marsha Forrest, John O' Brien, Herb Lovatt, George Flynn, Jack Pierpoint and Judith Snow, all of whom promoted and practised inclusive education. These events had a considerable influence upon the thinking and growth of inclusive education around the UK which has resulted in a significant shift in thinking away from justifying inclusive education to fundamentally challenging segregated schooling.

National government, local education authorities and many schools have embraced the language of inclusive education and many are seeking to remove the barriers that prevent or inhibit the participation of disabled learners. The “Index for Inclusion” (written by Mel Ainscow and Tony Booth, and published in 2000 by the Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education), which guides individuals and schools to good inclusive practices, is now well established and is a highly valued tool for enabling people to put theory into practice.

In addition to developments within education there have been legislation and policy shifts towards inclusive practices across health and social services. These shifts have brought together a greater number of people from across professional divides into contact with each other, prompting the need for discussions about the meaning and implications of inclusive education.

Looking at language

The evolution of a language and its meaning has very important implications for practice. Inclusive education is one such term, where many fundamentally different and often contradictory meanings can be used, usually without question. This can result in the language becoming meaningless and the practice being distorted.

An example of this was when I was invited to visit a college that was described to me as being “fully inclusive”. I was reluctant to go because I am always suspicious when people say they have a “fully inclusive” service. There was an attempt to reassure me by suggesting I would also have the opportunity to meet a group of “Inclusion Students”!

Other local authorities have interpreted inclusive education as bringing together one group of excluded learners with another group of excluded learners in the same segregated “special” school. Such understandings of inclusive practices differ considerably from my own.

Often people are brought together to work on a variety of projects related to the “topic of the day” which, for many, could be inclusive education. But inclusive education is not a theme. It is not a project. It is not a technique. For many people, inclusive education is a fundamental struggle against the injustices inherent within our schooling systems – injustices which prevent particular groups of children and young people from participating in their local mainstream schools. This is a denial of human rights which will ultimately impoverish *all* learners.

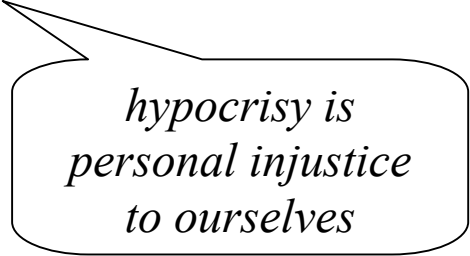
Not a “conference”, not a “workshop”, not an “event”

To reflect upon the language and practice of inclusive education, a group of people who have been involved in the struggle for inclusive practices over a number of years were invited to spend three days together. This retreat was not intended as a conference nor as a workshop, there were no visiting speakers, and there were no “experts”. The people invited were not representative of anything – it was simply a group of people who were invited to think and share some of their ideas and experiences around inclusion.

We hope the deliberations of the retreat will enable you to reflect upon some of that thinking which will hopefully act as a catalyst and strengthen you in the continued struggle for inclusive education.

People who took part

Karen Barton, Janet Cobb, Lynne Elwell, Maggie Gibb, Susannah Joyce, Kenn Jupp, Heidi Kenworthy, John Kenworthy, Navin Kikabhai, Gary Nield, Caron Peachy, Anne Rae, Sharon Rustemier, Julie Stansfield, Joe Whittaker



*hypocrisy is
personal injustice
to ourselves*

Getting to know each other

Our first session focused on introducing ourselves and understanding why we were meeting together. Each of us had been working in various ways for inclusion – in education, social services, disability movements, as parents, service users, and writers.

Our daily battles for inclusion rarely gave us the opportunity to take stock of our own lives, to reflect on what brought us to where we are,

on why we are doing what we are doing, on what inclusion actually means for us, and on where we want to be going with it. This gathering provided that opportunity for reflection, to renew our commitment, to share as people not just as professionals, and to identify the way forward for inclusion and our place in it.

We had all come from very different places, along very different paths, and were at various stages in our journeys. As well as the obvious variety of professions represented – social services, health services, education services, disabled people’s movements, parent-partnerships, citizen advocacy – people had different personal experiences of disability, were of different ages and life stages, different genders and sexualities.

Some of us had been to special schools, some had taught in special schools, some had been expelled or excluded, and some of us were mental health service users directly or through our families. We variously introduced ourselves by talking about our families, our achievements, our careers, our hurts, our experiences of exclusion and segregation, our work for inclusion, our likes and dislikes, our passions, our ambitions, our current circumstances and our recent stresses.

Already the group was in “a different place from when we started” – an inclusive space!

Reflecting on the Past

In two groups, we recalled the key events and experiences that had brought us to a commitment for inclusive education. This was an opportunity to practise for ourselves that honesty which is at the heart of inclusion, to be open – and sometimes vulnerable – and to make meaningful connections with each other.

A wide range of experiences and events had fuelled our commitment to inclusion. These included:

- personal experiences of exclusion and discrimination – involving ourselves, family members, or people we knew
- being friends with someone involved with inclusion
- key personal events – e.g. helping children go to mainstream school, promising we'd do whatever it took, and realising the action and protest that this ultimately involved – *“this was a catalyst for more honesty in my own life”*
- knowing/feeling that exclusion and segregation were wrong and then being able to name it
- the experience of coming together with other likeminded people, e.g. at the Bolton Inclusion Conferences – *“I thought it was only me”*
- listening to someone speak in an ‘ordered’ way, and hearing different speakers over time – *“they captured my heart and made me think”*
- hearing about inclusion at the right time and so being given a framework for ideas that were developing
- being exposed to new ideas (e.g. through PASS)
- living inclusion through working as the contact person helping others at conferences

- letting go of the role of “expert” – *“like a brick being lifted off me, the responsibility of being seen as the expert”*
- moving from answers to questions and recognising that we all seem to lack confidence at times about what we know about inclusion – *“inclusion is about honesty – not being sure”*

Inclusion makes me think of ...



... water. It is so common and plentiful, so ordinary, so crucial to life, and it is everywhere. Yet for many millions of children it is contaminated or lacking, causing illness and death.

Assessing the Present

The task of our second session was to develop an agreed statement about inclusive education. Working from our individual ideas, sharing with a partner, and finally with our groups, we teased out the essential elements of inclusive education.

Although we largely agreed on the values underpinning inclusive education, reaching an agreed statement turned out to be a difficult task. Some of our attempts included:

“Inclusive education is ...

... one system for all

... education which evolves from an environment where diversity of relationships is encouraged and valued and recognised as essential for learning

... about equal worth

... where the local school provides “whatever it takes”

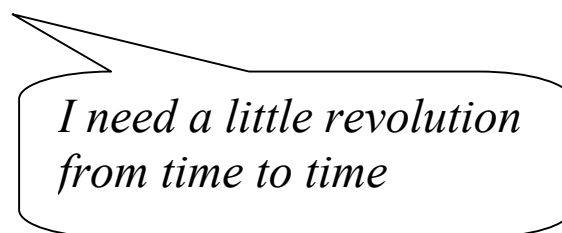
... an education system in which all children have the right to a local school where no child is excluded, where diversity is celebrated and where everyone’s contribution is valued; where learning, choices, relationships, play and friendships are central to creating a fair, just and equitable system, and the wider community works together to ensure meaningful continued inclusion

... treating everyone with respect and kindness

... education with a granted and guaranteed culture of accepting and welcoming all people to teach and learn together

... a way of creating a welcoming learning environment where each, irrespective of their culture, creed or ability, can develop at their own pace, whilst sharing space together to build a sense of safety and belonging through supportive relationships

... not a direction to travel, not a final destination; who you are travelling with is crucial; it’s a bigger deal than we first thought; when it happens there is “no blame”; so it won’t be a big deal at all.”



*I need a little revolution
from time to time*

Other discussions about the present situation looked at what it is that sustains us in our commitment to inclusive education. For example:

- not trying to make people change – using the hammer for building, not hitting – *“I won’t do anything now unless I can see the possibility of change for people in it”*

- making new allies, identifying those we can feel safe with and who are real about inclusion – *“our network is like a tapestry made up of many fine threads, keeping it strong is like weaving a cloth, we need to watch out for weak threads – the people who are making a career are not making change”*
- not beating myself up for “not being there” – letting go of the idea of accomplished perfect inclusion
- being honest with and about myself – *“we only have our own honesty”*
- success stories (and success can be small)
- constant engagement in the battles
- retreats like this one!

Inclusion makes me think of ...



... tissue paper. It's about being there for people, listening to the hurts they have experienced and being alongside to support them.

Inclusion makes me think of ...



... a book. Stories are important. They don't have to be long and complicated – just simple short stories, about people, to be listened to.

Are we just fighting to get kids into schools we don't like anyway?

Inspirational reading

“Irrationality” by Stuart Sutherland

“Velveteen Rabbit” by Margery Williams

“Shadow Syndromes” by John Ratey

“Skallagrigg” by William Horwood

“The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist” by Robert Tressel

Looking to the Future

In this session we discussed specifically what needs to be done to make inclusive education more of a reality, and our own personal commitment to this.

As well as the ideas, actions and commitments identified on pages 10 and 11, making inclusive education more of a reality also necessitates:

- “exploding the myths” surrounding education and young people – including myths about resources (transport, support, buildings), schools being “swamped”, individual and social

fears, labels (and the notion of “professionalism”), myths around learning and achievement, and myths about “naughty kids”.

- “hearing voices” – listening to children and young people, to parents and families, and to each other.

<i>WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE</i>	<i>HOW AND WHO TO DO IT</i>
Change the language that people use	Each of us to work on raising awareness, teaching and modelling respectful language in our everyday lives and work, through formal teaching and informal reminding
Highlighting problems with accessibility	Those of us who are disabled using regular community places at regular times, even when these are not yet physically accessible. Encouraging others to be more proactive
More Kindred Spirits courses	Lynne will mentor someone to run the next one. Julie will continue her organisational support, recruiting speakers, etc
Continue to recruit parents of young children to take the Partners in Policymaking courses	Lynne (and others) to continue publicising these through word of mouth, literature, organisations. Lynne and Julie to secure further funding
Close all special schools and halt the opening of new ones	<p>We can learn from the process of the closing of institutions</p> <p>Build knowledge on the alternatives to special schools</p> <p>Devise strategies, e.g. heads taking responsibilities for all children</p> <p>Work together with the few people who are openly against special schools. John will contact CSIE and the Alliance for Inclusive Education</p>

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<p>Make the physical entrances to schools more welcoming – and make sure there is just one entrance for everyone</p>	<p>Promote this through Kindred Spirits courses, and encourage more school staff to attend</p> <p>Influence LEA guidance to schools about creating a welcoming atmosphere</p>
<p>Work towards a government directive where head teachers of mainstream schools have all local children “with special educational needs” on their register</p>	<p>Kenn to contact CSIE and the Alliance</p>
<p>Shift financial resources from special schools to heads of mainstream schools (as in the Bristol pilot project)</p>	<p>Julie will contact Tim and Chris</p>
<p>Explore, share information about and/or create realistic, viable alternatives to schools, for all children</p>	<p>Learn from the experiences of others, e.g. Ann O’Brien, Jen Taylor, Linda Jordan</p>
<p>Offer immediate and practical support to families struggling to get mainstream places for their children</p>	<p>Anne is currently developing a project with the Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People to do just this</p>
<p>Challenge what’s “taken for granted”</p>	<p>Heidi to continue work in higher education through the MOWL course</p> <p>Sharon to build on research in further education</p> <p>All of us to promote more openness to new ideas and possibilities for young people, e.g. being involved in their own assessment, considering possibilities and opportunities after school and beyond further education</p>
<p>Engage in a national campaign for comprehensive legislation</p>	<p>Be prepared to act individually – we can all be involved in campaigning and lobbying for change at local and national levels</p>

You know inclusive education is happening when ...

#rules have been changed so everyone can join in

#gifts not grades are valued

#kids grade the teachers

#the community are in the school

#kids are joining in making up the rules

#when you stop asking questions

#when the 3Rs are respect,
relationships, responsibility

#when bullying disappears

#when the head teacher and staff eat
with the children

#when there are no special schools - and
schools no longer exist

#when people are not afraid to make
noise and mess

#when you walk through the door and feel
it

#when all the school are on first name
terms

#when kids are being kids and kids are
being teachers

#when people who can't sing are in the choir

#when it's part of the history lesson

#when there are wheelchair tracks on the football field

#when birthday parties take place in schools

Keeping in touch

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Inclusion makes me think of ...



... face rehydrator. It's hard demanding work, and we need to look after ourselves, take time to relax and refresh ourselves.