

## **Research Note**

# **Competing Values, Policy Ambiguity: A study of mainstream primary teachers' views of 'inclusive education'**

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## **Contextualisation**

The aim of this study is to show how teachers' views of 'inclusive education' may reflect the tensions, contradictions and dilemmas of classroom practice with reference to pupil diversity. My particular interest is whether teachers experience dilemmas around 'inclusive education' and how they resolve them. There are, it would seem to me, four sets of questions relating to 'inclusive education'. These are:

- How is it defined;
- How compelling are the arguments for it based on 'rights';
- What is the research evidence to support its promotion;
- In what ways does it influence or challenge educational practice?

I am about to embark on data collection, and I am currently piloting the first of two questionnaires. In what follows, some of the difficulties associated with the definition of 'inclusive education' are considered, the historical background is sketched and some of the reasons why I have chosen to focus on teachers' understandings of 'inclusive education' are explained.

Barton (1998) echoes the aspirations of the Salamanca Statement when he writes that "inclusive education is not an end in itself, it is a means to an end, that of establishing an inclusive society" (p 84). I am struck by a sense of irony to be researching the concept of 'inclusive education' at a time when the media reflect a sense of greater separation and difference within society. Examples of this are: the recent war with Iraq, with people positioning themselves as 'doves' or 'hawks'; the political moves to separate asylum seekers from the host community and suspicions about their motives for coming to Britain; and how British courts are reported to send more people to prison than in many other countries. There are other examples that focus upon difference and diversity. Currently, separation and exclusion seem to be recurring themes within the media; could it be that set against such a background 'inclusive education' may become at best an even greater challenge or at worse a form of Utopianism?

## **Introduction**

During the past ten years there has been a growing debate within education questioning the appropriateness of segregated provision for children with special educational needs. This debate has intensified because of a commitment to social inclusion, and with it 'inclusive education', both of which have become central components of government policy (Florian, 1998). The debate is not so much about the principle of 'inclusive education' on which there appears to be general agreement, but rather how it is to be realised in practice. The principle

is about educating *all* children in mainstream settings; the reality is how this is to be achieved in practice. One teachers' union leader urged the government to become 'more realistic' (de Gruchy, 2000, p 1) in its approach to education and blamed the government's drive for the greater inclusion of more pupils with SEN as contributing to increased stress among teachers.

Some authors have discussed the issues of 'inclusive education' in terms of Utopianism or Totalitarianism (Croll and Moses, 2000). Some have questioned whether there are limits to inclusion (Low, 1997; Evans and Lunt, 2002). Others have recommended a 'cautious' (Croll and Moses, 2000) or 'responsible' (Vaughn and Schumm, 1995) approach to 'inclusive education'.

As a topic, 'inclusive education' offers a powerful lens through which to critically view special education and the cultures, values and practices of mainstream education (Fuchs and Fuchs, 1994; Sapon-Shevin, 1996; Scruggs and Mastropieri, 1996). Despite the importance of 'inclusive education' to government policy, some researchers predict its progress will be problematic and challenging (Clark, Dyson, Millward and Robinson, 1999; Fuchs and Fuchs, 1994). This is because it is a complex process and its implementation may give rise to contradictions, inconsistencies and tensions in professional practice (Vlachou, 1997; Norwich, 2000). These arise because of policy and practice dilemmas arising from issues of how limited resources should be allocated and how to do so equitably. 'Inclusive education' is about how schools adapt and prepare themselves so as to welcome and nurture pupils with severe and profound learning difficulties and those with severe behavioural difficulties; the question implicit in this is whether 'inclusive education' should refer to *all* or to *most* students?

A further tension could be identified with the 'standards' agenda; do the agendas for 'standards' and 'inclusive education' need to be reconciled? Within an 'inclusive education' agenda what would be the role of special schools? These are difficult questions.

## Difficulties defining 'Inclusive Education'

'Inclusive education' is a difficult concept to define. Yet knowing what it means should be a prerequisite to setting goals or targets for it. As it is there are many concepts of 'inclusion' each with different nuances and emphases (Florian, 1998; Lunt and Norwich, 1999). Florian provides examples of definitions and concludes that a "truly satisfactory definition has yet to emerge" (1998, p 16). Similarly, Norwich writes that "it is rare to read or hear about inclusion nowadays without someone commenting that we are unclear about what it means" (Norwich, 2001, p 4) and he argues that it is a matter of 'conceptual choice' how one uses the word 'inclusion' because it refers to all forms of diversity.

'Inclusion' is in essence, a socially complex process (Clarke *et al.*, 1999) and as such, various definitions are possible. One consequence of having such a wide range of definitions could be that people are uncertain what it implies. As a result various positions may be adopted on 'inclusive education', for example: those who advocate full inclusion, those who take a reductionist view of it seeing it as dependent upon resources and those who adopt a pragmatic approach to it (Low, 1997). Norwich argues that there are divergent and incompatible views about the concept of 'inclusion' (Norwich, 2000). Because it is unclear what 'inclusive education' entails, Norwich argues that it causes difficulties identifying steps towards 'inclusion, setting goals and indeed evaluating it' (Norwich, 2000). Such difficulties in defining the meaning of 'inclusion' itself, is a possible source of confusion and tension, for its scope and implications may not be clear to those charged with promoting it.

## **Pupil Diversity: from integration to 'Inclusive Education'**

The greater integration of pupils with special educational needs into mainstream schools, was emphasised in the Warnock Report (HMSO, 1978) and ratified in the 1981 Education Act. The Warnock Report signalled a departure from policies and approaches to "handicap" that were pervasive until the late 1970s (Evans, 1995; Armstrong, 1998). With certain important provisos the Report recommended that the mainstream setting was the best for all pupils. This commitment to 'integration' as it was termed in the Warnock Report has had a wide ranging influence on later policy and practice, particularly in the original and revised Code of Practice on Special Educational Needs (1994; 2002), where the aspirations of the Report, were amplified and developed.

Such aspirations to 'integration' and more recently 'inclusive education' have not been without debate and controversy (Evans, 1995). For example, Desforges (1998) argued that the 1986 and 1988 Education Acts had clauses within them which reduced the chances of some students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) being integrated into mainstream settings. The Warnock Report was clearly an important historical and influential perspective on the development of 'inclusive education'; and yet other models and perspectives on SEN (Clough and Corbett, 2000) continue to influence how 'inclusive education' is perceived and understood (Croll and Moses, 2000). The Warnock Report provided a strong impetus towards 'inclusive education' (Hegarty, 1993). Nonetheless, the intervening years have been described as a 'struggle' to promote integration (Vlachou, 1997), or as "a sorry tale of thwarted initiatives and shattered ideals" (Dyson, 2001) leading to a situation today that is "fraught with tension". So while the Warnock Report was clear in its aspirations for 'integration' the subsequent legislation could not have anticipated some of the difficulties that would arise. Some of these difficulties are associated with how SEN may be constructed or understood; or how resources are allocated and to whom. Armstrong (1998, p 42) refers to these difficulties when he writes "in practice, categories [of SEN] are frequently recreated both as a resource management mechanism by LEAs and as a tool for prizing additional resources out of the system by schools, and increasingly, by organised parent groups."

## **Teachers and 'Inclusive Education'**

Teachers play a central role in promoting 'inclusive education'. Paradoxically, as one author notes (Mittler, 2000), they represent the single greatest obstacle to 'inclusive education' because of their "perceptions and attitudes" (p 8). They are judged as being negative towards 'inclusive education' (Clark *et al.*, 1999), and resistant to more inclusive practice (Hegarty, 1993). If this is so, could it be explained by considering the ambiguities of government policy on 'inclusive education', with the lack of clarity about what it means or entails causing tensions and dilemmas in its promotion and practice (Evans and Lunt, 2002)?

The Government's position on 'inclusive education', for example, is described as being 'conditional' (Corbett, 1999) 'weak' or 'provisional' (Evans and Lunt, 2002) and being promoted where parents want it and appropriate resources can be deployed (Lunt and Norwich, 1999). Government policies are thought, by some, to undermine the principle of inclusion (Booth, Ainscow and Dyson, 1998) because these encourage competition "between and within schools". The competing demands within the government's education policies may give rise to contradictions in practice. Furthermore, the complexity of 'inclusive education' may cause tensions and confusion about what it means, conceptually and in practice, at the levels of Government, the Local Education Authority (Moore, 1999) and within schools and classrooms. Such confusion about 'inclusion' may cause teachers to experience tensions, contradictions and dilemmas in their practice (Norwich, 1993; 2000; 2001; Clark *et al.*, 1999; Dyson, 2001). Indeed,

certain authors argue that “however pure and universal the principle of inclusion may be, its reality will always be partial and compromised” (Clark *et al.*, 1999).

## **‘Inclusive Education’ and my research**

In the past three years my focus has been teachers’ views of ‘inclusive education’. For this study a qualitative approach will be adopted using two questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The sample will be recruited from teachers in one London Borough with a commitment to ‘inclusion’. This study aims to identify barriers to ‘inclusive education’ associated with teachers’ dilemmas and to understand its possible limits.

The first of two questionnaires is currently being developed and I am aware of the problems associated with such an approach to data collection. I am aware too, of Corbett’s admonition, when she writes that “the researcher of inclusive education has to learn how to capture what is inevitably elusive and complex” (Corbett, 2001). So, in attempting to explore teacher’s dilemmas around ‘inclusive education’ through the tensions and contradictions they report, I am aware of the challenges that are ahead. My research questions are:

- What do teachers understand by ‘inclusive education’;
- Should anyone be ‘excluded’;
- Have they experiences of children who were challenging;
- What was challenging about these children;
- How do they resolve such issues?

I would welcome reader’s comments and observations.

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