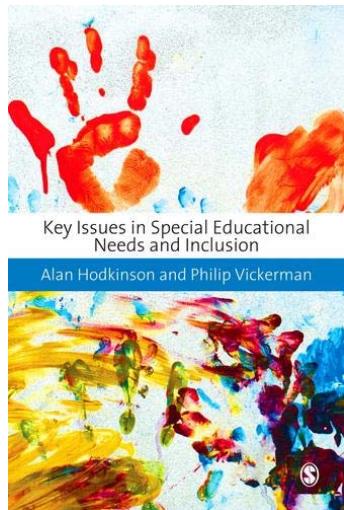


## Book Review



### **Key Issues in Special Educational Needs and Inclusion**

by Alan Hodkinson and Philip Vickerman

London: Sage Publications (2009).

Paperback £19.99 (ISBN: 9781847873811)

Review by **Frederic Fovet**

It is rare for textbooks on Special Needs and Special Provisions to focus on anything other than the teacher perspective or, at best, the student perspective. Inclusion however is a concept that flows from legislation rather than autonomous classroom practice, school orientation or local authority decision making; it remains, at this stage, still first and foremost therefore an issue of human rights, legislative framework and safeguards, as well as administrative implementation. This textbook is singular in its decision to examine inclusion through the lawmaker's lens; this is perhaps not the richest perspective from the point of view of an educator, for other dynamics may be more immediately appealing to the classroom practitioner, but it is certainly a dimension laden in complexities and subtle issues.

Hence the authors declare from the start:

Behind this world, though, is another – that of government departments and educational policy, of civil servants and the British public who provide the political will which governs and regulates the systems of SEN and inclusion provision. To understand the current context of SEN and inclusion we have to recognise the complex interplay between these two worlds (p 1).

The book also begins with a statement that it wishes to serve as a student guide and therefore will target a concise analytical overview of inclusion theory, rather than a detailed investigation:

The aim of this book, therefore, is to provide a starting point to enable students to develop a basic knowledge and understanding so that they are better placed to engage in meaningful and informed discussion about the issues that dominate SEN and inclusion (p 1).

The presentation and format are indeed user friendly and particularly suitable for use with undergraduates or in teacher training: each chapter begins with a summary, and extracts of legislative provisions appear in boxes, within the text. There are also numerous case studies (thirteen in all) which, at a later stage from chapter three, make way to highlighted 'Reader Reflection' sections. The intention is clearly to make the text more palatable to student readers but this does run the risk of interrupting the flow of the main text. The entire volume, on the other hand, is clearly structured with three sections, nine chapters - an analytical overview of the entire concept of inclusion remaining the target throughout. These conflicting

imperatives mean that I found some pages to be difficult to follow being both conceptually laden and logically structured and articulated – yet interrupted in several places by boxes, additional material, further legislative angles, etc. (p 112 would be such an example).

The objectives of the authors are admirable and they set out to not just take an overview of current inclusion provisions, but to also encompass the various theoretical frameworks, to provide international axes for comparisons and to trace the entire history of SEN provisions. This does seem overly ambitious perhaps, even when one considers the intended audience, and the text, as a result, suffers both in terms of clarity and depth: (i) the authors, in a desire to be simultaneously all encompassing and synthetic, prioritise structure over content; the index and the text itself as a result, though exceedingly structured vis-à-vis terminology and concepts, leave the reader somewhat confused and seem repetitive in parts (chapter seven restating much of the information already covered previously); (ii) legislative history is adopted as the only interpretive perspective on inclusion and, as a result, much of the literature on experimentation and research on inclusion, which in fact led the way to legislative reform, is sadly entirely sacrificed. The relevance of such research may have been far greater for student teachers than that of a mere historical overview of legislation, however exhaustive this might be.

Another shortfall of the volume concerns chapter six, entitled 'International Perspectives on SEN and Inclusive Education'. I was greatly looking forward to this chapter in a volume which sadly, apart from these few pages (p 90-114), limits its scope strictly to United Kingdom legislation and practice - yet it disappoints by the randomness of the chosen case studies. While Australia and the United States of America seem appropriate examples to attempt parallels and comparisons with the British SEN framework, the other two examples chosen - Asian countries generally (p 101-103) and Uganda (p 107-108) - leave the reader perplexed, as these countries share little with Britain with regards to their definition and interpretation of the concept of 'inclusion'. Issues of post-colonialism, as well as wildly differing socio-economic priorities, render rather irrelevant several of the conceptual frameworks that the authors present quite appropriately at the start of the book (p 15-31), particularly the systemic or holistic models. Without these conceptual points of reference, inclusion and special education have a far narrower meaning. The issue of inclusion lacks substance in educational systems where education is neither compulsory, nor universal. Was there hence really much purpose – or much virtue – in attempting a comparison of inclusion provisions in the developing world?

Another conceptual weakness of the textbook is highlighted through this comparison between the five countries: while the distinction between 'Specific learning difficulties', 'Behavioural, emotional and social development needs' and 'Sensory needs' is very accurately explained from the onset in the text (p 6-7), little attention is later paid to this subtlety. In developing countries inclusion does refer mostly to addressing, in the mainstream classroom, the needs of students affected by disabilities – mostly sensory and physical. In the Western World, the focus has however shifted radically over the last decade to include mild learning difficulties as well as behaviour difficulties, somewhat less complex issues that nonetheless fuel the majority of current debates on inclusion. The analysis might have gained in impact by limiting its scope solely to learning needs and disabilities, still giving rise to a debate regarding best practices, particularly as the axis of investigation for the great majority of the textbook is exclusively the current status of inclusion provisions within the British Education System. In doing so, the authors may have found it easier to address more up-to-date issues on inclusion and SEN provisions. Accommodating the needs of students with dyslexia, for example, or of a child with a hearing or sight impairment, in a mainstream classroom is now routine. However, developments in case law occur daily in Britain and most developed countries as to the rights of children on the autistic spectrum, or learners affected by Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Social Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties, etc.

In addition, there is also developing case law as to the benefits and hurdles of a universal provision of services to such a diverse clientele. Gender differences, the uses and impacts of technology, peer perceptions of inclusion and peer support mechanisms, hybrid teaching and the transformation of what constitutes a classroom space, as well curriculum modification are but a few of the axes of investigation which might have been worth including.

Finally, even from a legislative point of view, this textbook lacks a genuinely detailed analysis of the effects the implementation of Every Child Matters legislation are having on the practice of inclusive education. A mere two pages (p 155-156) may indeed seem a very thin overview when one considers the ground breaking approach this Act has had on inclusive policies, both theoretically and pragmatically. By embracing the 'whole child' theoretical framework at a national legislative level and focusing interventions primarily on 'well being' or lack thereof, this piece of legislation has entirely restructured the construct of 'learning and behavioural difficulties'. The Act has meant a rewording of child care and teaching for students with special needs, from what is lacking in a child's performance to, much more constructively, what must be provided - a radical shift that the authors perhaps failed to gauge. It is also, interestingly, for once a case of classroom practitioners and researchers in the field now leading reform at legislative level.

This remains a solid text, well researched and entirely laudable in its intentions, which must be presumed to be intending to facilitate speedy familiarisation with the history of inclusion and the legislation that surrounds it. However, as an Education PhD candidate having previously practised as a solicitor, I feel that while addressing two distinct audiences (the student teacher and the law specialist) it fails to fully deliver to either. In this sense it sits firmly 'on the fence' and this will limit its readership. While it will undoubtedly appeal to History of Education faculties, it will be seen, sadly, as neither sufficiently up-to-date for the Law specialist (particularly as it includes none of the wide ranging case law which has emanated from the legislation discussed), nor sufficiently grounded in classroom consideration for the undergraduate heading for the field.