

**DECOUPLING EDUCATION POLICY  
FROM THE ECONOMY IN LATE  
CAPITALIST SOCIETIES: SOME  
IMPLICATIONS FOR SPECIAL  
EDUCATION**

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# **DECOUPLING EDUCATION POLICY FROM THE ECONOMY IN LATE CAPITALIST SOCIETIES: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION**

## **1. Introduction**

A few years ago in a keynote address I gave to the Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education (IATSE) I posed the question, does special education have a role to play in the twenty first century? I came to the conclusion that it did not and that

“nothing short of a radical deconstruction of special education and the reconstruction of education in totality will be enough – even if it takes us another hundred years”.

(Oliver 1995.67)

While I have tried to specify some of the changes necessary for this reconstruction to take place (see Oliver 1996 Chapter 6), in this paper I want to take this further and suggest that at this point in our history fundamental changes are occurring in our lives and our worlds and that these will have profound implications for education in general as well as for special education in particular. In order to begin to grasp the magnitude of all this I will need to examine recent attempts to theorise what some writers have called the end of modernity. Thus I will locate my arguments within current debates about the coming of what has variously been called postmodernity (Bauman 1992), high modernity (Giddens 1990) or late capitalism (Jamieson 1991).

It would not be untrue to say that while these debates have raged within social theory for sometime now, by and large they have passed by attempts to theorise special education (see

for example Clark, Dyson and Millward 1998). Hence, as one of the other keynote speakers at this conference points out,

“The symbiotic relationship between regular and special education constrains theory making. Special educational theorising will not of itself challenge its central cannons to effect a reconstruction of schooling. The challenge has to be imported”.

(Slee 1998.136)

In attempting to rise to this challenge and to import postmodern theorising into special education, there are a number of preliminary points that I need to make. As I have already indicated different theorists use different terminology to refer to these changes that are now occurring and while modernity/postmodernity have become the dominant descriptive terms, I prefer to think that we are entering the phase of late capitalism. However, for the purposes of this paper, I will retain the dominant terminology although there will inevitably be some slippage.

With the coming of the postmodern turn, we have also seen changes to the nature of theorising itself. The goal of objectivity has broken down in the face of criticisms from a variety of disempowered and disenfranchised groups (Clough and Barton 1999) to the point where personal experience has sometimes become a standpoint epistemology. The overall outcome of this has been that theory has often been denigrated from both sides because of its partiality: it is either unrepresentative of or irrelevant to the lives of most people. The solution to this dilemma according to Carol Thomas (1999) is to combine structural analysis with writing oneself into the picture.

Accordingly in the first part of this paper I will describe my own intellectual journey which led me to believe that there is no place for special education in the postmodern world to which we are moving. In the second and third parts I will attempt to add a structural analysis to this by looking at some of the economic and social forces which are beginning to sound the death knell for special education, whatever it does and however it tries to reconstruct itself. Finally I will look at the future by writing both myself back into the picture and suggest that an active engagement in postmodern politics can contribute to building a more inclusive world.

## **2. THE SPECIAL EDUCATION PARADIGM**

### **A personal account**

My critique of special education and subsequent calls for its abolition have not been based upon direct personal experience. I never attended a special school as a pupil though many of my friends did and I have heard them talk bitterly about their experiences. My own experience came initially when I taught, or more accurately attempted to teach, young offenders to read and write and subsequently when as a lecturer in special educational needs I visited numerous special and ordinary schools who were attempting to meet special educational needs. Finally I served as a member of the Fish Committee which reviewed special needs provision in Inner London in the 1980s. During this time I met many committed and dedicated professionals and many contented children.

I make these points in order to separate out my attitude to and experience of special education. While my experiences, in many instances were positive, I was and remain implacably opposed to the very existence of special education. This attitude was shaped crucially by a document called the “Fundamental Principles of Disability” (UPIAS 1976) produced by an organisation of disabled people known as the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation. This document not only called for the abolition of all institutions which segregated disabled people but provided a rationale and justification for so doing. All my subsequent work including that on education has been shaped by this ‘little red book’ (Oliver 1996). The point I am trying to make here is that my critique of special education has been a conceptual, analytical and political one and not one deriving from some unfortunate personal experiences in special schools.

In describing my thinking about special education, I propose to make use of the work of Thomas Kuhn on ‘knowledge paradigms’. In his great work The Structure of Scientific Revolutions he describes how knowledge paradigms replace one another, not through the gradual evolution of our understanding and the accumulation of facts about the world but through but through the emergence of what he called anomalies in the existing paradigm. Eventually, he argues, these anomalies become so great that they force a shift to an entirely new paradigm through nothing more or less than a complete revolution in our thinking.

This idea of the replacement of one paradigm by another through a knowledge revolution is helpful in understanding our current experience in special education; in Kuhn’s terms we are moving from a special to an inclusive education paradigm. In my view the anomalies in the

special education paradigm are becoming so numerous that we are approaching paradigm incommensurability, by which Kuhn meant that the particular worldview was falling apart, was becoming unsustainable. In discussing the emergence of anomalies in the special education paradigm I shall firstly discuss those personal anomalies which resulted from my own direct experience before going on to discuss anomalies which have emerged through developments in policy and practice.

I met a young man who I shall call 'Foxy' thirty years ago when I attempted to teach him in the young offenders' prison where I then worked. He had been labelled as educationally subnormal (severe) and his IQ was recorded as 55. Despite his attempts and mine he couldn't read a word on the day I met him and he still couldn't read a word on the day he was discharged from the prison some 18 months later. Foxy was a passionate fan of Southampton Football Club and he claimed to know not only the result of every match they had played since the end of the second world war but also who scored the goals. He further claimed that he could list all 11 players for each of those matches. I didn't believe him, of course, and initially I exhorted him to stop boasting and concentrate on acquiring some literacy skills.

It turned out that Foxy could do what he claimed but that only became apparent after I undertook detailed research myself into the recent past of Southampton Football Club. I may be an Arsenal supporter but I was young and committed to my work. With such talent all the education system could do for Foxy was to give him a stigmatising label and a measurement which was a gross violation of his real abilities. I can't help feeling that if he

had been born into a pre-literate society, he would have been a key figure in passing on their history and culture. I don't know what happened to Foxy but I bet he is not a professor of oral history in one of our universities.

My second personal anomaly came some 10 years later just after I had become a lecturer in special educational needs. One of my in-service students worked in a school for the delicate as it was then called. Within this school many of the children were labelled as autistic (later softened to children with autistic tendencies) and a small number of these labelled children possessed skills not dissimilar to Foxy's. They could draw with architectural precision, they could memorise music after one hearing and not just songs, whole symphonies, concertos and the like. One such person as an adult was portrayed by Dustin Hoffman in the film 'Rainman'.

Once again special education could not bring out the best in these children. It could give them a wholly inappropriate label and attempt to explain their skills by coming up with the pseudo-scientific label 'anomalous representation', whatever that may mean. It could keep them safe and secure but was singly unable to build upon these prodigious talents and develop these children to their full educational and social potential. These children were integrated into the special education paradigm as it was because these talents were labelled as special needs. This also kept the paradigm safe and secure; there was no attempt to question a paradigm which could not explain these wondrous skills.

My third anomaly occurred a few years later. I was a guest speaker at an EEC conference on special education in Holland and as part of the conference I spent a day with several young people with learning difficulties in their group home. It was a very pleasant day, the young people were very welcoming and they discussed their lives and their educational experiences fully and openly. The group home itself was like group homes all over the modern world, clean, comfortable and well designed. But it failed my own personal test of acceptability; I wouldn't have been prepared to live there so I don't think other people should be forced to either.

But that is not the main point I wish to make. What was remarkable about the day was that the language spoken was English. A monolingual senior academic from a University is reliant on six bi-lingual students who are labelled as having learning difficulties for a satisfactory means of communication. I was visiting their country at their expense as a renowned expert in special education and yet I was completely reliant on them. And yet I carried with me the positive academic label 'professor' and they carried with them the essentially negative label 'learning difficulties'. There is surely something anomalous in this.

Personal anomalies, of course, are never enough to produce a paradigm revolution in themselves. It takes what we might call structural or external anomalies to appear as well.

The first of these was formally identified by the Warnock Report (1978) when it argued that special education until then had been structured by medical rather than educational need. As a consequence of this, the Report's authors argued that the medical classifications which were central to the special education enterprise should be replaced by categories of special

educational need. Unfortunately however, the changes produced in the system as the report's recommendations were implemented in policy, were relatively marginal because, although the labels may have changed, the practices underpinning them were still based upon an individualised and even still a medicalised model of educational development. Hence while the anomaly itself may not have produced a revolution, it opened a crack in this particular worldview.

A second structural anomaly was appearing in the special education system as well. Both research and direct experience was revealing systemic biases: proportionately more black children than white were ending up in special education, more working class than middle class children and more boys than girls (Mongon 1982). These biases could only be explained in one of two ways. Either the system was accurately reflecting the different needs of these groups; that is, black children, working class children and boys had greater special needs than white, middle class children and girls; or that the operation of the special education system was somehow itself responsible for producing these systemic biases. Few people would seriously argue for the former position anymore and yet we still have a special educational paradigm which reproduces disadvantage based upon race, gender and class. Nevertheless this systemic bias remains another and widening crack in the paradigm.

A third structural anomaly centres on the question of whose needs are actually being met by the special education paradigm.. Nearly twenty years ago now Sally Tomlinson published a book [A Sociology of Special Education](#) (1981) in which she argued that it was not the needs of SEN pupils, but those of ordinary schools and the professional staff who work in

both special and ordinary education who really benefited from the existence of the special education system. While the book was a fairly traditional neo-Weberian analysis, the application of its ideas to special education caused a furore amongst special educators and Tomlinson herself was demonised in many gatherings and conferences. Few would now disagree with her central thesis however: that the special education paradigm serves the interests of a variety of groups, organisations and institutions, only one of which are the children so labelled. So there remains yet another crack in the paradigm; special education is not just about meeting the educational needs of 'special' children.

One of the problems in applying Kuhn's analysis is that it doesn't provide any historical framework in which to locate and even explain why one knowledge paradigm replaces another and why it does so at particular historical moments. These are the issues to which I now need to turn in order to discuss the replacement of the special educational needs paradigm by an inclusive one. In order so to do, I shall briefly discuss the changing relationship between the economy and social policy before going on to discuss the implications that this will have for education in general and special needs education in particular.

### **3. A STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS**

#### **The economy and social and educational policy**

In discussing the relationship between the economy and education (as well as social) policy we need to bear in mind the point made earlier by Slee (1998), namely that there is a symbiotic relationship between regular and special education. In other words, special

education has developed in the ways it has because it has been dependent, by and large, on regular education. And there is no doubt that since the rise of modernity, social and educational policy has been shaped by capital's need for accumulation and profit although this is not an attempt to deny that political struggles against inequality and injustice have also played a part. Hence all social and educational policy can be seen (in part at least) as inextricably linked and intended to facilitate these two aims. The welfare state, in its broadest sense, has been part of this and has been seen as a project of modernity.

As I have already suggested most social theorists are now in agreement (though they may not use the same terminology to discuss it) that at present we are in transition from one kind of society to another: the current code suggests from modernity to postmodernity. If this is the case, and I have already indicated that I think it is, then it is likely that the relationship between the economy and social policy may also change fundamentally. Giddens (1998), for example, suggests that the new welfare state must switch to being a 'risk-management' enterprise whose aim is to prevent problems from occurring rather than one which compensates afterwards. This would obviously involve a renegotiation of the relationship between the economy and social and educational policy; he suggests that the radically reformed welfare state would, in fact be a 'social investment state in the positive welfare society' (Giddens 1998.127).

If Giddens is right, then the implications for special education are indeed profound. Upto now the special education paradigm has attempted to compensate individuals for their (presumed) intellectual, physical or behavioural deficits although, as I and others have already suggested, it has failed. Quite how it could reconstruct itself as a risk management

enterprise is difficult to see and hence it is unlikely to be provided with the social investment to make a positive contribution to the welfare society. Hence, as I have already suggested, the future for special education is thankfully bleak.

Inevitably then the goals of social and educational policy are already in the process of changing in the postmodern society to which we are moving. Under modernity the main goals of policy were a healthy and compliant workforce and a social division of labour which reproduced this. Leaving aside the odd difficulty caused by the boom and bust trade cycle, by and large under modernity social policy delivered these goals very well. However it is becoming increasingly obvious that under the conditions of postmodernity with the rise of the global economy and higher productivity due to new technology, these conditions are changing fast. In sum less people work to produce more goods and the goals of the postmodern state are not so much concerned with the supply of labour and social reproduction as with the demand for goods world-wide and the need to control the ever increasing non-working population.

This I would suggest, will inevitably mean that the relationship between the economy and social and educational policy will need to change fundamentally to address these goals.

“Social policy in such conditions is conceived less as a means to redistribute incomes and wealth, or to act as a band-aid for capitalism , and rather as a means of increasing individual opportunities by creating labour market flexibility in a global economy and expanding the non-inflationary growth rate of the British economy”.

(Driver and Martell 1999.250)

I would further suggest that this change is so radical that it represents nothing less than a decoupling of the economic from the social at least at the level of the nation state.

Undoubtedly this will have profound implications for social policy in general and education policy in particular. It is the magnitude of some of these changes that postmodernity will bring for education policy that I will discuss in the next section.

### **Decoupling work and education in the postmodern world**

As the nature of work changes in the postmodern world, it is inevitable that the relationship between work and education is becoming decoupled. This is bound to have a major impact on education. As Lipsky and Gartner put it

“Just as the regime of the production line influenced the shape of public education in the industrial era, the nature of post-industrial society and its work have consequences for the educational system of the twenty first century”.

(Lipsky and Gartner 1997.250)

Under conditions of postmodernity, education no longer functions to serve the needs of the capitalist nation state.

The reasons for this are becoming increasingly obvious. To begin with we are seeing the rise of the global economy in which both the size and power of multi-national companies are beginning to supersede the nation state. As a consequence these multi-nationals have a presence in education systems with their sponsorship schemes buying books, computers and other equipment and funding research and scholarship. Additionally the global economy is increasingly being driven by consumption rather than production making the rationale for

these sponsorship schemes obvious; their corporate imagery penetrates deeper and deeper into ever younger minds. Finally, flexible labour markets are becoming increasingly internationalised, posing difficulties for national education systems. As more and more young people come to realise that their futures have been exported, they increasingly vote with their feet and abandon their schools for the shopping malls and the streets.

Given these far reaching and fundamental changes which are now occurring in the economy, it is obvious that the relationship between it and education will also change fundamentally. But more importantly for our purposes here, if these changes are indeed occurring, then there is bound to be a considerable impact on special education itself. Before going on to consider this in some detail, we need to examine the evidence we already have for changes in the relationship between education and the economy that are beginning to occur.

One obvious change as we move away from the condition of modernity is that less people are working to support more people who don't. This is reproduced in education where the numbers of people studying full and part-time are far greater than they have ever been.

Additionally we see governments supporting a whole range of 'education for life' initiatives which acknowledge that the old relationship between education and the economy has broken down; schooling no longer ends when adolescents have been prepared for jobs for life.

“Governments need to emphasise 'life long education', developing education programmes that start from an individual's early years and continue on even late in life”.

(Giddens 1998.125)

Further, with the marketisation of education, we have seen a move away from the ideology of 'education for personal growth' and onto education serving the needs of flexible international labour markets and the global economy. Finally in recent years we have seen the development of sustained critiques of the normative criteria such as IQ testing on which education for modernity have been based.

But not all the trends are in the same direction. For example we see the education curriculum, in schools as well as further and higher education, being driven increasingly by other kinds of normative criteria such as standard assessment tests (SATS) of one kind or another. Additionally, despite the development of flexible learning systems, we continue to see paper chases to obtain educational qualifications for jobs where such qualifications are not necessary because, as Jordan has recently pointed out

“...it is a complete fallacy to suppose a correlation between high standards in education and technical training and high levels of economic participation”.

(Jordan 1998.47)

And finally of course, despite the effects of globalisation, national politicians still see votes for education as key to their election. So in the recent general election in Britain, when Tony Blair was asked to list his three priorities for government, he replied 'education, education, education'.

### **Special education and the contradictions of postmodernity**

This apparently contradictory set of ‘social facts’ are relatively easy to explain. We are straddling the shift from one kind of society to another and under such circumstances we can expect to see a battle between conservative and radical forces . Indeed the German sociologist Karl Mannheim drew attention to this in a book tellingly entitled Ideology and Utopia. More recently other writers have turned to this and Jock Young has called the phenomenon “the contradictions of late modernity”. Using a nautical metaphor, he explains

“The movement into late modernity is like a ship which has broken from its moorings. Many of the crew try to return to the familiar sanctuary of the harbour but to their alarm the compass spins, the ship continues on its way and, looking back, the quay is no longer secure: at times it seems to be falling apart, its structure fading and disintegrating. The siren voices which forlornly, seriously, soberly try to convince them that going back is possible are mistaken.”

(Young 1999.191)

So what does all this mean for special education? If education is going to be re-created in the new society to which we are moving and going back is impossible, then it is also inevitable that special education will be transformed by that process of re-creation, indeed if it is to survive at all. Special education does not exist in some kind of privileged vacuum which will keep it immune from these changes because

“There can be no disputing that the history of special education is inseparable from the history of regular education”.

(Richardson 1999.xv)

In fact, we can begin to see from the struggles already being waged over the role and future of special education that it will be transformed by some of the major social and economic forces I have outlined in this paper. The way in which debates in special education have moved away from what used to be called the integration/segregation debate and onto what has come to be called the inclusion/exclusion debate is indicative of the fact that this debate, once narrowly confined to education is now about the possibility of the inclusive society (Oliver 1996). And with the coming of the idea of the inclusive society, special education which has excluded throughout its history faces the possibility of its own demise.

Of course, it is possible to argue, as Roger Slee does, that this shift 'connotes a linguistic adjustment to present a politically correct façade to a changing world' (Slee 1998.131). While this may be the case for many within special education, I would argue that the implications of this changing world are so profound that mere linguistic adjustment is a strategy which is bound to fail those special educators wishing to keep things as they are. And for the remainder of this paper, I do not wish to concentrate on those reactionary, conservative forces which promote such a strategy, but instead, to focus on the radical, transformative potential that may emerge from some of the struggles beginning to take place in and over special education.

#### **4. WRITING OURSELVES BACK INTO HISTORY**

##### **The politics of postmodernity**

The contradictions of late modernity identified earlier as just as apparent in the arena of human agency as they are in other aspects of our worlds. On the one hand we see the

decline of traditional political institutions like monarchies, states and parties and yet on the other we see a plethora of disempowered and disenfranchised groups organising themselves into new social movements of all kinds. These movements often cross national boundaries, present broadly based critiques of existing economic, political and social institutions and arrangements and use a whole range of tactics to promote their ideas and goals.

Special education is not immune from the effects of these new social movements. It is not changing just because of the anomalies in its paradigm, nor is it just being changed by the broader economic and social forces that are transforming all our lives. It is also being transformed by the dissenting voices of disabled people ourselves: we are writing ourselves into the picture of an inclusive postmodernity. With the rise of a powerful international disability movement, the critical voices of disabled people have begun to speak out against our decarceration in all areas of our lives and the institutions in which we have been placed under modernity; whether those institutions be residential homes, hospitals, villages, special schools or units. Hence political struggles have developed around our rights to go to the schools, colleges and universities of our choice as well as all other areas of economic and social life (Campbell and Oliver 1996).

These struggles have not merely been positional or locational however. They have also taken place at the ideological or cultural level and have promoted celebrations rather than control of difference. This has been allied to an increasingly thriving disability arts movement which has moved beyond 'art as therapy' and onto 'transformative identity politics' and beyond. Of course, the contradictions of late modernity cannot be ignored here either; with the

emergence of the radical forces of celebration we have also seen the coming of the conservative forces of eradication. For disabled people the potential for celebration with the coming of postmodernity is, at least, tempered by the threats of genetic engineering, selective abortion, non-resuscitation policies, health care rationing and euthanasia.

In these increasingly intense struggles between conservative and radical forces, standing still is not an option for special education. If the forces of reaction emerge triumphant, society will not continue to fund special places for special people because the economic returns will not justify it and eradication will be the preferred option. If the forces of radicalism emerge triumphant, there will simply be no place for special education in the inclusive society. The final question for this paper therefore is, who will win?

## **5. CONCLUSIONS**

At the beginning of this paper I suggested that I was more comfortable with the term late capitalism rather than postmodernity. My reason for this is that my own intellectual background owes much to Marxist social theory. To put it bluntly, I was a marxist before it was fashionable, while it was fashionable and I still think it has much to offer now it is no longer fashionable. One thing that it has to offer which postmodernism does not, is an optimistic view of the future. While postmodern theorising tends to be suspicious about our abilities to shape the future and is perhaps pessimistic about the world to which we are moving, I am more optimistic about future possibilities and our abilities to make our own histories. That it not to say that I am certain about such matters but rather that we do have the possibility to make our own futures.

As far as special education is concerned, as I have argued in this paper, standing still is not an option because change is coming anyway. At the beginning, I referred to a previous keynote address I had given in Ireland. At the end of that conference, I was asked how I felt that people had responded to my suggestion that special education had no future. My response was that the tide of history was about to sweep over special education and that I had met with three kinds of response. The first were what I called 'ostriches'; people who thought that they could bury their heads in the sand and let the tide sweep over them. The second were a group I called the 'rubber ducks' or to borrow Slee's term, the 'linguistic adjusters'; they were a group who thought they could bob around on the tide of history but remain untouched. The third group I called the 'surfers'; they saw the incoming tide as a challenge not just to be faced but to be ridden to a better place while enjoying the buzz that surfing brings.

Special education has no choice; it can begin to change itself from within or be swept away by the tide of history which is washing over us all as we enter the twenty first century. It can be part of the struggle to produce a more inclusive world or it can continue to align itself with the forces of exclusion. The former strategy offers us all the possibility of a decent future, the latter offers a few of us the illusion of a safe and stable world. I hope that special education is mature enough to make the right choice.

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