

Segregated Special Schools Must Close

(This article appeared in Greater Manchester of Disabled People's Magazine 'Coalition' (2001: pp. 12-16).

In this article Joe Whittaker exposes the damage inflicted on disabled children and their local communities by a system of special schooling and segregation. He further argues that inclusive education will be prevented from being implemented in any meaningful way whilst this system remains intact.

He concludes, therefore, that special schools must close.

Inclusive Education has become one of those terms, which slips off the tongue straight into a policy statement, and everyone is expected to applaud. I want to encourage caution about the language of inclusion and a much greater scrutiny of its meaning in practice. Recently I was told by a senior teacher in a college of further education that they now had a "fully inclusive college", where all students were treated equally. When I gave a sceptical look I was told if I didn't believe him I could go to the college and meet their "inclusion students". I declined the offer.

Over the last 50 years different governments have told us that we are moving towards "integration", where disabled children and non-disabled children work together in the same school and where everyone has equal opportunities. However, simultaneously the same governments have stated that there will always be a need for some children to go to segregated special schools, and legislation was introduced to ensure this would happen. Until very recently there were three conditions that prevented disabled children from going into mainstream school.

1. They had to prove that their Special Needs could be met in the mainstream school.
2. They had to prove that their attendance in the mainstream school would not adversely affect the learning of other children.
3. They had to prove their placement within the mainstream school would not be an inefficient use of resources.
- 4.

In 1981, 127,157 children were placed in segregated special schools by using these conditions. In 2000, there were still 102,621 children in segregated special schools or referral units. This is disturbing because over the last twenty years we have been told that greater equality of opportunity for disabled children was the new guiding principal which meant disabled children could choose to be supported in mainstream schools by introducing appropriate legislation.

The Statement of Special Educational Need.

The 1981 Education Act was described by many as the "integrationist charter" This legislation introduced the 'Statement of Special Educational Needs.' (SEN) The "Statement" placed a formal obligation on local education authorities (Lea's) to provide a written account of the child's identified need, the provision they would make to meet that need and the school placement they would offer. At the time of its introduction the "statement" appeared to offer children and parents real consultation, greater access to mainstream education and more creative and comprehensive support. However, for many families 'statementing' has proved to be a painful and laborious process in which the child is categorised, labelled and segregated. The "Statement" has not opened doors to new and equal opportunities for disabled children but rather has served notice that the mainstream school doors remain firmly closed.

The number of learners with statements of special needs has continued to rise over the last twenty years. In the year 2000 alone, the number of statements rose from 248,041 pupils to 252,857. Forty per cent of children with statements continue to be segregated in special schools or units. Even when children with a particular label are successfully supported in mainstream schools, the statementing process can create other categories and attach new labels to a new group of learners to ensure that the actual number of disabled children segregated from mainstream school remains fairly consistent.

Labels on people lead to educational cul-de-sac. The labels attached to learners can be many and varied, like 'spectrum', 'syndrome', 'complex', 'disorder' or 'challenging', each can serve to justify a segregated special school place. Even when the label changes the segregated special schools continue to adapt to meet the fashion for new labels. For example, in the 1980's there were many segregated schools for children with the label of "moderate learning difficulties" (MLD). When there was a shift towards placing children with the label of MLD into mainstream schools, this did not result in the closure of the segregated special schools only a change in its function. The special school would receive children with new labels that emerged from the statementing process, like "complex learning difficulties" or more fashionable labels like "attention deficit disorder" (ADD), or attention deficit hyper disorder (ADHD).

To avoid suspicion about any change of function the special schools, continue to use names, which reflect a natural beauty of the countryside. 'The Elms', 'Woodside', 'Beech Tree House', 'Moorbrook', 'The Oaks', typify the leafy names which serve as camouflage for their real purpose, which is to segregate large numbers of children from their own natural communities and local schools. This statementing process is used by professionals to maintain the myth of "Special Needs" and is used to "select out" large numbers of children whose opportunities are denied or restricted.

It is often argued that we need labels and statements to direct the appropriate resources and support to the particular learner. This is indeed part of the distortion and legacy of a pernicious system, which is based upon the false premise, that it is the "individuals difficulty" rather than the systems deficiencies, which prevent full and active participation of all individuals. However, it is important to acknowledge that the present statementing process of a child or the attachment of a particular label to that child, is no guarantee that the appropriate support and resources will be provided for the child.

Appropriate support to access schooling should not be seen as 'conditional' or as an 'optional extra' or dependent on 'good will' or for 'expert delivery only'. Supports should be so effective and available that they are not seen or presented as 'special'. A ventilator, a signer, an

interpreter, a personal assistant, voice recognition software, physical adaptations, accessible transport and toilet facilities, should be as available and central to places where people learn as a pair of spectacles or a text book.

Segregated Special Schools have to close

Whilst segregated special schools remain open there will always remain a pressure on local education authorities to segregate children. By using the statementing process children will be directed to vacant places in those schools and many families will be conditioned into thinking that there is no alternative but segregation and a special system. Whilst we continue to give head teachers the power to reject some children and offer the option of a "special segregated place" we continue to isolate those individuals and fail to learn from them, they become scapegoats for an ineffective and damaging schooling system

The obsession of professionals to take individuals through more and more elaborate assessment procedures and direct them into "special support services" can often be more expensive than the cost of the ineffective support the individual may or may not, eventually get.

Segregated special schooling can be a very profitable business, our local education authorities continue to invest large sums of money into segregated special services, which has more to do with progressing professional careers rather than meeting the support requirements of the disabled person. Sending a child away from their own home and local community to a residential segregated special school can cost on average £40,000 per year, with costs of over £100,000 not unusual for extra "special" segregated schools. For a child to go to their local school with the necessary support, would be a fraction of the cost. Whilst I would argue that cost should not be the issue for effective and meaningful support it is bizarre for education authorities and head teachers to deny disabled children the right to attend their local school on the grounds of insufficient funding. We can work out a financial cost of sending a child to a particular school but we can never work out the loss to the child and his or her local community resulting from their forced removal.

Any system regardless of its ineffectiveness or the damage it may do to individuals will justify its existence, as long as there are significant levels of funding to be had and professional status to be gained. The segregated special school system also requires the continued construction of the child with "Special Educational Needs" to ensure its continued existence.

No Equal Rights means No Inclusive Education.

The most recent Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 is a very significant move in the right direction and campaigners have been successful in removing two of the three conditions which have been used to prevent disabled children from going to mainstream schools. However, disabled children still have to prove that their attendance at the mainstream school will not adversely affect the learning of other non-disabled children before they can gain admittance. This is still discrimination and cannot be tolerated; it has to be removed from the existing legislation.

Special schools have become the 21st Century gulags, where the collective fears of children who are seen as different is assuaged and their segregation from other children is reconstructed as "special education" in a "safe" environment. These children are in a very real sense "the disappeared" whose segregation from ordinary childhood experiences and the potential for ordinary adult life is compelled by law. If inclusive education has any meaning

whatever it has to be supported by comprehensive human rights legislation that ends the discrimination of disabled children.

Inclusive education cannot exist in a system that offers disabled people partial access, partial support, and partial rights. The presence of ALL learners is only the first step in the eradication of irrational fears about difference - where in learning to value the contributions of others we can learn our own value.

In an inclusive educational system much of what we have come to accept as the "normal" will have to change. Bullying would not be tolerated as a necessary part of growing up, obsessive testing of children would be rendered pointless, oppressive grading systems and league tables would be recognised as damaging and ineffective. The isolation and rejection of children because of the way they learn would be replaced by learning as collaboration with peers and their teachers, in learning environments where it is safe for people to make mistakes, and where diversity, difference and justice are central to understanding and Education.