

## **Invention and Repair: Disability and Education After the Coalition**

This short paper examines the extent to which the UK Coalition government has been inventive or reparatory in their approach to policies governing the education of disabled children and young people. Of central concern here is the extent to which policies contribute to the invention of the disabled child by conceptualising their education as a constant process of reparation. I argue here that this landscape of policy proposals creates particular problems for the ways in which the pedagogic relationship can be conceptualised, reinforcing teaching as a complex negotiation of deficit and anxiety.

We need to continue to remind educators, at all levels, that people do not 'have' special educational needs. People may experience impairment but their educational needs are made special as a result of the ways in which we conceptualise and organise our education systems. The term 'Special Educational Needs' refers to a set of systems for organising educational processes and allocating resources (Terzi, 2010). Although we, as a community of scholars, may recognise these systems as 'problematic' for the ways in which they create and reinforce a separation between 'normal' education for children and 'special' or 'abnormal' education for disabled children, the launch of 'new' policies for 'SEN' reinforce an acceptance of disabling approaches to education. Such times of educational reform should therefore be treated as incursions into our societal consciousness.

Stephen Ball (2013) refers to the Coalition as essentially Conservative in nature, reinforcing neoliberal agendas that connect education with market development, individual productivity and global competition but with the addition of the neoconservative imperative for societal improvement through a process of 'cultural restorationism' (Ball, 1990 cited in Ball 2013:15). This is described as the return to traditional moral and cultural values and educational standards (Ball, 1990:48). These may be viewed as problematic when applied to the representation and education of disabled people. The restoration of 'benevolent humanitarianism', the need to create every person as productive and independent, and a reinforcement of education as a medical concern characterises policy proposals.

It is important to state from the outset that Coalition policy proposals for 'Special Educational Needs' do not offer us anything new in this conceptualisation of the relationship between education and disability since it is framed within existing limited and limiting discourses.

### **Invention, Repair and Reform**

*'the biggest illusion of the Human Mind is probably the one which Man has built himself: the idea that he invents something, when all he does is repair.'* (Attia, 2014)

Processes of physical healing and reconstruction appear to be a positive when applied to culture and nature in work by Kadia Attia, a French-Algerian artist now working in Berlin. In a body of work concerning physical healing and reconstruction, Attia sees the concept of repair as 'an underlying principle of development in both culture and nature'. There has been an historic concern, in policies relating to education with reparation of systems and practices. Cameron went further to describe drivers for education policy as a means of mending our broken society (Ball, 2013:4). In 2011 Gove described a failing system in need of repair framing their new proposals in the language of invention.

Gove used emotive language to describe a system that was failing disabled children. If anything was to be mourned it was the alleged 'bias towards inclusion' (DfE, 2011).

Education policy appears to be particularly susceptible to the metaphor of repair as successive governments seek to am/mend inherited educational processes and systems. Ball is useful here in describing the ways in which policy is changed over times and the political drivers for this, referring to this as the 'transformational dynamism' that characterises political transition (Ball, 2013:3). Here he recognises the relationship between policy reform and a modernist concern with the constant need for improvement:

*Policy is an enlightenment concept, it is about progress, it is about moving from the inadequacies of the present to some future state of perfection where everything works well and works as it should.* (Ball, 2013:9)

Such normalising modernist concepts have, in themselves, been recognised as problematic in relation to the history of disability and the creation of disability as a category of difference to be regulated and productively managed. We can question whether diversity can be celebrated when value appears to be limited to normative assumptions regarding productivity, employment and independence. Current proposals aim to restore historic values and attitudes towards disability by positioning the disabled body as one that should gain from benevolent intervention in order to become a productive body.

The concept of repair is particularly pertinent to policies relating to 'SEN', which also appear to be predicated on the repair of disabled children via their identification, categorisation and subsequent education. Pedagogic relationships are framed within this discourse of repair. This has a particular influence on the pedagogic relationship when diversity is framed around compensation and planning for *support* rather than *education* (DfE, 2013: see heading 6.1).

'Policy texts' relating to 'Special Educational Needs' including the original Green Paper 'Support and Aspiration: A New Approach to special educational needs and disability and revised versions (DfE,2011 and DfE, 2013) and Research Priorities in SEN (DfE, 2014) reinforce 'normal' and 'special' education as parallel tracks. Ball (2013) recognises that he cannot do justice to the depth of discussion of SEN policy in his text on 'the education debate' and instead offers a paragraph on key points (which include 'the re-emergence of the medicalised discourse of abnormalities' (p.202) and the concern with over and under identification). Ball's acceptance of his own limitations in this respect serves as a reminder of the ways in which SEN policy (and therefore practices regarding the education of disabled children) are created and reinforced as a set of separate concerns that are in some way removed from 'the education debate'.

'SEN' policy continues to define and be defined by disability as individual pathology with limited attention to the social model of disability (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2011:75). An inability to mourn the past leaves us with policy repair of processes for managing the education of disabled children resulting in an inability to invent new ways of defining pedagogic relationships. Coalition policy for 'SEN' reflects an inability to conceptualise education in the UK as anything other than two parallel tracks where difference is accepted as deficit and support, provision and care are accepted as synonyms for education.

The links between disability and education appear to be driven more by pathology than pedagogy. The deficit language maintained in the description of the four areas of need would do little to inspire teachers to celebrate diversity with children described via paragraphs of deficit. From the outset the SEN Code of Practice is a joint concern published with Department of Education and Department of Health logos – a publication signifying a ‘joined-up’ approach that implicates the health of the child or young person in their education. Medicalisation of the educative process appears to be cemented via the joint Education and Health Care Plan. I do not dismiss the importance of health care for disabled children and young people but am concerned about the influence of this conceptual conflation on the pedagogic relationship. ‘Special Educational Needs’ are framed as a health concern and there is a shift from guidance to schools and educational establishments to ‘lead organisations’. The introduction acknowledges the, all encompassing, nature of the new code designed to ‘identify, assess and make provision for children and young people with special educational needs’. Although Coalition policy appears to remove barriers to appropriate support, the focus on individual deficit remains as a driver for resources and the definition and development of a market.

The ‘0-25’ focus is of particular relevance here with the drive for early intervention and the growth of developmentalism and the emphasis on adulthood, employment and independence, with the individual being managed from birth through to a productive life. At the later end of this age range, disabled young people will be supported in order to fulfil their hopes and aspirations in moving to further education or employment. A meaningful or successful adulthood is consistently conflated with progression into meaningful employment and independence (DfE, 2013, p49). Human value appears to be defined within a particularly narrow set of expectations and therapeutic support sits alongside the ‘job-coach’. Gove suggests that children should become ‘the author of their own life story’ and the language of emancipation and participation is difficult to resist. Inclusion and participation are harnessed to the neoliberal discourse of individual productivity, appropriated as a means of creating the disabled child as autonomous and productive. This appears to be the only driver for the education of disabled children and young people.

Voice and participation have a particular resonance in disability politics. Children, young people and their families are all involved in decision-making via person-centered planning, the design of the local offer and commissioning of services. Here however, the rights of disabled people – rights to freedom and choice - become a justification for participation in the creation of markets. There is an overwhelming expectation for pupil and parent/carer involvement. Although potentially empowering, this is also potentially bewildering and exhausting. In order for disabled children to receive an education, parents/carers are encouraged to participate in a whole range of service negotiations. As a parent of a non-disabled child, I am aware that I just wave my son off to school everyday. Life is simple (and inequitable).

There are contradictions in this discourse of participation since proposals signify control over *support* rather than *education*. Fully participatory and emancipatory approaches enable participants to identify and frame *their* debate. Here participation is pre-defined and limited. Although participation appears central, ‘clauses of conditionality’ (Slee, 2013) pepper the document and offer a number of ‘get out’ clauses (e.g. ‘schools should ensure that *where practical* pupils with SEN are represented on class and school forums’ (DfE, 2013: 17) and ‘all settings *should* involve children, young people and parents/carers’, where the status of this remains as ‘good practice’ rather than a statutory requirement). There is a statutory responsibility for schools to ensure that ‘children with

SEN take part in the activities of the school together with children who do not have SEN *as far as possible*'. Here a statutory responsibility still contains the get out clause 'as far as possible'

### **Final Comment**

My final comment relates to the peculiarly local concerns of new policy proposals. What has happened to Salamanca? What has happened to the UNESCO aims for inclusive education? Gove is keen to draw on international examples to promote ideas about a free market in education but he appears less concerned with international comparisons for inclusion. Have we looked elsewhere for good practices in creating inclusive communities through education?

We are right to be cautious about a neoconservative agenda in education based on the cultural restoration of the disabled child as one who is defined by a limited and limiting medical diagnosis and categorisation. We should have moved on. Work in Disability Studies recognises disabled people as politically active in creating and contributing to the education of all. It encourages us to recognise different ways of experiencing the world and the value that this brings for the development of a diverse and inclusive society and enables us to broaden otherwise limited definitions of the productive body and the dominance of independence.

After the Coalition we will need educational reform. We will need to begin by repairing the relationship between disability and education.

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