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## **At Odds with Inclusive Education**

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### **Abstract**

This article presents the author's views, experiences and observations as well as ideas obtained from reviews of literature concerning inclusive education. The author questions the usefulness, practicability and acceptability of inclusive education, especially in developing countries where there are teacher-pupil ratios and acute shortages of teaching/learning materials. If our aim is to empower children so that they become independent and full participants in society, then we need special and separate schooling so that these children get the most relevant and appropriate knowledge, skills and abilities that will enable them to compete meaningfully with anyone else in the world of work. To the author, inclusive education is a step backwards; it is an attempt to undermine our achievements in special needs education.

### **Introduction**

In recent years, many governments and schools have faced pressures from human rights organisations (such as the United Nations) and advocates of inclusive education to include children with various disabilities into regular schools. Hall (1992) asserts that "The inclusive education movement is beginning to make an impact and those in special education will ignore it at their peril. The question is not, can we do it? My advice to the reader is, Just do it" (p. 23). Such emotive statements have resulted in many schools plunging into inclusive education without a clear reason for doing so, let alone knowledge of how to do it. To date, very few studies have been conducted regarding the views of various stakeholders on inclusive education (Booth & Ainscow 1998) yet, and surprisingly, inclusive education is being and has been implemented in many countries. In the author's view, there is need to be cautious because, unless various stakeholders such as parents, teachers, pupils etc. accept and are convinced of the usefulness of inclusive education, attempts to implement this concept may be futile. "When teachers resist a change, the change will only be implemented with considerable social dislocation and high social cost". (Ungerleider 1993 in Knight, 1999; p. 4) As already said, among other things, the present author questions the acceptability of inclusive education.

Many countries have committed themselves to inclusive education by virtue of being signatories to the *Salamanca World Conference Declaration* (UNESCO, 1994). The Salamanca Statement reads in part, "We call upon all governments and urge them to . . . adopt as a matter of law or policy, the principle of inclusive education, enrolling all children in regular schools, unless there are compelling reasons not to

do so" (UNESCO 1994:IX) To the writer, as shall be argued, there are indeed compelling reasons for not implementing inclusive education, at least for now, especially in developing countries. United Nations *Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities* (1993) indicate that if the school system feels unable to meet the special needs of children with disabilities in regular classes, then this must be respected. Such children with special education needs include: a) children in regular schools who are failing to achieve adequately; b) children who are not currently enrolled in regular schools but could be enrolled if schools were more responsive; and c) those with severe impairments or whose educational needs are not being met.

It is the writer's contention that with so much inclusionary pressures exerted on many governments, many of them especially developing countries with their large class sizes and scarce resources, do not give themselves adequate time to assess whether they are in a position to implement inclusive education meaningfully or not; the result is that children with special needs end up being simply dumped in regular schools. But what is inclusive education? What does it involve?

### **Concept and Rationale for Inclusive Education.**

Knight (1999) sees inclusion as a concept that sees children with disabilities as full time participants and members of their neighbourhood schools and communities. Inclusive education, therefore, involves all children learning together in the same physical environment. The school is seen as being capable of accommodating children of greater diversity. The contention here is that since society is an inclusive community, the school as a miniature society must also be inclusive, preparing children for life in society. Separate schooling is seen as cultivating alienistic attitudes and, therefore, it (separate schooling) ends up being a more serious disability to people with disability than the disabilities themselves. Thus, inclusion advocates education in which individual differences are accepted as a source of richness and diversity, a challenge and not a problem.

Inclusion follows from integration or mainstreaming (a term preferred in the USA) but differs from it in that in integration, it is the child who must make adjustments to the requirements of the school but in inclusion, it is the school that must make adjustment to include or accommodate the child. Emphasis shifts from the child to the environment (school); what it can do for the child with special educational needs. For Ainscow (1995), integration means going to school (as visitor) while inclusion means participating in school life (as full member). The child with disability is

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unconditionally accepted as he is and the school must do all in its powers to ensure maximum development of the child. "The goal of inclusion is not to erase differences but to enable all students to belong within an educational community that validates and values their individuality" (Stainback, 1994 cited in Knight, 1999; p. 4). Giorcelli (1995) gives four main characteristics of successful inclusion which are:

- (i) zero rejection philosophy. As already said, the child with disability must be accepted fully by the school, teachers and peers. The child must be accepted physically, socially and instructionally;
- (ii) age and grade appropriate placements in neighbourhood schools. Placing the child in his/her age group is likely to make him socially acceptable;
- (iii) co-operative learning. His/her peers must be willing to learn together with him/her, tolerating the child's difficulties and sharing ideas with him/her; and
- (iv) special educational support given to regular education. This involves making available to the child, special learning materials and equipment, extra human resources such as assistant teachers etc. to facilitate the child's learning.

### **Analysis and Critique of inclusive Education.**

According to the Newham Council (1995), every child, whatever special educational needs they may have, should attend their neighbourhood schools and be able to participate in every aspect of mainstream life in order to achieve their full potential. It is such a radical view that forms the point of departure with the present author. Is inclusion appropriate for all students? Will some students not be worse off in regular schools because of lack of teacher attention and rejection by peers? Even the Jomtien Conference, implied that there are some children whose educational needs cannot be met, perhaps even in special schools (Powers, 1996).

In a study by Reezigi and Jan-Pul (1998) (cited in Booth & Ainscow, 1998) it was found that many pupils who had been included in regular classes in the Netherlands wanted to go back to their special schools after suffering isolation and stigmatisation. Many of these pupils felt uncomfortable in regular schools because pupils in regular school did not want to socially and academically mix with them. They were viewed as different. Pupils in the regular school had negative attitudes towards the pupils with disabilities. It is these negative attitudes that made the pupils with disabilities wish to go back to special schools. This indicates that unless schools, communities, etc., change their attitudes towards children with disabilities, these children will find it extremely difficult to learn in inclusive settings. This is why Powers (1996) views

inclusion as attitude change rather than physical placement. Unless our attitudes change, bringing these children in the same physical environment with pupils in regular classes will cause more harm than anticipated; especially if the child with disabilities senses that he/she is not being accepted. Hall (1992) asserts that "Pupils' most fundamental need is to be known and accepted as valued members . . ." (p. 21).

If the child with disability is not recognised and accepted in school, this negatively affects his/her development and learning. It is perhaps for this reason that Dyson (1997; p. 154) argues that, while attempting to include children with special educational needs in regular classes, special education to date has merely "reproduced itself in a mainstream setting. It has, in other words, colonised rather than transforming the mainstream". Such reviews indicate that attempts to include children with special educational needs in regular classes are meeting with serious problems; either these children keep to themselves or they are segregated. The child with disability continues to be seen as different (Booth & Ainscow, 1998). If inclusion is more of an attitude than physical placement, why then bother removing these children from special schools where they receive meaningful assistance? Furthermore, literature reviews (Baldwin, 1994; Cohen, 1995; Florian, 1998; Powers, 1996; Knight, 1999) indicate that children need to socialise with children with the same ability/disability. So, even if these children are placed in the same environment physically, socially they will remain separate. Thus, if not carefully thought about, inclusion may accentuate rather than mitigate exclusion. The child's disability becomes more pronounced, and hence the inclusive school may be a negative structure for these children.

Many people seem to talk about inclusion without considering the pedagogical consequences of such inclusion. An inclusive class with its heterogeneity in terms of interests, developmental needs, abilities, preferences and experiences is difficult to define as a group. Surely, the extent of curriculum modification must be very great if all these are to be catered for. One must not underestimate the complexity and immensity of the task for teachers and administrators to provide appropriate pedagogy and curricula. Many teachers lack the necessary experience and expertise to teach such a class. Where teachers fail to properly and adequately adjust the materials and methods for such children, their handicaps become even more visible because a handicap appears when work demands exceed the individual's capacity to do that work. This can even make these children appear more stupid before their peers.

Pretending that people are the same is a clear denial of reality and an education system that denies reality is bound to give its subjects irrelevant and inappropriate skills, knowledge and abilities. For Soder (1995), cited in Powers (1996), the mere idea of inclusion or integration already implies that that person is different and as such, he will remain different even in inclusive settings. For example, the aims and objectives of educating an inclusive class will always remain different. For instance, while the deaf and the blind learn the content of their curriculum just like any other students, the ability to communicate and to read Braille respectively is also a priority for them (Florian, 1998). Kauffman (1993), Knight (1992), and Mercer (1997) cited in Knight (1999) have expressed concern about the impact inclusion is likely to have on teaching and learning of other pupils. According to Florian (1998), teachers resist inclusion because many questions about teaching and learning in an inclusive class remain unanswered. For example, by including these children, are we not compromising the education of pupils in regular classes? Children with special educational needs often need more teacher-attention and assistance as well as more time to complete their work. Clearly this will interfere with the flow and routine of activities of pupils of the regular class.

Where the teacher has no time for children with special educational needs, they are likely to suffer. They may not get the best education and, therefore, will not acquire the needed skills and knowledge. According to Mattson (1998), as long as students with disabilities are not developed to the full, they will remain unable to influence events in their surroundings, relying on the assistance of others to fulfil their decisions. It is only through separate and special schooling that we can give these children a relevant and appropriate education because in such schools, we are able to attend to their individual learning needs. By giving them a relevant and appropriate education, we increase their opportunities in society and thus, enable them to compete meaningfully with others. We certainly need to observe the rights of all children by availing to them what they deserve so that they become the best of themselves. This is only possible by giving them an appropriate education in special schools. It is unjust to treat unequals as though they were equals. In special schools, these children are merely specialising according to their abilities and their potentials, just as much as some of us at some stage in our schooling may specialise in some field according to our abilities. Special schools are a special arrangement for them, as much as we may have special seats for them on a bus. If there were many such people with disabilities boarding a bus, it would be more appropriate to have them on their own bus with special seats for them than to have them on a bus with ordinary seats where they will sit very uncomfortably just for the sake of being together with people without disabilities. Inclusion tends to negate the limitations of

children with special learning needs. In fact, inclusion undermines our achievements in special needs education so far; it is a step backwards. We should be thinking about ways of purely individualising the teaching/learning of these children (in their special schools) in the light of what they are capable of doing instead of thinking of inclusion which Cohen (1995) calls a 'one size fits for all model'. People are different, and this must be respected and accepted. After all, society is characterised by multiplicity, not sameness.

Advocates of inclusive education argue for equal educational opportunities for all children. To them, education given to all children must be of equal value. However, they concede that teachers must adjust the environment, content, methods, activities etc. to suit the child with special educational needs. Clearly there is inconsistency in their thinking because the latter view contradicts the idea of education being of equal value. Furthermore, the idea of equal educational opportunity does not mean equal education; it merely means freedom to attend school at a school of your own choice provided you have the means (e.g. intellectual or financial means). So, if some children do not have the means to attend regular schools, why force them? Powers (1996) asserts that "if the goal is eventual maximum empowerment, independence and participation in the wider society for some pupils this might be best achieved by less than total inclusion in ordinary schools" (p. 40). In fact, the World Conference (1990) in Jomtien, Thailand (cited in Powers 1996) agreed on Education for All with the following as one of the major goals, that is, giving all children the most suitable education. Our aim should, therefore, be the quality and relevance of the education we give to children with special educational needs. In the author's view, special schools are the best for these children because they provide the most suitable learning environments. Some studies, e.g., Mattson (1998) and Hall (1992), have shown that some children with disabilities refuse to attend regular schools because these are not sufficiently handicap-adapted. Other children have refused because of bad experiences such as constant failure, teasing by peers, failure to take prescribed medication because of lack of proper and constant monitoring by authorities (Reezigi & Jan Pul, 1998; Booth & Ainscow 1998). Such observations make a strong argument for special schools.

In the Salamanca Statement (1994) we are told that schools with an inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes and of building an inclusive society (p. IX). Thus, inclusive schools are believed to help both pupils in regular classes and those with special educational needs to improve their attitudes towards each other. This means that inclusive schools are supposed to be promoted not only for educational purposes, but also for social reasons. The belief is



that it is in such settings that full social integration can occur. Unfortunately there are flaws in this kind of argument. First, social integration takes priority over the acquisition of useful academic knowledge, skills and abilities. This sharply contradicts one of the main cries of advocates of inclusive education, that is, giving these children education of equal value to that given to pupils in regular classes. Second, no evidence is given to support the claim that it is in inclusive settings that full social integration can occur. It would appear that advocates of inclusive education have not yet produced convincing arguments, let alone research evidence, that inclusive schools yield better results for children with special educational needs. Many reviews of literature, e.g., Farrell (1997) and Hegarty (1993) regarding the benefits accruing from inclusion are inconclusive, yet, there is so much cry for inclusive education!

For many developing countries, inclusive education still looms in the distance. This is so because as already noted, inclusive education requires a lot of material, human and financial resources if it is to succeed. The World Bank Report (1994) cited in Powers (1996) says that in order to cater for children with special educational needs, schools need to be provided with the full range of human resources necessary to deliver a full curriculum for all children through a combination of class teacher, specialist teacher, semi-specialist, resource teacher, consultancy and ancillary staff. Can developing countries afford to pay so many "teachers" per class? In some developed countries where inclusive education has been effected, a class is manned by two teachers; the class teacher and an assistant teacher. The class teacher introduces the lesson to the whole class, after which, the assistant teacher takes the children with special educational needs to their "corner" in the classroom and continues with the introduced concept using adjusted materials, methods and activities.

Surely many developing countries cannot afford the luxury of employing two teachers per class. Furthermore, class sizes in developing countries militate against inclusive education, for example, Zimbabwe has about 50 pupils per class, Uganda has about 120 pupils per class while Ghana has about 50 pupils per class. In contrast, developed countries have small class sizes of about 15 pupils per class which are achievable in only very few developing countries. Large classes of up to 120 pupils inhibits the extent to which a teacher can attend to the needs of individual pupils, let alone to the needs of those with special educational needs. Under present circumstances, many developing countries would be irresponsible to introduce inclusive education at the moment. In fact, developing countries should be warned against swallowing wholesome, concepts that originate in developed countries

because these worlds are very different. There may be need to adjust these concepts to their own situations or developmental level, even if it means not implementing the concept for the time being. Thus, while there may be good reasons and good will for inclusion, perhaps the structures, procedures and resources for successful inclusion in many countries are still to be established. There may also be need to re-consider what exactly we want to achieve through inclusive education.

### **Conclusion**

Perhaps those who are already impatient with the implementation of inclusive education globally will dislike the content of this paper. However, it must be noted that arguments presented here are by no means intended to undermine the policy of inclusive education but rather to stimulate more critical thinking about inclusive education. There is, therefore, need to closely monitor and assess developments in inclusive education in order to see if the benefits from it warrant such a move in the less developed countries.

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