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Special Units for young people on the Autistic Spectrum in mainstream schools: sites of normalisation, abnormalisation, inclusion and exclusion

Louise Holt¹, Jennifer Lea¹, Sophie Bowlby²

¹Loughborough University, Department of Geography, Loughborough, Leicestershire, LE11

3TU

²The University of Reading, Department of Geography, PO Box 227, Whiteknights, RG6

2AB

l.holt@lboro.ac.uk

j.lea@lboro.ac.uk

s.r.bowlby@reading.ac.uk

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Abstract

This paper explores the experiences of young people on the Autistic Spectrum (AS) who attend a special unit within a mainstream secondary school in England. The paper feeds into contemporary debates about the nature of inclusive schooling, and more broadly, special education. Young people on the AS have been largely neglected within these debates. The paper focuses upon processes of normalisation and abnormalisation to which the young people on the AS are subject, and how these are interconnected with inclusion and exclusion within school spaces. At times the unit is a container for the abnormally behaving. However, processes of normalisation pervade the unit, attempting to rectify the deviant mind-body-emotions of the young people on the AS to enable their inclusion within the mainstream school. Normalisation is conceptualised as a set of socio-spatially specific and contextual practices; norms emerge as they are enacted, and via a practical sense of the abnormal. Norms are sometimes reworked by the young people on the AS, whose association with the unit renders them a visible minority group. Thus, despite some problems, special units can promote genuine 'inclusive' education, in which norms circulating mainstream school spaces are transformed to accept mind-body-emotional differences.

Key words

Inclusive Education, Autistic Spectrum, Disability, Special Educational Needs, Young People, Mainstream Schools, Normalisation, Abnormalisation, Special Units

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1. Introduction

There is a contested global policy of inclusive education for disabled children and those with Special Educational Needs (SEN)¹; increasing numbers of children with a wider range of mind-body characteristics are being educated within mainstream school settings internationally (Ainscow and César, 2006). Despite global pressures, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (UN, 2006) and the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), inclusive education is interpreted differently in various national contexts and is increasingly challenged (Meijer, 2010). England has witnessed a recent dramatic policy shift, connected to a change in government from the left of centre Labour Party to the right leaning Conservative-Led Coalition. The new government has vowed to end a perceived presumption towards inclusive education and halt closures of special schools (Department for Education² (DfE), 2011a). Many parents of disabled children and disability activists contest the existence of a presumption towards inclusive education, arguing instead that there is a predilection for segregated education for young disabled people (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2011). Certainly, provision of special education in England is spatially variable and often adversarial for parents (Lewis et al., 2010; Ofsted, 2010).

¹ Young people can be defined as having SEN, due to falling outside, and usually below, norms of expected learning development. Following the 2001 SEN code of Practice (Department For Education and Skills, 2001b), there is a graduated approach, which reflects the perceived severity of the needs of the student, from School Action, to School Action Plus, to a Statement of SEN. Generally, those with impairments will also be the recipient of a diagnosis of SEN. However, some young people with SEN do not have impairments, and their diagnosis emerges specifically within the context of the education institution.

² The name of the national department overseeing the implementation of education policy in England changed following the election of the Conservative-Led Coalition in 2010 to the Department for Education (DFE). This is the latest in a series of name changes.

Moreover, education landscapes for children with disabilities and SEN is under review and highly contested within the UK and globally.

This paper feeds into these contemporary debates, which are inherently geographical, being about the place of disabled children's education: both the appropriate location for educating disabled youths and schools as inclusive or exclusive places. It contributes to the burgeoning field of student-centred geographies of education (Cook and Hemming, 2011; Holloway et al., 2010). The paper begins to address two interconnected critiques of policies for, and research about, inclusive education. First, that inclusion policy is about increasing the range of mind-body characteristics of those in mainstream schools, not including all learners (Meijer, 2010). Certain groups: those on the Autistic Spectrum (AS), with socio-emotional differences³, or profound and multiple disabilities, experience high levels of exclusion from mainstream schools (Achilles et al., 2007). Second, these groups of young people are relatively neglected in research about young people's experiences of school (Slee, 2006; although see Holt, 2010a, b) and objectified in anti-inclusion discourses, which coalesce around these groups (Warnock et al., 2010).

The paper begins to address this gap by illuminating the experiences of young people on the AS. The paper thereby contributes to a growing geographical interest in the life-worlds of individuals on the AS (Davidson, 2008, 2010; Davidson and Henderson, 2010a, b; Davidson and Smith, 2009) and, more broadly, those whose practices conflict with everyday, emplaced, expectations of behaviour (e.g. Parr, 2008; Pinfold, 2000; Wilton, 2004). The paper focuses

³ Holt (2007) coined the term socio-emotional differences to represent those people who are disabled by normative expectations of behaviour in everyday (school) spaces, particularly those defined as having Emotional and Behavioural *Difficulties*, under the auspices of the SEN institution.

upon the experiences of young people who attended a ‘special’ unit in a mainstream secondary school (given the pseudonym Westfield School), with diagnoses of AS. Some also had diagnoses of Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). Despite parallels to findings of research with adults on the AS and with mental ill-health, some specificities of the experiences of young people are teased out here.

Crucially, most young people in the Global North attend school. Schools are institutional spaces designed to equip young people with the skills and knowledges to become productive adult citizens. Here, we explore how schools, along with teaching formal curricula, such as English and Maths, are more insidiously, sites of normalisation. In schools, young people are taught to embody and reproduce norms of acceptable behaviour (Foucault, 2003; Olssen, 2010). Since all young people are perceived to need to learn norms that govern society, these are relatively explicit and codified within schools compared to non-institutional spaces. How these are applied to, and transgressed by, young people on the AS is therefore open to exploration. The paper focuses upon the ways that young people on the AS experience interconnected processes of (ab)normalisation within the spaces of a special unit and a mainstream school. We also explore how, by forming a minority group and being recognised as ‘differently behaving’ within mainstream school spaces, the young people on the AS sometimes contest and transform prevailing expectations of ‘normal’ behaviour.

Drawing upon Foucault (1977, 1978, 2003), the paper traces how normalisation occurs via specific, everyday practices within school spaces (see also Philo, 2007; Hansen and Philo, 2007). In schools, all young people are subject to normalisation. However, some, including those on the AS, are rendered ‘abnormal’ by falling outside of expected ‘norms’ of

behaviour. A practical sense of what is normal emerges from casting some as abnormal (Canguilhem, 1973). Being positioned as outside the norm has particular effects for young people on the AS; they are (temporarily) segregated into a unit and subject to intensified regimes of normalisation to render them normal and facilitate inclusion into the mainstream.

Since normalisation is always a ‘practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint’ (Butler, 2004: 1), or a set of socio-spatially embedded performances, there is an inherent possibility of reworking norms – perhaps fleetingly or within specific socio-spatial contexts. These momentary transformations suggest an immanent political potential to expand the norms by which sociality is governed, within specific school spaces, and potentially, more widely. The paper therefore pays attention to the positive and generative affects of normative power in constituting subjects (Foucault, 2003; Butler, 1997). We suggest that political transformation emerges from the potential to expand the norms by which subjects are governed via a positive recognition of difference (Butler, 2004). Here, this is facilitated by the material spatiality of the unit and the visibility and minority group status of the students on the AS. We signal that this has implications for school managers and teachers interested in producing more ‘inclusive’ school spaces.

The paper proceeds through four further sections. Next, we establish schools as normalising institutions and examine how these geographies of normalisation are tied to the specific policy context of the educational ‘inclusion’ of young people with SEN. Subsequently, in Section 3, the data, methods and methodology are briefly discussed. In Section 4, we draw upon empirical research with young people and adults to explore how the special unit, and the broader mainstream secondary school, operates as a site of (ab)normalisation for young

people on the AS. We conclude by highlighting the importance of working through normalisation as a positive, generative and unstable form of power, which emerges through everyday socio-spatially shifting practices; the norms of sociality can be challenged and expanded. The unit facilitates forging a collective identity and acts as a launching pad for contesting and transforming norms of appropriate behaviour within the school and potentially beyond. Our findings highlight the importance of the experiences of young people with a diversity of mind-body-emotional characteristics to education policy and praxis. However, we caution that a critical notion of agency should be applied to all participants (including researchers), since agency is never autonomous or omnipotent.

2.1 Schools as normalising institutions

Geographers have displayed a keen interest in Foucault-inspired examinations of power geometries in school spaces (see Philo, 2011), often focusing upon complex intersections of disciplinary power and resistance (Metcalf et al., 2011; Pike, 2008, 2010). Particular attention is given to the spatial metaphor of the panopticon (e.g. Barker et al., 2010). Gallagher (2011) importantly, highlights that these relationships of control and resistance are enacted through sound along with vision. This paper builds upon this body of research to focus upon schools as normalising institutions; how specific norms circulate school spaces (Ansell, 2009) and actively form subjects (Gagen, 2004; Pykett, 2007).

Normalisation can be viewed as one of four interconnected techniques of disciplinary power⁴ (Elden, 2003) or as a pervasive operation of power (Foucault, 2003; Philo, 2012). McNay (1994: 95) argues that:

“In modern society, the behaviour of individuals is regulated not through overt repression but through a set of standards and values associated with normality which are set into play by a network of ostensibly beneficial and scientific forms of knowledge”.

Schools are a: “central institutional means of normalisation” Olssen (2010: 70). Indeed, the genealogy of normality has been traced by Foucault’s mentor Canguilhem (1973) to clinics and education institutions, where statistical ‘averages’ substitute for ‘normal’ (Foucault, 2003; Philo, 2007).

Here, we focus on both how norms circulate school spaces and are imposed upon young people and how they are integral to the very construction of subjects via subjection (Foucault, 1978, 2003; Butler, 1997). Individuals regulate *themselves* in relation to the norms that circulate social spaces (Foucault, 1977) in order to become socially recognised subjects (Butler, 2004). Crucially, subjection occurs via sub-conscious psychic incorporation (Butler, 1997) of norms and the mostly unreflective reproduction of ‘appropriate’ subject positions through everyday performances (Butler, 1990).

Foucault traces the genealogy of specific norms within specific settings, such as the prison, reformatory school, clinic and psychiatrist’s couch (Foucault, 1979, 1977; Philo, 2000).

⁴ The other three being selection, hierarchisation and centralisation (Foucault, 1997, cited in Elden, 2003: 244)

Norms, if not exactly ‘fictions’, are socio-spatially and historically produced. Foucault (2003) suggests that normalisation is connected to a shift in the operation of power from the 18th Century onwards, which reflects the response to the plague stricken town rather than the banishment of lepers; the examples of the plague town and lepers are metaphors for a broader shift in the deployment and spread of power – away from banishment of the minority towards regulation of the majority (Elden, 2003). Importantly, normalisation reframes power as positive, generative and inclusive, rather than negative and exclusionary. Foucault (2003) contends that, normative power is “always linked to a positive technique of intervention and transformation” (p.55), or from “a reaction of rejection, exclusion and so on...” to one of “inclusion, observation, the formation of knowledges, the multiplication of effects on the basis of the accumulation of observations and knowledge” (p.48). All individuals are subjected by norms, for instance of sexuality (Foucault, 1978; Butler, 1997).

The subjection of individuals within realms of normalisation is never complete and is always ongoing through a set of reiterated practices. As Butler (1997: 94) suggests:

“The Foucaultian subject is never fully constituted in subjection, then; it is repeatedly constituted in subjection, and it is in the possibility of a repetition that repeats against its origin that subjection draws its inadvertently enabling power”.

Therefore norms can be viewed as dynamic, situated practices, or as Philo (2007: 90-91) claims of medicine, a set of:

“precarious accomplishments, eked out of a myriad of uncertain practices ... enacted through countless small decisions, on-the-spot judgements, some (but by no means all) of which coalesce into temporary [formalised, sedimented, legislated] assemblages”.

Thus norms are socio-spatially shifting (also Philo, 2012). Norms are therefore open to transformation – perhaps fleetingly. However, these momentary transformations contain immanent political potential for a broader challenge to societal norms and expectations (see also Davidson and Henderson, 2010a; Hansen and Philo, 2007).

Taking our cue from Canguilhem (1973) and Foucault (2003) we are also interested in how normalisation operates to define individuals as abnormal within schools via simultaneous processes of abnormalisation. Indeed, Canguilhem (1973) argues that the abnormal precedes the normal; it is in contrast to a practical sense of the abnormal that the normal emerges (see also Philo, 2007).

People with disabilities and/or SEN fall outside of ideas of normality (Shildrick, 2005) in relation to bodily, mental or and/or socio-emotional practices. However, these processes of abnormalisation are performed, dynamic and socio-spatially shifting, and individuals can be (more) or (less) (dis)abled in different spatial contexts (Holt, 2004a). To be defined as abnormal is often to be excluded and stigmatised as ‘other’ (Foucault, 2003), reflecting the mode of power applied to the leper. This is characterised by: “... mechanisms and effects of exclusion, disqualification, exile, rejection, deprivation, and incomprehension ... an entire arsenal of negative concepts or mechanisms of exclusion” (Foucault, 2003: 44). The analogy could extend to the relationship of a quarantined plague town to its geographical neighbours. This suggests that the two modes of power operate simultaneously in historical time – the model of the leper is not fully superseded by the plague town (see also Philo, 2012). Those cast as abnormal are not exempt from the exegesis of normalising power, as we observe below.

The experiences of (ab)normalisation of young people on the AS have been relatively neglected within the literature (although see Douglas, 2010). Here, we consider the socio-spatially shifting operations of (ab)normalisation of young people on the AS in mainstream school spaces. First, we review the relationships between the educational inclusion of young people with SEN and normalisation.

2.2 Educational ‘inclusion’, SEN and normalisation

Young people who fall outside of, generally below, norms of learning development in schools, become subject to specific educational diagnoses and intervention, via the SEN institution. Since the early 1990s in the UK, as in many contexts globally, a significant, and until recently increasing, proportion of young people with SEN have been educated in mainstream schools. The tendency towards ‘inclusion’ was consolidated in the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (Department For Education and Skill (DFES), 2001a). These spatial shifts reflect a fragile global imperative towards inclusive education, expressed firmly in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and more equivocally in the CRPD (UN, 2006).

Moves towards the inclusive education of disabled young people are underpinned by human rights concerns and endeavours to promote the social inclusion of children when they become adults (Loreman et al., 2011). A change in labelling from ‘integration’ to ‘inclusion’ emphasises increasing consideration of the contexts that young people are being moved into; rather than primarily physical relocation, ‘inclusion’ is about full participation in all aspects

of school life (DFES, 2001a; Loreman et al., 2010). Such accounts reflect and are tied to discourses reproduced in the broader social inclusion agenda. Instrumentalist concerns for children's future participation in paid work are pivotal (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001).

Inclusion is also increasingly cast as a process of schools moving towards facilitating full participation of all (Ainscow et al., 2006; see also Parr, 2008), since mainstream schools are largely ableist institutions (Holt, 2004b). Despite the focus on including all students, the debate focuses upon those with SEN and, overwhelmingly, identifiable impairments (Slee, 2006). Implicit in viewing inclusion as a process is the continued exclusion of some into special, and within mainstream, schools. This issue is, however, seldom explicitly debated.

Disparities are evident between ideals and practices of inclusive education (Cook et al., 2003). This is unsurprising; inclusive education policies contained contradictory tendencies from their inception (Ravet, 2011). For instance, despite human rights origins of calls for inclusive education, the policy is also situated within a broader move towards re/de-institutionalisation within the context of fiscal considerations of neoliberal governance (Anastasiou and Kauffman, 2010). The experiences of young people has parallels to other groups subject to such policies, ranging from mixed (Parr, 2008; Wilton, 2004) to, at worst, merely representing a scaling down the spatialities of exclusion from large scale segregation into special schools towards micro-exclusions within school spaces (Dear and Wolch, 1992; Holt, 2004b). The normalisation of disabled people, a self-conscious movement with a distinct genealogy (albeit open to Foucauldian analysis), is also an implicit backdrop to inclusive education (Culham and Nind, 2003; Mathews, 2011). Like inclusion, normalisation was premised upon the idea that disabled people should have full civil rights and live 'normal' lives, rather than being segregated and treated as less than human (e.g. Wolfensberger and Nirje, 1972). However, normalisation for disabled people has been

critiqued. It emerged from professional perspectives rather than disabled people's experiences and (consequently) draws upon individual tragedy models of disability, casting disability as an abnormality of individuals to be rectified, rather than emphasising the need to expand the norms of disableist societies (Oliver, 1996).

Nonetheless, inclusion policies have opened up the potential for the transformation of experiences and representations of disability in schools (Holt, 2007, 2009) as they have facilitated enhanced social inclusion of many people with mental ill-health (Parr, 2008). The possibility of transformation emerges in part as the meaning and praxis of inclusion is socio-spatially shifting at the scale of the Local Authority (LA)⁵, school and within school spaces – providing examples where dominant, negative, representations of (dis)ability are transformed (Holt, 2004b; Holt, 2008). Parr (2008) and Davidson and Henderson (2010b) emphasise the importance of listening to the collective experiences of people with mind-body-emotional differences to enhance the social and political inclusion of people on the AS and/or with mental ill-health. Hence 'political' action can emerge from the need for a 'safe space' in the face of a stigmatising and exclusionary broader society (Cook et al., 2003; Davidson and Parr, 2010).

Most scholarship about inclusive education emphasises the experiences of non-disabled adults, such as teachers and parents; the voices of young people have largely been excluded

⁵ Local Authorities are the government body responsible for governing education in England and Wales. Spatially, they are tied to borough councils or county councils. Their functions include distributing and monitoring funding for schools, overseeing admissions, and the administration of SEN provision. The power of LAs has been corroded by successive initiatives to remove responsibility of funding from the local level to the individual school.

from the debate (Cook et al., 2003). Recent literature has begun to address this gap (e.g. Connors and Stalker, 2007; De Schauwer et al., 2009; Goodley et al., 2011; Shah, 2005). However, young people on the AS are almost absent in these accounts. This reflects the marginalisation and othering of these young people in policy and media debates. Accounts that emphasise the experiences of young people on the AS could help to transform negative representations of them in broader society and education policy and practice (see also Davidson, 2008; Davidson and Henderson, 2010b; Davidson and Smith, 2009). Although interested in the experiences of young people on the AS, we draw upon a critical notion of their agency. Since normalisation proceeds mostly via beyond-conscious, everyday practices, only a critical reading of participants' accounts can give an insight into its operation. Sustained critiques of the concept of the sovereign, all-knowing, agent (e.g. Butler, 1997; Foucault, 1979, 2003) also make it inappropriate to apply an uncritical notion of agency to the (young) research participants (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008) or the researchers (Rose, 1997). This poses some methodological problems.

3. Methodology

The research presented here is part of a broader ESRC study exploring the reproduction of more or less valued embodied identities via the social relationships of young people with a variety of mind-body-emotional characteristics, particularly within school spaces. The accounts of participants (both young people and adults) and the researchers are partial and situated. Hence, the research took a multi-method ethnographic approach (see Hemming, 2008), seeking in-depth understanding of young people's experiences from a variety of perspectives -young people on the AS, adults, and the researchers.

The data presented here are drawn from: 30 days of ethnographic observation, focusing upon 11 young people in the unit and broader school; repeat (two) semi-structured interviews and self-directed photography which informed the second ‘photo-interview’ (Jorgenson and Sullivan, 2009) with five young people; and semi-structured interviews with one parent⁶ and four members of staff – the head of the AS unit; the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENco), who is the teacher responsible for co-ordinating provision and policy for SEN across the school; the deputy head-teacher; and the head of a separate inclusion unit for young people with socio-emotional differences. Interviews with 8 key informants from the LA and the broader research involving research with 108 children, 7 parents (to date) and approximately 70 key actors is an important backdrop. Methodological approaches and issues raised are discussed in more detail elsewhere (Lea et al., 2012). Some pertinent issues are briefly outlined here.

Informed consent was gained from young people and their parents/carers prior to observation. Young participants were self-selecting. It was emphasised that all aspects of the research were voluntary and participants could withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured, with the usual provisos that action is necessary in the disclosure of harm (Alderson and Morrow, 2011), although what this means is complex (Holt, 2004c). The names of all participants, the LA and school have been changed.

The unit is the only AS facility attached to a mainstream school in a rural, largely affluent, LA, catering for a maximum of twelve “high functioning” (academically and socially able)

⁶ All of the parents/carers of the young participants were invited to take part in an interview. However, only one parent of students in the AS unit agreed to take part.

young people on the AS; some young people were also diagnosed with ADHD or ADD. For most of the young people, the alternative to this unit would be a special school, since they had experienced multiple exclusions in/from mainstream schools. The unit is over-subscribed. Westfield School is a high-achieving secondary school (age 11 to 18). Perceived by staff to be inclusive, it also had an 'inclusion resource' for young people with socio-emotional differences (data about this resource are presented elsewhere (Holt et al., 2011)).

All interviews were recorded and transcribed and observations were typed in a research diary. Further details of the analysis are presented elsewhere (Lea et al., 2012). It is worth noting briefly that a thematic line-by-line analysis of the written data was undertaken by hand initially and then using the computer package NVivo to facilitate sharing analysis. The analysis of the photography focused upon young people's interpretations in the second interview. Analyses began with reflections in the research diary. The research participants were not accorded epistemological privilege. Of course, young people are knowledgeable about their lives; we suggest, however, that they are not all-knowing about their experiences and the consequences of their actions (see also Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008). This is no different to any other actor and is not a specific limitation of researching with young people and/or those on the AS.

4.1 The unit as a site of normalisation for inclusion into the mainstream space

All the young people attached to the unit had diagnoses of ASD and were therefore perceived to require intensive normalisation strategies to enable them to be 'included' into mainstream school activities (paralleling the model of the plague town rather than the leper (Foucault,

2003)). The students were all taught in the unit for Personal and Social Education (PSE); most also elected to socialise in the unit during informal periods. However, the unit was a porous space; the young people moved into and out of the unit and the mainstream school, particularly during formal lessons. Friends from outside were permitted to socialise in the unit, although this was rarely observed. Two of the young people engaged in sporting activities and socialised in the mainstream school.

The intensive work to promote acceptable forms of social expression occurred during both formal and informal time, which merged into each other. We focus here on four techniques of normalisation: positive behaviour strategies; intervention in young people's social relationships; PSE; and the (re)production of hierarchies of difference. Young people's resistance to normalisation is also briefly explored.

Staff in the unit used positive behaviour strategies, such as setting specific targets for young people and rewarding good behaviour with 'golden time' and lollipops. Targets focused upon behaviour rather than learning; those listed below are typical:

“Ali – to compare his actions to the rest of the class and ask if he looks stupid

Andy E – don't get stressed on science assessment

Lucy – not to get over excited about her birthday

Theo – to continue to think about the way he talks to adults and stop being rude to them” (Research Diary).

Young people were admonished to reflect upon their practices and compare their behaviour to their peers to encourage self-regulation (Foucault, 1978). It is interesting to note that positive behaviour strategies and the nurturing and relatively egalitarian social relationships forged between staff and young people were central to the operation of young people's self-regulation; the adults gained the affection of the young people who consequently sought the adults' recognition and thus subjected themselves to normalisation (Butler, 2004). Therefore normalisation power operated effectively with these young people because it was bound-up with nurturing relationships, which are difficult to resist.

Staff used their relatively egalitarian relationships with the young people to mediate in young people's relationships, as exemplified below:

“At this point Lucy and Carl have a falling out – Carl says “I don't know why I bothered to come to this school” – it carries on and Carl says “no one likes me” and Lucy replies “no one likes you because” at which point the adults step in and say “Lucy you were doing well up to that point”. Carl stormed out and slammed the door and Lucy talked to the staff – she was complemented on her calmness but told that she shouldn't have made her last comment ...” (Research Diary, Break-time in the unit).

These mediations served a normalisation purpose in helping young people to learn to adhere to the norms of sociality that teachers believe pervade the mainstream school and, by extension, society. The sociality of young people within the broader school was not subject to such intensive surveillance.

PSE is an initiative for all students, initiated by the former Labour government, but with an uncertain future in the new political context. It can be viewed as an attempt to formally codify, previously hidden, behavioural expectations (Gagen, 2009). Students on the AS were perceived to require more, specific, and intensive PSE. However, there was a lack of clarity about how this should be approached (Watson et al., 2012). This arguably reflects the difficulty of teaching norms of sociality, which seem self-evident, but are actually socio-spatially shifting and difficult to define (also Philo, 2007). In PSE, attempts were made to explicitly teach young people social and practical skills, such as shopping and using public transport (which are not taught to students without diagnoses of SEN). During the period of observation, PSE focused on students devising, performing and filming a play in groups; the normalisation work was about teaching young people to cooperate. This excerpt from the research diary is expressive:

“We start in a circle passing a football around so that everyone has to contribute a strength that is needed for working in a group ... Andy E gets irritated by Ali who is still whistling. There was one successful group (not Andy, Carl, Roberto and Ali’s). Aiden is standing looking out the window and Mrs Munroe says if he is quiet they should just let him be. The successful group get to go ahead with props and costumes, rehearsing the script they wrote last week. The ‘unsuccessful’ group (by implication) have to sit around the table with Mrs Munroe and Mr Brown discussing their script. They are trying to keep them on topic, but Andy is saying he is ‘haunted’ by the last place (his last school) and keeps seeing people from there in the school corridors. Aiden is asked whether he would like to use a camera – given another opportunity to take part. Carl suggests making some props but is told that there is a particular process to go through and not now... Mrs Munroe tries to involve Ali by saying that he will be the sound effects man and he practises by making the noise of a gun going off. He does it a number of times and is told “that’s enough” by Mrs Munroe. Aiden briefly looks to see what is going on in the room and then looks back out the window. Ali is disengaged. Mrs Munroe asks him if he is OK. Then he starts making explosion noises. Mr Brown says “I think this is Ali’s time to share – what

happens next?” Ali is talking and Andy sits with his head in his hands while Ali speaks. Carl grasps Andy’s wrists and Mrs Munroe says “boys, boys”. There is an awful lot going on in the room which is hot and quite fraught. Ali is taken outside by Mrs Munroe (he was sitting with his shoes off and she takes him out to talk about this and his over-excitement)... Aiden is still looking out of the window. Andy talks about the flawed system and that he is the most capable of the group to do this on his own – Mrs Munroe says “in your opinion” and then says that even if he thinks the system is flawed, they have made a lot of progress since last time...At the end of the session Mrs Munroe attempts to sum up – first to the small group and then to all of them. “Last week there was an awful lot of arguing, people got very upset” Ali chips in “it’s not my fault!” Mrs Munroe: “we’re not blaming anyone”. Carl says “it’s boring” and Mrs Munroe says “you don’t need to sit there disputing things – we’re doing the bit we have to do before we can do the fun bit – filming. We’ve made lots of progress”.... Aiden is still at the window and is so close to it that he has steamed it up. They move back into the centre of the room and she talks. Andy again gets annoyed by Ali” (Research diary).

Five key points strike us. First, the efforts made by teachers and teaching assistants (TAs) to maintain a positive and nurturing atmosphere. There is some censure and admonishment, but it is gently done. Second, a great amount of effort is being made to ‘teach’ young people on the AS to ‘cooperate’ because this is perceived to be a social skill they require which their ‘condition’ renders difficult for them. Teaching the young people on the AS to learn to cooperate, to correct their perceived deficiencies (rather than focusing on their talents and abilities) reflects other forms of normalisation applied to disabled young people in (special) schools; such as physically impaired children being removed from formal lessons to practice learning to walk (Copeland, 1999). Third, the norms being (re)produced are not fixed, given, or dictated from national policy, but emerge via situated performances (Philo, 2007). Indeed, norms become exposed and even emerge when they are contravened. The group who are not behaving as the adults think they ought, get far more comments from the teachers (and are

subject to more of the researcher's gaze) than the 'successful' group. This emphasises that norms are open to transformation since they only come into being as they are performed, and indeed transgressed, in specific contexts (Canguilhem, 1973). Fourth, it is apparent that the 'culture' of the unit was not equally accepting of all individuals, differences or practices. Rather, hierarchies based on norms of acceptable behaviour are reproduced. Hierarchical ordering is regarded as a tenet of disciplinary power (Elden, 2003), although here we view hierarchical ordering as a component of broader tendencies of normalisation (Foucault, 2003; Philo, 2012). In particular, Ali was consistently the subject of more or less subtle otherings by staff and peers. Both staff and students marginalised and stigmatised Ali, generally in habitual and beyond conscious ways. He engaged in behaviour which both young people and adults found irritating. Thus, violent outbursts, silence and non-co-operation are all relatively tolerated, but irritating behaviour is not. These limits to acceptable behaviour reproduced within the unit were sometimes violently enforced. They served a normalisation purpose by demonstrating the penalties of falling outside of the relatively expansive norms of the unit.

Fifth, Andy is critical of normalising attempts to encourage him to cooperate with his peers, focusing instead on his ability to do the task. In interview, too, Andy seemed aware of, and resistant to, the normalisation imperatives of the unit:

“... well basically I don't like some of the controlling bits. **[Oh right, can you say a bit more about what you mean by that?]** Controlling? Well ...**[Mm, like or give me an example]** ... because Miss Carey and Miss Bailey, I'm going to say those two people, are quite controlling in what you do and stuff”.

The attempts of some young people to contest the exegesis of normalisation illustrates the importance of young people's agency (Butler, 1997, 2004), along with the role of 'slippage' (Butler, 1990) in contesting the operations of power.

4.2 The unit as an Autistic Space and a porous container for the abnormally behaving

The unit acted simultaneously as a site of the acceptance of difference or 'Autistic Space' (see Hall, 2010 in relation to learning disabilities; Pinfold, 2000, in relation to mental ill-health) and, like asylums, a container for the abnormally behaving (Parr and Davidson, 2009). Young people felt that the unit offered a space of refuge from the mainstream school and a site of knowledge and understanding about AS. Moreover, as is evident in section 4.1, the social rules of engagement within the unit operated with a slightly different logic than in the mainstream school, making it a space in which the majority of young people felt comfortable socialising. There was a significant degree of acceptance of a range of behaviours within the unit, ranging from not wishing to socialise to verbal aggression (physical aggression was not tolerated) which would generally be perceived negatively in the mainstream school space

The safeness of the AS unit has resonance to the Internet as a virtual space of acceptance for people on the AS (Davidson, 2008). The unit facilitated developing friendships and a sense of collective identity, with potential implications for political self-identification (Cook et al., 2003). The relaxing of sanctions and norms of behaviour towards these young people diffused across the school; it was felt that they could not, rather than would not, adhere to normalised expectations of behaviour. The institutional 'powers and resources' (Philo and

Parr, 2000) and knowledges, of the unit leaked into the mainstream school as the young people on the AS moved around it. A diagnosis of AS excused behaviour regarded as unacceptable in other students:

“Miss Bailey explained that the children in the unit were not subject to the same discipline structures as other children in the school – for example they weren’t shouted at by the head of house as it wasn’t appropriate for them – sometimes the other children thought they were getting away with things but Miss Bailey told me that they have their own way of disciplining in the unit” (Research Diary).

This highlights that norms and how they are applied are socio-spatially shifting, variously performed (Philo, 2007) and consequently can be challenged and transformed. Therefore, the normative expectations of the school emerged in specific ways due to the presence of the young people on the AS. The material spatiality of the unit, the (consequent) visible status of the young people on the AS, and the expert powers, resources and knowledges of its staff seems to have been significant. Although the staff in the unit were presented as experts, their knowledge was forged in part through their relationships with young people on the AS. The voices of the young people were therefore indirectly important. Young people’s own ‘different’ behaviour was also crucial. Although not a deliberate attempt at collective self-identification (cf. Davidson, 2008; Davidson and Parr, 2010), the contestation of everyday norms (re)produced in school spaces by the young people had immanent political possibilities.

The unit also acted as a container for the abnormally behaving. All young people associated with the unit had a diagnosis of AS and were therefore labelled ‘abnormal’ in relation to ‘expert’ social and communicative norms. Adult discourses about the young people’s diagnoses often reflected individual tragedy models of disability (Oliver, 1996). There were also limits to how far beyond pervasively circulating norms of behaviour those on the AS could transgress before being excluded into the unit: “If our students become too disruptive, very quickly they’re not wanted in the lessons” (Mrs Munroe, head of the AS unit). The difference of the young people with socio-emotional differences was mapped and reproduced via the material spatiality of the unit (see also Holt, 2004b). Plate 1 demonstrates how the unit was demarked an ASD space.

Plate 1 – The doorway into the ASD unit



The door separates the unit from the rest of the mainstream space, signifying a distinct space. The letters ‘ASD’ on the door label the unit as attached to the *AS Disorder*. The unit becomes

a spatial container of difference (Parr and Davidson, 2009). Thus, the model of the ‘leper’ applies to the young people on the AS when they are within the unit (Foucault, 2003). For the majority of students of the school, the unit is terra incognita, the void outside, like that beyond the city walls to which lepers were cast. Young people without AS were permitted into the unit to socialise. The door is ajar, perhaps suggesting the porosity of the space and inviting students in. However, rarely and only briefly were those from outwith the unit observed here.

5. Conclusion: Special Units, Inclusion and Normalisation

This paper enhances debates about the appropriate place to educate young people with mind-body-emotional differences. It emphasises that schools are not only about formal learning, but are also sites of normalisation that operates via adults and young people’s interconnected practices. A key, sometimes hidden, purpose of school institutions is to produce individuals who adhere to societal norms. All young people in schools are subject to normalisation. However, some, such as those on the AS can be rendered ‘abnormal’ by these processes—leading to diagnosis, exclusion into a unit and intensified normalisation. It is, however, only via a practical sense of the abnormal that the normal emerges, as a socio-spatially shifting set of practices rather than a pre-existing dictate. Although reflecting the model of the leper (Foucault, 2003) in the exclusion of young people into the unit, whose material spatiality denotes their separation and difference, the more ‘positive’ imperatives of normative power are always present within the porous space of the unit. This suggests that, along with continuing to operate simultaneously in chronological time (Philo, 2012), the models of the leper and the plague town (Foucault, 2003) can be intimately interconnected. Within the unit, processes of normalisation are intensified in an endeavour to rectify young people’s ‘deviant’ social expression to enable them to be ‘included’ within the mainstream school. The

emphasis is upon normalising the deviant bodies of those on the AS, not expanding the norms reproduced in school spaces.

Nonetheless, the presence of the young people on the AS expand the norms of behaviour (re)produced in mainstream school space. These fleeting transformations suggest an immanent political potential to broaden the norms of sociality in the school and beyond. The materiality of the unit and consequent visibility of the young people on the AS, a leaking of expert powers, resources and knowledges from the unit into the mainstream school, and the practices of the young people which conflict with the norms of particular school spaces, are important here. This questions the dichotomy often presented between ‘expert’ and ‘disabled/young people’s’ knowledges, since much of the knowledge of the professionals emerges from their attentiveness to the young people on the AS. Thus, along with young/disabled people’s own collective action (e.g. Davidson, 2008; Hansen and Philo, 2007; Parr, 2008), teachers and professionals can, perhaps, play a political role in expanding the norms by which society is governed.

We suggest that there is a need consider more fully *what it means* to posit power as creative as well as regulatory. The operation of society relies upon, among other things, sets of (at least partially) shared norms (Barnett, 2011), albeit these might be viewed as precarious constellations rather than fixed tenets (Philo, 2007). Norms in themselves are not problematic. Norms circumscribe but they also enable. It is therefore pertinent to work to expand the norms of which lives are liveable (Butler, 2004). Crucial to identifying the potential for transformation is conceptualising norms as situated practices, socio-spatially

variable and emerging only within the context of their performance. Even when codified, norms are interpreted when enacted, often from a practical sense of the abnormal.

Inclusion of disabled young people within mainstream schools, and social inclusion of disabled people more generally, is predicated, then, upon inclusion into normalisation. However, this is a specific concept of normalisation, which involves the expansion of normative boundaries to more fully include the full diversity of mind-body-emotional characteristics within conceptions of the fully human (Butler, 2004). This differs significantly to Wolfensberger and Nirje's (1972) model; it does not focus upon rectifying the mind-body-emotions of impaired individuals to enable them to fit into a narrow definition of the human. The challenge for school leaders and personnel is to reproduce more expansive norms in school spaces. Special units might have a role here. Despite some critiques of special units (Holt, 2004b), they can act sites of specialist knowledge and safety for young people on the AS, and a launching-pad to reproduce more inclusionary social and communicative norms.

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