**Special educational needs and inclusion, moving forward but standing still? A critical reframing of some key issues.**

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*Abstract*

This article draws together my thinking in relation to SEN and inclusion that have dominated my practice. The article, through the concept of embodiment, revisits, reviews and reframes the key issues of, the construction of SEN, inclusion and the ideologythat binds such together. Through this exploration, I argue we often seem to move forward with policy while in reality standing still in ensuring the ‘success’ of all of our pupils. By critiquing and reframing taken for granted assumptions and the sacred words of success and achievement, future directions of inclusive education will be mapped out. The article concludes with a reflection upon my first days as a teacher of SEN and my work to support Kenny a student with cerebral palsy. This personal reflection maps out a different form of educational success that perhaps could provide a forward momentum to develop more successful inclusive education policy and practice.

*Introduction*

This article draws together my thinking in relation SEN, disability and inclusion that have dominated my thoughts over the past three decades. My research and work during this period has examined the history, current legislation and international perspectives of SEN, disability and inclusion as well as being drawn along the path of disability studies. What has become clear to me is the fact that education systems both in the United Kingdom, and across the world, experience difficulties in finding ways to ensure that all of our children and young people are included in early years settings, schools and colleges and that they experience ‘success’ in their educational pursuits. Given this fact, I intend to revisit, review and reframe the key issues that have dominated my thinking- these issues being definitions/ constructions of SEN, disability, inclusion and the ideology that bind such together. Through this exploration, I draw out the complexities of SEN and inclusion and argue that in England, as in the international arena, we often seem to move forward with policy while in reality standing still in relation to ‘success’ in education for all of our pupils. In addition, I want in this article to cover two other areas. These being what the future directions of inclusive education might be if we reframe taken for granted assumptions of SEN and disability. I intend to conclude this article with a personal reflection of my first day as a ‘teacher of SEN’ in the late 1980s. Through this reflection, I will map out a different form of educational success that perhaps could provide a different forward momentum to inclusive education.

Through this article, therefore, I hope to lay bare my thoughts, feelings and attitudes towards SEN, disability and inclusion. I hope that this article might also enable you to reflect on your feelings towards how the identity of SEN and disability has been, and still is, created in many parts of the world and how perhaps it is time to reframe our thinking about this key issue.

I acknowledged from the outset, though, that SEN and disability operate on a continuum in which there is sometimes no clear distinction between pupils who have and those who do not have SEN and also that SEN in practice, and at policy level, is a world that is complex, difficult and sometimes an utterly frustrating wonderful space to be present in. It is also important to state here that I have observed and been involved with successful inclusive practice and also successful SEN provision in segregated settings. This article presents an opportunity for me to outline my thoughts and for you as the reader to decide whether such thoughts have solidity and potential traction to provide a forward momentum in the world of SEN and disability in terms of inclusive education.

*A contextual beginning . . .*

My work in this world, named as SEN, began as a practitioner in further education and then in primary schools. I have been a SEN coordinator, a senior manager in primary schools and now hold employment as Associate Professor of Learning Support. These employments have enabled me to navigate a path through a series of complex and diverse issues relating to the practice and research in this arena. This though is a world dominated by many others. As Norwich (2000) comments, SEN and disability is dominated by professionals, families and administrators who try to work together to meet children’s needs. Through work with these groups, I have observed that SEN and inclusion is constricted, constrained and conformed by politics, policies and ideologies which provide regulation to the provision of inclusive education. I believe that if we are to fully understand the context of this arena, we must as Norwich suggests be able to recognise the complex interplay between these practical, professional, political and ideological worlds.

Within these worlds – it appears to me that everybody’s body is shaped, sorted and graded according to its ability to fulfil an ideology of the normal body. A body, not supported by the state but one that should live independently. A body that is economically active and thus we are told contributes positively to society. Indeed, these are the mantras in England of the 2014 Children and Families Act and its associated Code of Practice but also in policy and practice in other parts of the world too. Following Foucault (1991), I aim to draw out the ways in which policy and practice, nationally and internationally, detail a political investment of the body. I want to reveal how policies attempt to orientate a pupil’s identity into a ‘phenomenon that can be utilised, altered and developed, to best serve the economic interests of the state’ (Campbell, 2013, p. 28, 24). I want to bring focus to this master narrative of disability, and SEN and how it carves the flows and edges of the ‘impaired’ body to make it fit with an ideologically crafted perfect body identity. I want also to show how the resistance of ‘impaired’ bodies push back against this ‘bodypolitic’ and thus create opportunities for emancipation and the creation of owned’ identities (Goodley and Runswick-Cole 2013). Let us begin by revisiting special and inclusive education.

*Special and inclusive education*

Singal (2009) reflecting back on the changing trends within this special educational world details that for some the Warnock Report, in England, broadened the notion of special education by introducing the concept of SEN, instead of continued categorization and labelling. Jangira ( see Singal, 2009) and others have detailed that this evolved into a broader and natural concept that of inclusive schooling. This linear transformation from SEN to inclusive education is one I find interesting. This is because it is not one that I wholly recognise. Indeed, I question whether Warnock introduced ‘inclusion’ or whether this actually was a concept introduced much earlier by the disability movement themselves (see Hodkinson, 2016). As a culture, though, it is perhapscomforting to buy into a belief that education systems have moved beyond exclusion based upon identity created by categories, and that we have moved almost seamlessly into inclusive education (Hodkinson& Burch, 2017). However, there is a wealth of literature suggesting that the progression of inclusive educational provision is not as advanced as we like to think. Indeed, in England we still operate a system built upon the categorisation of ‘special educational needs’. We have replaced one system of categorisation for another or in some parts of the world, we have seemingly superimposed new words onto old but have not replaced outdated attitudes. In SEN, we appear to have moved forward whilst continuing to stand still. Let me advance this argument a little further.

For many, progression in SEN is framed only in linguistic replacements, which continue a structure of education that creates disability within difficulty and deficit. An identity solely located within the individual. (see Hodkinson, 2009; Slee, 2001; Vlachou, 2004). Such linguistics and expressions of SEN Norwich (2012) argues have taken on negative assumptions that are prominent in its ancestral discourses. For example, SEN now broken down in England into the areas of ‘communication and interaction’, ‘cognition and learning’, ‘social, emotional and mental health difficulties’, and ‘sensory and/or physical needs’ and other such categorizations are to me inherently problematic. As Penketh (2014, p. 1488) accounts, such categories ‘give little to inspire teachers to celebrate diversity with children whose needs are described via paragraphs of deficit’ and do little to the creation of positive identities for children and young people with disability. I believe that systems based upon the creation of identity grounded within individual deficit misdirect conceptions and the practice of inclusion. Such that systems of inclusive education, trumpeted by governments as being based on human rights and equality, sometimes appear only to be coated with the rhetorical guise of inclusive practice (Hodkinson & Burch, 2017).

Let me try to draw this part of my argument together. Conceptualising differences such as disability and the SEN of pupils is, without doubt, complex and often fraught with difficulties. There are so many contrasting and opposing views as to what counts as a SEN and or disabilities and indeed where these pupils should, or should not, be educated. Such views, it appears to me, are renewed and reinforced as new ideologies, policies and practices emerge at a political level. It is such ideologies, policies and practices that shape what the identity of SEN and inclusion becomes in particular temporal and geographical spaces. However, what has become important in the development of my understanding is that current thinking and the practice of SEN and inclusion is dominated by its history. A history that in many places in the world frames disability and SEN within the realms of deficit. For example, Eskay (2012), details Nigeria educators must shift their educational paradigms and join the 21st Century by putting away their old traditions of negative perceptions towards some learners. I have said similar things in relation to educational systems in England, India and Poland. An important question here is: why 40 years after Warnock and twenty years after the Salamanca Statement do such negative perceptions and attitudes still persist?

*Revealing and problematising master narratives of SEN and inclusion*

The Warnock Report (1978), we were told, was transformational in relation to inclusive education. We were also informed that the Salamanca Statement was likewise transformational on the international stage of inclusive education. To be fair, Warnock and Salamanca did seek to move thinking and practice forward and to formulate and maintain systems of inclusive education. However, my point here is that even a cursory examination of Warnock and Salamanca reveals that these ‘transformational’ documents about SEN policy and practice centre on entrenched societal views which compare, contrast and normalise children and young people. It is this master narrative of a normalising technology of power, of SEN and disability identity, that I seek here to explore and problematise. I suggest that in reality ‘transformational thinking’ needs to reframe the identity construction of marginalized groups such as those of SEN and disability and that this is the thinking we need to become centre stage. I wish now to move this discussion on to explore how such master narratives of SEN are formed. To aid us with this discussion, I pause and turn to the concept of embodiment as a theoretical guidebook to our onward journey.

*Manufacturing SEN and disability identity: a re-examination through the lens of embodiment*

Within societies, Ahmed argues that the body is manufactured within and orientated (Ahmed, 2006) by varying but distinct regimes (Foucault, 1971). The catalyst to such processes may be defined by power and its relationship to the individual’s body and its orientation and it extension into a given temporal or geographical space (Ahmed, 2006). I argue, following Foucault (1971 & 1978) that such power is woven into every individual identity inserting ‘itself into actions, attitudes, discourses, learning processes and everyday lives’ (Foucault 1978, p. 31). For Gramsci (1971) and Marx & Engels (1968) referring to industrialised societies, power in such processes should be read simply as capitalism. That is, capitalist relations of production which seek to produce a docile labouring and controlled body identity. A body whose ‘social skin’ (Low, 2003, p. 70) is a surface upon which society impresses its bigotry, stereotypes, ideologies, values and assumptions thereby reshaping it (Ahmed, 2006). The body and its identity here therefore becomes an ‘intellectual text’ in which we might usefully read the ‘ideological assumptions of social systems’ (Meekosha, 1998, p. 122).

Reading of these ‘lived through experiences’ and meanings (Iwakuma, 2002, p. 78) brings me to the place of a socially constructed embodied space (Ahmed, 2006). In this space, the body and its identity might be reformed as an object of intellectual inquiry (Iwakuma, 2002). Here its surface, its skin, becomes a frontier, a mirror to society, reflecting a contested boundary between the *Them*, the *They* and *Their* representations of a SEN and disability identity (see Hodkinson, In Press). In such spaces bodies and their identities acquire orientations, they are ‘gendered, sexualised… raced’ and disabled (Ahmed, 2006, p.5). Within such hard border disputes, I argue that the concept of embodiment becomes a useful tool of analysis of *their* beliefs. In summary, Ahmed (2006, p. 17) details that embodied space contain social pressures that forces bodies and their identities ‘to follow a certain course, to live a certain kind of life’. From this perspective, embodiment becomes a repetitive straightening device, which orientates and lines bodies up to ‘taken for granted’ social conventions such as what actually is SEN and disabilities and how such pupils should be educated.

Such orientation, though, is not neutral but rather is driven by ‘political requirements that [bodies] turn in some ways rather than others’ (Ahmed, 2006, p. 12). In my employment of embodiment, therefore, I am mindful, of such realisations of phenomenology as well as Giddens (1991, p. 40) perspective that individuals also protect their own ‘ontological security’. Bodies and their identities are not always rendered as ‘passive entities upon which power brands its own images’ (Meekosha, 1998, p. 172). Indeed, I wish to argue against such simplistic formulations, which pitch docile bodies against ‘disabled’ bodies, inscribing them as ‘without agency’. To this end I also find utility in Low’s (2000, p. 70) definition of embodied space. Here space is occupied by a body that has ‘perceptions and experiences . . . [which] contract and expand in relationships [between] a person’s emotion and state of mind [and] sense of self, social relations and cultural predispositions’. I will exemplify this later, through a personal reflection upon my work as a teacher of SEN. For now though, through the employment of embodied space I want to demonstrate how policies and definitions relating to SEN and inclusion re awakens age old controversies between ‘productive’ and ‘non-productive’ body identities (Mitchell & Synder, 2015) and how past histories make surface impressions on the social construction of the ‘disabled body’ (Ahmed, 2006). Such constructions, I argue, are not innocent as they seek to make bodies ‘available as resources to be used’ (Ahmed, 2006, p. 118). I wish to analyse how shifts in policy discourse appear to sanction the creation of a perfect body identity; a docile compliant and productive body, and thereby diminish the location and rights of some ‘impaired bodies and minds’. By first revealing and then problematizing such ablest discourses I wish to highlight my unresolved issues which constitute the boundary between the *Them*, the *They* and the Other. The question I ask, therefore, is what sort of body identity do *They* through policies and ideology of SEN and inclusion wish to create and how, if at all, does the disabled body, an active, beautiful and powerful body fit with the manufactured docile and seemingly powerless body identity exemplified by technological, capitalist and commodified societies?

Let us put this concept to work and tease out these master narratives identities. For example**,** I have already detailed how the work of Warnock in 1978 and the Salamanca Statement seemingly stimulated a drive towards inclusive education, where children and young people apparently were to be included in mainstream schools- apparently *‘with no ifs and no buts’.* As Article 26 of the Universal declaration of Rights states, ‘Everyone has the right to education’. However, the devil here is in the detail. What education are we actually talking of and is this notion of education conceptualised similarly- person to person, school to school, country to country? Let me push this point just a little. Forty years after the Warnock Report, data continue to show that in England approximately one in five children are still identified as having a ‘difficulty with learning’ that requires extra help to be given in class. Additionally, it is also the case that the majority of children requiring the highest level of provision, those with an Education Health and Social Care Plan are still educated in special schools. My question here is, why is it in England that special Education is still special? Why has inclusive education not made this form of education become just plain old ordinary? What is my point here? Well it is this. We do not seem to be getting better at inclusive education because it is still the case that we have educational needs that are still considered special. Indeed, evaluations of policy initiatives at a national and international level continue to demonstrate goals missed and policy commitments not realised. Consequently, the complex and diverse nature of SEN continues today, as does the debate on the how support for these pupils should operate and where the teaching of these children and young people should be located. We seem to spend so much time rehearsing these debates. It is the case that in England work on inclusive education has not produced the desired results. Indeed, during the period of the New Labour government’s flagship inclusion policy it is argued (See CSIE in Hodkinson 2016) that more children went to special schools than ever before. Politicians consistently tell us we are moving forward while in reality we continue to stand still or indeed slip backwards in terms of inclusive educational ideals.

Given this policy history, I suggest that if we are to move forward with inclusion we need to reframe the debate on SEN and inclusive education both within the UK and in some international settings so that more realistic identities are created for and by disabled people. There is a need then to tease out and materialise the master narratives that work to constrain and conform thinking and thereby hold back practice. Such master narratives often orbit around small policy words. Such words, as I will demonstrate, though have a large impact on the practice of SEN. As Derrida (1995) accounts words are detonatives. The words I choose to explode here therefore are independence, employment, SEN, inclusion and success.

First, then lets us examine how a disabled body identity is manufactured through the myth of independence and a reality of employment. I want now to consider statements from previous Conservative party manifestoes here in England to materialise independence and employment…

*On independence . . .*

‘I believe strongly that you not the Government should be in charge of your life’ (1992)

‘a more engaged nation is one in which we take more responsibility for ourselves…’ (2015)

On a personal note, it is important here to state that I have never been independent. Indeed, I like everybody rely on people all of the time. I would suggest these statements relating to independence moves its discourse far away from human rights and the discourse of the Independent Living Movement promoted by disability rights campaigners to one where bodies do not become an economic burden on society (Hodkinson & Burch, 2017).

Turning now to the detonative of employment. Conservative manifestos over several decades have suggested that employment is the major purpose of education. For example, they state:

‘we welcome people who want to work hard and make a positive contribution’ (2005)

‘A Conservative government will not accept another generation being consigned to an uncertain future of worklessness and dependency’ (2010)

Now do not get me wrong here. I am not against employment *per se*, but how employment is sometimes the only success criteria of education policies. Accountable then to such rhetoric educational policies become ideologically saturated by the values, assumptions and expectations of the economy that resonate with the production of docile and productive bodies. Unravelling this discursive veil of ‘independence’ we might observe how this politically imagined configuration of the body rejects the humanness of dependence in favour of the mythical existence of the independent and an economically employed body (Hodkinson & Burch, 2017). That is, a political commitment to independence provides no more than a safety net for people that are deemed unable to meet a normative set of needs (Shipley & Upton, 1992, cited in Lawrence, 2009).

I believe that employability enmeshed within such policy constructs, provides straightjacket to holistic formulations of educational success. As such, these words become detonative to a normalising technique of neoliberal citizenship (Lakes, 2011). There are, for some disabled people, therefore, no positives in these incarnations of ‘contributions,’ as these policy words blast out worlds which orbit around pupils becoming independent in later life. That pupils are financially secure thereby ensuring their positive contribution is not to become a burden to society. My own view, however, is that a civilised society should value those who are unable to contribute in the narrow ways set out by governments.

I wish now to return to the terminology of SEN that is applied in policy discourse and rhetoric. I wish now to begin to reframe this discourse.

*Reframing the terminology of special educational needs*

There can be no doubt that SEN, has over the last four decades, become an orthodoxy of education worldwide. SEN is a high status construct that has gained currency within educational and social policy initiatives as well as in early years settings, schools and colleges. To some, this terminology is an uncomplicated straightforward term, which is based simply upon providing the best support so that a child’s educational needs might be met. However, in the harsh reality of practice and policy imperatives, it is apparent that SEN does not represent an uncomplicated nor uncontested ideological construct. I wish, at this point therefore, to reframe this construct to demonstrate that perhaps it is a term that have outlived its usefulness in the determination of realistic pupil identities in education and beyond (SEN Policy Options Group, 2009). Let me begin this reframing by stating the legal definition of SEN that operates within the Children and Families Act in England. A child or young person has a SEN if:

1. he or she has a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her.

(2) [and that] learning difficulty or disability . . .

(a) has a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age, or (b) has a disability which prevents or hinders him or her from making use of facilities of a kind generally provided for others of the same age

Here, I highlight the words: ‘difficulty, prevents and hinders’ ( these inperson and impersonal words). Similar definitions of SEN exist in other parts of the world. Such definitions are based upon what individuals with disabilities cannot do. They are definitions based upon a premise of deficit and negativity. SEN, defined in these terms, has changed littlein England since the Warnock Report. However, the terminology of SEN and disability exists within a context of education policy that has changed over time. Such policies, it seems, serve either, to stall or accelerate inclusive education. For example, if we examine current English government definitions of the purposes of education we find that: ‘Perhaps what is most important is that we must ensure that more people have knowledge and skills they need to be a success in a demanding economy,’ and that ‘education is the engine of our economy’. (Nik Gibb- Schools Minister, 2015)

Other polices in other parts of the world link education to the production of effective citizens who promote national efficiency. However, I take issue with such policies as they include such simple math. That is that,

EDUCATION + CHILD = Economic Efficiency of Country.

As with the study of infinity, politicians will I fear never find and end to this form of math. I myself find interest more in policies developed elsewhere in world. For example, the Indian governments stated purpose of education purpose is that it should strengthen the social fabric of democracy through provision of equal opportunities, where curriculum should make the child free of fear, trauma and anxiety through a system of child friendly and child centred learning (MHRD, 2018). I do realise the issues inherent in the Indian educational system but as I have argued elsewhere the point here is that some ancient eastern philosophies of disability and inclusion are still far beyond those operating in some educational policies operating in western industrialised societies (Hodkinson, 2009).

What has become abundantly clear to me is that SEN and inclusion operate within a political arena where academic success, based upon good exam results, and contributing economically to society dominate educational success and identity formulation. If though inclusion in society and inclusive education is ever to become a political and practical reality, it must, I suggest, be based upon a human rights approach. This would by default necessitate a redefinition of how education frames not only independence, economic contribution but also more basic words such as success and the ‘special’ in Special educational needs. I do not have time to expand upon an analysis of the word special here. However, I do briefly want to examine the common educational parlance of the words of success and achievement to push my point about educational identity further.

For some children and young people, framing success and achievement only in terms of good exam results or obtaining a good university place (these are the words of a current English government minister) will mean that their ‘educational career’ is doomed to failure before it has begun. As Albert Einstein supposedly wrote, ‘Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid’. SEN, then, is a construct, that I believe rather than supporting all children to experience success actually, because of competing policy initiatives, might actually ensure some children’s identities have been conceptualised around failure and deficient and thus doom them to failure.

*Reframing SEN on the international stage*

To further this reframing of SEN and inclusion I layer in here some international dimensions of this world of special education. I have, in my reading and through my research realised that these terms also operates within distinctive international perspectives and settings. Such perspectives and settings are also driven by policy and ideology. Two aspects of international policy related to SEND that are worth returning to here are the 1994 Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with a Disability (2006). I have observed through the Salamanca Statement and the UN Convention how many international communities and educational authorities have adopted a philosophy of ‘inclusion’ to address their social and moral obligations to educate all children. Indeed, The UN convention of 2006 obligates international member states to undertake proactively the appropriate measures to ensure disabled people participate in all facets of society, on an equal basis with others. However, I have also observed that the UN failed to meet its millennium goal and that there are still millions of children and young people with SEN and disabilities out of education or segregated in special school settings. It is the case that despite, policies signed at an international level prioritising inclusion, politicians are still finding difficulty in determining the appropriate balance between mainstreaming and segregative strategies. Thus, while international policy seeks to integrate and include disabled people into all aspects of schooling individual countries are finding the appropriate methods of doing so to be highly problematic. What has become clear to me, is that empowerment and self-representation of disabled people, combined with an international commitment to acknowledge the rights of children and young people with SEN to a high quality education, must have ascendency if we are to observe a major shift in the policies and practices of inclusive education and the development of proud and strong identities of disability. This commitment it seems is easy to express but seemingly difficult to realise.

*Future directions of SEN and inclusion*

So what could be the future directions of inclusive education and the identity of disabled people within such systems? To move forward, I believe that we must look back into the past. Let me exemplify this approach by detailing a little history as context to my reframing of SEN and inclusion.

In England in the late 1990’s and early part of the 21st century, the New Labour government took a ‘powerful inclusion stance’ (Coles and Hancock, 2002: 10) and by adopting a top-down approach to policy implementation they forced their own version of inclusion upon early years settings, schools and colleges. Therefore, whilst it might appear that New Labour was committed to the ideology of inclusive education as defined by a previous minister of education as ‘ensuring that every child has the opportunity to achieve their full potential’ (DfES, 2004a: 2), it also appeared their particular view on inclusion was not without its critics nor an entrenched ideology of economic contribution. Indeed, New Labour’s attempts to define inclusion along a continuum that placed inclusive education in the realms of ‘equality for all,’ as I stated earlier actually led to more children attending special schools than ever before. New Labour, then, like other governments around the world, was well versed in ‘inclusion-speak’. However, its motivational drivers and its inclusion policy were, like its definition of inclusion, suspect. Despite such shenanigans, inclusion became yet another ‘buzz-word’ that like SEN gained status and acquired international currency within educational and social policy initiatives. What I observed, though, is that inclusion as a concept has a constellation of definitions and meanings especially when it is enmeshed in political rhetoric and enshrined within educational policy (See Hodkinson, 2012). For example, from 2010, we witnessed a fundamental change in the ideology, which underpinned the provision for children and young people with SEN in England. It became clear that the government of the day did not observe inclusive education to be the sole objective of educational provision. Indeed, the government made clear through the tone of its rhetoric that the medical model of disability had been returned to the centre of educational policy and provision. It seemed that any hope that ‘full inclusionists’ might have had that all special schools would be closed were cast aside by Prime Minister Cameron’s conviction to end the ideologically bias towards inclusion. Whilst Cameron determined that policy and provision should, quite rightly, not be driven by ideology the employability clauses emplaced in the 2014 legislation is an example of Conservative ideology of economic contribution yet again driving the governing principles of educational provision. I contend that we cannot move forward with inclusive education until we address these forced ideological notions of education.

Time and time again, we may observe in England and throughout the world, government interference and ideologically driven policies of education being unsuccessful. I believe they will continue to be unsuccessful because the fail to take into consideration the views and wishes of those who are most important. Namely, children and young people. Policies in the United Kingdom have since the 1940s included the notion of pupil’s voice but such policies have not delivered on this commitment. In my reframing of SEN and inclusion, I suggest that it is perhaps time for politicians from every political party and ideological standpoints to reframe the purposes of education and to think about who education is really for? Is it for children and their families or is it so that we may produce economic units of production? This question is significant for all children and young people but especially for those who have SEN.

Let me pursue this argument further by reframing inclusive education itself. Inclusion, I stated earlier is a construct that is supposedly built upon the absolute presence of all children in mainstream classrooms - ‘no ifs – no buts’. Application of current government’s policies in England and elsewhere though means we actually seem further away from making inclusion happen than ever. This is because we continually fail to realise who the system of special education and inclusive education are for. My own view, therefore, is that inclusive education cannot be a forced top down system of ideals and ideology. It needs to be much more personal than that.

What I observe, is that in attempting to define and materialise inclusion we actually produce a construct contextualised in the wider underworld of politicians, politics and ideology. My analysis of inclusive education, leads me to a belief, both in the United Kingdom and throughout the world, that as a word inclusion is simple but inclusive education as practice is constructed, complicated and constrained by words such as independence and employment and the concept of educational success. It has become clear to me then that inclusive education is a complex and multi-facet construct, which while supposedly having no boundaries has actually polarized educational provision.

At the beginning of the 21st century moving forwards from Warnock and the Salamanca Statement we had a real opportunity to make inclusion happen. Governments though have consistently failed to ensure that inclusive education has actually happened for every child or young person that wants it. Governments have allowed marketisation and accountability, funding issues and the lack of effective teacher training (to name but a few issues) to get in the way of this important educational and social imperative. We now find ourselves in a position that despite numerous government and international interventions little has actually changed in relation to inclusive education since the 1980s in many parts of the world. This is a real shame, especially when we consider the very real benefits inclusive education can bring for some children and young people. This does makes a recent education minister’s statement seem rather ironic…

‘This government won’t shy away from seeking the best for every child, wherever they are …Children only get one childhood and one chance at their education, so there is a real urgency in our need to deliver.. [we need to ensure] that vulnerable children are supported to succeed with opportunities as good as those for any other child. (Morgan, 2016: 3-4).

Therefore what we really need if inclusive education is to become a reality is old ideas not new ones. For example, the ideas promoted by early welfare pioneers and the disability community themselves. To be specific, the UPIAS (1976:14) nearly fifty years ago stated that disabled peoples’ groups should

‘[work] as a political movement through which disabled people can gain expertise and take control over our own lives. . . In this way, the problems of poverty, immobility, unemployment, etc., of physically impaired people would be increasingly integrated into the common problems of social life which also include these aspects and affect many other social groups.’

It is also useful here to remind ourselves of another UPIAS’s statement:

* “In our view it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society.” (UPIAS, 1976:3)

We must learn the lessons of history, not repeat its mistakes. Those who use education must drive education policies. Namely, the children and young people with SEN and disabilities, their families and teachers. We must listen, we must hear and we must act. Inclusion I suggest, therefore, must be reframed not just within the rhetoric and principles of human rights, democracy, equity and social justice but it must be actioned by all for all. Inclusive education ultimate aim must be to develop early years, schools and colleges where all children can participate equally, where they will be respected and have a right to be included at a social, intellectual and cultural level. Schools where the special becomes ordinary, where success is re-defined. My belief is that inclusive education must move beyond structure, policies and politics towards strategies of empowerment. This world of inclusive education is still not beyond our grasp but weas the generation working together with children and young people with SEN and disabilities need to reach out and take it!

I leave you with a personal reflection upon my first days as a ‘teacher of SEN,’ which perhaps conceptualises my current thinking about this world of SEN that we all inhabit. Research tells us that altitudinal change is fundamental to the development of effective inclusive educational settings – so this is my story of such change.

In my employment as a one-to- one special needs tutor in further education I was tasked, on my first day, to support a student called Kenny. Kenny was in his 40s, had cerebral palsy and communicated with the world one letter at a time, through a computer programme he operated with a head pointer fashioned out of a metal coat hanger and a triangular rubber taken off a discarded pencil. When he did speak, it was virtually impossible to understand him, involved being drenched in spittle and staring at his decaying and rotted teeth. In so many ways, my first day was slow going.

At one level, Kenny was not contributing economically. Indeed, from one perspective he might be observed to be a burden on society. He was the epitome of a medical model approach to education that had failed. His mother had been advised to euthanise Kenny during pregnancy. He had been categorised as a child and shut away in a supposedly caring institution. He was denied education. However, in his 30s he pushed hard to be educated. So, his local authority placed him in a school nursery where he was only allowed to ‘play’ in the sand pit for hour after hour, and day after day. That was until his mother pushed him and his wheelchair two miles to the further education college.

I was there to support Kenny but in reality, he supported me. Over the next years, one letter at a time, I learnt so much from him about life, and, how to live it to the full. Kenny encouraged me to visit the institution where he lived. I was shocked- I found him strapped to a chair and left to manipulate alphabet blocks, hour after hour and day after day. Kenny knew the effect this visit would have on my attitude and understanding of what we call SEND today. He was correct; from that moment forward, I knew that education had to change. It had to be inclusive; it had to respect and enable all people to fulfil their potential – whatever that might be.

Kenny eventually took an O level in mathematics – his life’s ambition. He started on the Monday and four days, and hours of toil later, he finished. He was physically and emotionally drained. He had given everything of himself – it was his life work. Later, we found out he had got an A pass. The state education system had let him down, it had seen him as needing support and not able of achieving success. He had proved them all wrong. How he laughed and laughed!

To some people Kenny was a ‘societal misfit’ a person who had no place in an education system who prepared children to become economic units of product. He, and others, I worked with in those early days achieved success in their own ways. Not always the success of academic qualifications but success nonetheless. The lasting legacy of these few years was that I, as an educator, had to alter my attitude. I had to be re-educated as to the wonder and uniqueness of every individual. We have no need for more categorising in education, nor continuance of definitions, nor, ideologies and policies that exclude. What we need is to learn respect for all life and the pure awe-inspiring wonder it can bring to our early years settings, classrooms and colleges. Inclusion is not just a choice but is a way of being. Moving forward, it must be observed as a basic human right. A right to important to be left to the vagaries of politicians and ideology.

I really hope that this article has laid bare my ideology. That is, SEN and inclusion is a journey that we roll, walk, crawl and slide together. Every person can and does contribute to this journey. This is my taken for granted assumption. I hope that in your life’s work in education and beyond, that your journey, in this world they name as SEND, continues- every day with the realisation that we must change ourselves before we try to change others- we have to reframe our ideas. We have to challenge taken for granted assumptions that are forced from above. We have to truly work with, listen to, and learn from all children and young people who have a SEN and/ or disabilities. These then, for myself, are the key issues in special educational needs and inclusion.

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