

# HAS INCLUSION BECOME A BARRIER TO INCLUSION?

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Almost twenty years ago I edited and contributed to a book entitled 'Enabling Inclusion: Blue skies...dark clouds?' (O'Brien, 2001a). The book contained a variety of chapters that raised issues about inclusion confusion – especially in relation to rights, entitlements, ethics, systems, processes, pedagogy, ideologies and models. All contributors were concerned that the blue-sky thinking that surrounded inclusion at that time required a more critical debate in relation to the meaning of inclusion in education and how we could make it work. Emerging contradictions, tensions, concerns and dilemmas were identified so that they could be confronted and tackled before they became even more problematic as time went on. So, where are we now and how do I see it?

## Education for all: how can it happen?

To understand where we are now in the UK, it is important to take a look at where we used to be. I will select a few key moments. Firstly, it is important to highlight that there was a time when some children were the responsibility of the National Health Service. They received medical treatment as they were deemed to be uneducable. They were uneducable due to the profound nature of, what were referred to as their 'impairments' – a term that the social model of disability rejects. They received treatment not teaching and those who were considered to be educable took their place in the education system. The Education [Handicapped Children] Act (HM Government, 1970) changed this and all children, including those with 'a disability of mind', from this point, were seen as educable and became the responsibility of Local Education Authorities. The Warnock Report (DES, 1978), a comprehensive enquiry into the 'education of handicapped children and young people' and the result of a committee working together for almost four years, represented a critical landmark in the education of those who experienced 'special educational needs' (SEN). It identified what provision for a continuum of needs could and should look like. It proposed that education must have, very broadly, the same aims for everyone and that twenty per cent of children, at some stage in their years at school, would experience learning difficulties. These

difficulties were now described as SEN. The term ‘handicapped’, and the eleven categorisations of handicap that previously existed, were no longer used as individual or group descriptors. Terms such as ‘educationally sub normal’, ‘physically handicapped’ and ‘maladjusted’ were seen as promoting a model of within-child deficit. It can also be argued that the term SEN, and in its current formulation ‘Special Education Needs and Disabilities’ (SEND), still has similar deficit connotations and implications. I shall reflect on this later. The change in terminology advanced a change in how provision could be structured, with an intention for special education – defined as extra help and support needed to overcome learning obstacles (Warnock, 1979) – to take place ‘wherever possible’ within mainstream schools. This challenged the education system to think deeper about segregation and integration and what that might look like for individuals who experienced SEN. The Warnock Report was not intended as a charter for the complete removal of special schools. Mary Warnock stated that she felt special schools as ‘centres of expertise for those who used to be called ‘maladjusted’ and those who are very severely multiply disabled’ remained a necessary component of a system of education (Warnock, 1999).

The 1981 Education Act (HM Government, 1981) brought the ‘Statement’ of SEN into being: a contractual legal document identifying how a young person’s SEN would be met. A statement was the precursor of the current Education, Health and Care plan (EHCP), although the age range did not extend to 25 years old as it does now. Other important documents included the ‘Codes of Practice’ relating to SEN and SEND (DfEE 1994; DfE, 2015) and the principles, guidance and models, such as the graduated response to need, that are contained within them. The codes of practice aim to ensure that systems adapt to need and work collaboratively to do so. Another key milestone was The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). It was adopted by the World Conference on Special Needs Education in Salamanca, Spain. 92 governments were represented as were 25 international organisations. This statement asserted that ‘regular schools’ with an ‘inclusive orientation’ were the ‘most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes.’ Such schools would create welcoming communities, improve the cost-effectiveness of the education system and combat direct and indirect discrimination in order to reduce marginalisation. Those with SEN were to have access to regular schools which would accommodate them within a child-centred pedagogy capable of meeting their needs. The role of environmental factors in relation to SEN were to be taken into account too. The momentum towards inclusion, supported by policy and legislation, was now occurring as part of an agenda that highlighted global impetus and interconnection.

## Inclusion and exclusion

Inclusion is conceptually complex and also involves lived complexity. It is multidimensional and multi-positional. When we talk about inclusion we are talking about people's lives, and, as this is the case, we have to challenge the existence of barrier-creating systems that promote preferred ways of being. We also have to be aware of the competing and contradictory value positions that the concept of inclusion illuminates. Inclusion is about more than headcount: it must maximise both presence and participation. Inclusion has intentions that are associated with the advancement of social justice. It also aims at enhancing human rights and self-advocacy, enabling people who used to be seen as welfare recipients to be respected as rights holders who can claim and demand non-discriminatory educational provision. Inclusion challenges global education systems to respond in an affirmatory manner to the complexity of human difference in multiple contexts. Inclusion is centred on overcoming and removing barriers to learning and is purported to have benefits for groups, individuals and ultimately everyone. Inclusion can also be seen as representing transformational cultural reform and radical realignment within systems, schools, communities and societies that will create barrier-free equality of opportunity for all. Inclusion is a process - it is not an outcome or a fixed state. It never has been.

However, blue skies can contain dark clouds and to understand inclusion we have to take an honest analytical gaze at exclusion. This necessitates the analysis of the multiple types of displacement and exclusion that exist inside the education system and extend beyond it. We have to be conscious of the disproportionate representation of particular groups amongst the data that captures those who are being permanently excluded from education - as well as those who are being perniciously excluded in the shadows and therefore do not exist in reported data. We also have to consider what the role of special, specialist, or alternative education is in an inclusive context. Is it a necessary form of responsive, flexible, and additionally resourced provision co-existing within an inclusive system or is it socially and educationally devaluing provision that creates detached and isolating educational silos that reinforce stigma? Or, does it have to be seen in such a binary and polarised way? Then, of course, there is the question about what needs mainstream schools can *really* meet. This fuels the rhetoric versus reality and espoused values versus enacted values debates, forcing us to consider whether mainstream provision might actually exacerbate or aggravate certain learning difficulties for some. It remains a knotty challenge to find a universal agreement on what inclusion in education is and is not. Understanding inclusion is complex. Teaching is complex. People are complex. The world is complex. It is a festival of complexities and we have to embrace and navigate those complexities, and the associated tensions, ambiguities and dilemmas, in order to respond to diverse needs.

## Full inclusion

In *Enabling Inclusion* (O'Brien, 2001a) I expressed concerns about the sense of ideological zealotry and conviction about inclusion – especially full inclusion which required the closing of all special schools - that might shut down the interdependent voices of parents, carers, practitioners, pupils and others who were key to the success of inclusion. Would the closure of special schools and specialist provision silence voice and remove choice or was education for The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), adopted in 2006 and opened for signature in 2007, was presented as the dawn of a new area for inclusion and inclusive placement. Article 24 of this human rights treaty (UN General Assembly, 2007) obliges 'state parties' to ensure that children can access an inclusive education system at all levels, free and 'on an equal basis' with other communities in which they live (p15). The UK government ratified the UNCRPD in 2009, but with restricted obligations enabling the right for disabled children to be educated outside of their own community thus retaining a system of mainstream and special schools. Many would argue that this was not, and is not, inclusion. In 2017, the United Nations Disability Committee were critical of the UK position stating that separate and parallel systems of special and mainstream education do not represent inclusion as they provide and promote segregation. In 2018 the Irish government also ratified the principles of Article 24. The National Council for Special Education in Ireland recently consulted with educators and engaged with research to consider how to move forward, as the Irish system of mainstream education, special education and special classes is also not compatible with the UNCRPD model of a fully inclusive system (NCSE, 2019). Other countries find themselves in a similar position as they grapple with the fundamental cultural and philosophical changes, as well as the paradigm shifts, that full inclusion may require. The continuing professional development implications for those who have to make inclusion happen also have to be taken into account. Inclusion may be a 'wicked problem' - a term used by design theorists to describe complex issues with multiple interdependencies, where there may be no immediate or definitive solution and where one problem appears to be symptomatic of another (Buchanan, 1992). However, those committed to a full inclusion solution would disagree and can point to education systems where there is no systemic segregation, such as in New Brunswick, Canada. In New Brunswick inclusion means a fully inclusive education system. Policy 322, a provincial legally binding policy as from 2013, states that segregated and alternative education programmes from kindergarten to grade eight are prohibited. There is no separate special or alternative provision in the province of New Brunswick. Education support teams, individualised learning plans and an integrated services delivery framework underpin full inclusion.

## Hyperaccountability and inclusion

I was also concerned about how we could make inclusion happen in a world where marketisation and competition were just beginning to gain momentum. I remember feeling an intense sense of discomfort at the time when I wrote that if marketisation and league table competition continued unabated those with SEN would be framed as the damaged goods on the education market stall (O'Brien, 2001b). No child deserves that but, sadly, in this culture of hyperaccountability and performativity it is happening. Real world experiences of inclusion and exclusion, and their associated narratives, cannot be ignored. In the UK, league tables of academic performance remain a powerful feature of the educational landscape. The stakes are high. Headteachers, dependent on granular data and results, are becoming as disposable as football managers. Schools judged to be outstanding by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) drape their 'we are outstanding' banners outside their buildings so that the community can make drive-by assessments as to where high-quality teaching and learning apparently resides. Accountability has gone hyper. One function of accountability systems relates to identifying who can be trusted to deliver professional standards and who is untrustworthy. Accountability is a professional expectation of being a teacher and so it should be – but when it becomes hyper it can make teachers feel untrusted. For example, assessment can appear to be more about teacher accountability than it is about learning and progress to inform future teaching. Hyperaccountability creates free-floating anxiety and activates dormant fear in people and in systems. It can damage relationships within schools and between schools; it crushes systemic collaboration. It can have a negative impact on individual and group wellbeing. Hyperaccountability can also devastate teacher agency. Teachers, as recipients of change and vehicles for change, can find themselves in a state of manic vigilance: feeling de-professionalised and scrutinised as they seem to spend more time justifying that they can do their job rather than being trusted to get on and do their job. Surveillance is not support.

The question posed by schools to pupils is in danger of becoming flipped: 'what can you do for us?' (for example in terms of examination and standardised test results) rather than 'what can we do for you?'. Hyperaccountability fatigue and performance-related anxiety have extremely worrying outcomes. Teachers become stressed. Pupils become stressed. Systems become stressed. We cannot and must not continue with the normalisation of an education system where winning comes before wellbeing.

## Market-driven exclusion

In this context how can inclusion ever work? Some schools become very well defended against any slip or dip in academic attainment that will influence their league table positioning locally and nationally. Other schools become the ‘good-at-inclusion’ schools, developing a local reputation for their adaptability...but the league tables are not league tables for inclusion and these schools will never feature at the top. In a market-defined system of exceptionalism there are no prizes for being inclusive. I also wonder how radically different the education landscape would be, for example, if there were league tables for kindness. An include-me-out mindset also becomes a distinct possibility where, for those parents capable of affording transport costs, leaving their own communities to search for schools that are perceived to be more desirable for their children in nearby communities can occur. The meaning and the practice of inclusion becomes increasingly more fragile in a market-led model and young people who challenge systems that they may process as intolerable cannot be tolerated. Those whose performance in examinations or inability to meet benchmark targets may impact negatively on a school’s status can find themselves excluded – after all, who wants young people that threaten to tarnish the school’s varnish? Schools being more defended means systems become less inclusive and teaching and learning becomes more about cognition, while emotional and social factors take a backseat. Cognitive scaffolding to support learning is important - but so is emotional scaffolding. Those who experience SEND - especially those with the most complex needs – are at risk of becoming an afterthought and, for them and their families, ‘Education for All’ can be a hollow mantra that resonates loudly and painfully. They know that in some contexts, especially where spray-on inclusion exists, ‘all’ does not mean all. Epistemic trust fragments. The landscape is not level.

## Does a label enable?

The labelling of children concerned me because I felt that it might make inclusion problematic in terms of enabling responsive systems and connective pedagogy. As I have highlighted, the intention of ‘special needs’ labels such as SEN and SEND were to increase entitlement and expectations, reduce categorisations and emphasise that disability was not necessarily an indicator or predictor of a learning difficulty and should not be used to validate segregation. But has the term ‘special’ ever promoted inclusion? Today, the quest for categorisation still exists in the UK within the large umbrella of SEND. The current smaller umbrella terms that relate to needs and difficulties, whilst also highlighting those who might be at risk of exclusion, cover four broad areas: communication and interaction; cognition and learning; social, emotional and mental health difficulties (SEMH) and sensory and/or physical needs.

Labels are constructs that are culturally defined and redefined in different contexts. The orienting nature of labels inevitably create dilemmas and tensions. The exceptional critical analysis of Norwich (2013) illuminates the nature and variety of tensions and dilemmas that are inherent in inclusive education. Labels are intended to enable inclusion but SEN and SEND labels have a starting point of generic positioning and this is problematic. Labels about learning need or difficulty highlight the perceived typicality of a group – they foreground group needs and difficulties - but they do not, and never can, be specific about individual difference and disposition within a group. This is why, for example, if you meet one autistic person you have only met one autistic person; autistic people are not all the same and nor are their needs or narratives or how they identify.

The outcome of labelling is complex, as labels do enable inclusion in that they have a legislative, resourcing and early intervention function but they can also be seen as enabling outclusion in that they identify how some groups have significant difficulties and needs that separate them from a much larger group that represents socially constructed normality. Here, labelling is seen to ‘other’ a person or a group from the perceived norm and thus can be experienced and expressed as oppressive, power-based and stigmatising. In the current competitive education system ‘special needs’ labels can easily become discriminatory rather than emancipatory. The term ‘additional needs’ may also attract similar systemic and attitudinal discrimination too. One proposition is that labels can enable a more inclusive pedagogy. This, of course, will depend upon how teachers make meaning out of what inclusive pedagogy is and how pedagogy can be enacted effectively to meet need. Pedagogy is a complex and multifaceted combination of connected beliefs, thoughts, decisions and actions and making it more inclusive is a challenge that requires more than the rebranding of one-size-fits-all or one-size-fits-nobody-at-all models.

Consider one of the umbrella terms: SEMH. One of the early formulations of this term was Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (EBD) which carries assumptions about child defiance that can take a focus away from pedagogy onto child deficit. Terms found in the literature at the time such as ‘troubled’ and ‘disturbed’ do the same. The next formulation was ‘Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties’ (SEBD). Here a social dimension is taken into account but the highlighting of difficulties rather than needs remains. In the current formulation in the UK – Social, Emotional and Mental Health difficulties – behaviour is no longer codified having now been replaced with ‘mental health’. Difficulties remain highlighted. The ‘MH’ in SEMH is beneficial in terms of enabling teachers to become more aware of the impact on learning and behaviour of factors such as anxiety, emotional development, attachment, trauma, and depression. However, those who experience SEMH continue to raise potentially uncomfortable questions about the nature and possibilities of inclusion. Teachers are

not mental health professionals but the potential for ad-hoc diagnoses of mental ill-health, by teachers who are making meaning out of what is happening in their classrooms, remains possible. The term SEMH itself implies that we may, perhaps unintentionally, be returning to pathologising labels that emanate from the medical model.

SEMH, like other labels, does not provide insight into what individualised pedagogy and pedagogic decisions might look like. Consequently, quick-fix strategies or ‘managing’ behaviour in the classroom might be seen as a viable tool for inclusion for this group instead of the necessary analysis of, for example, pedagogy, values, relationships and culture. Quick-fix approaches to complexity can be a factor in exclusion too. Also, SEND labels can still carry low expectations with them (Bartram, 2018) and those who experience SEND are still at risk of finding themselves on the list of ‘curriculum casualties’ (Garner, 2014). Let’s be clear, identification and recognition of need does not always result in inclusion. Labelling is not a risk-free process. It never has been.

### What about those without SEND?

One question that is often raised is whether including children who experience SEND in homogenous mainstream classes has a positive or negative impact on those who do not experience SEND. This is an important question – so, what does the research indicate? The research evidence here is contradictory. For example, a systematic review of the literature by Kalambouka et al. (2007) illuminates that there are mainly positive effects on children ‘without SEN’ of having those with SEN in mainstream classrooms - with 81% of outcomes reporting neutral or positive effects. Positive effects here were mainly related to increased levels of the acceptance of difference. This supports other research studies which highlight how the inclusion of those who experience SEND can have a positive impact on those who do not experience SEND in terms of increasing empathy and awareness of the needs of others (Griffin and Shevlin, 2011). Research also indicates benefits for all children and not just those who experience SEND (O’Brien and Roberts, 2019).

The empirical picture can alter when those who present with challenging behaviour are the focus of research. I use the term ‘challenging behaviour’ here in terms of describing behaviour that may be a challenge to the young person, the teacher, to families, to schools and systems. Some refer to it as ‘distressing behaviour’, but as the behaviour does not always emanate from a state of psychological distress, I do not use this term. There are research studies indicating that the presence of those who present with challenging behaviour in inclusive



classrooms can have negative outcomes for those without SEND. Fletcher (2010) offers an analysis of spill-over effects of inclusion, such as disruption of learning and the demanding of teacher attention by those who experience SEND, highlighting how these can have a negative impact on those who do not experience SEND – such as on test scores in reading and maths. Rujis (2017) found no statistically significant effects on those without SEN of having peers who experience SEN in their classrooms. A meta-analysis of 47 research studies by Szumski et al. (2017), incorporating a sample of almost five million students, concluded that being taught in inclusive classrooms is positively, though weakly, associated with the academic achievements of those without SEN. It is important to state that international comparisons are complex when multiple variables relating to different countries are taken into account, such as the historical implementation of inclusion, the national and local interpretation of what inclusion means and the national and local role and impact of policy and legislation. The current empirical base continues to present varying and contradictory outcomes about the impact that inclusive classrooms have on those who do not experience SEND.

## Questions to confront

I was also concerned about the ontological fragility of the term inclusion. I am now very concerned. For those who are unfamiliar with this term, ontology relates to the study of being and invites us into exploring a phenomenological approach towards understanding being. It prompts questions such as, what is being? What does it mean to ‘be’? what does it mean to ‘become’? There is no universal agreement upon what inclusion actually means and multiple assumptions from multiple perspectives exist about what it means to be or become included: inclusion is ontologically fragile. When we refer to being included, what do we actually mean and do we have a shared understanding of what we mean? There are still so many questions to confront and resolve. Inclusion from what into what? Inclusion for whom, from where and why? What is at stake and whose interests are really being served? Where do barriers to inclusion exist and where might others be revealed and overcome? Where does power really lie? Is situated enquiry taking place to establish the localised meaning of what inclusion is and could be for individual schools (O’Brien and Guiney, 2005)? What research evidence is informing strategy, policy and practice and why? Are there pedagogies, or is there a pedagogy, for inclusion? How do we resolve the tension between the social right to be included – ‘being there’ - and the moral right to be educated in a context where you learn best – ‘learning there’ (O’Brien, 2000)? Some questions have created unresolved dilemmas for many years, others keep on coming.

Inclusion as a concept is itself a barrier to inclusion. When we think about being inclusive, we have to start from a point of exclusionary thinking: who is out there that we need to include in here? The concept of inclusion places our first focus on exclusion and the excluded. Thinking about being inclusive places attention onto groups, sub-groups and individuality – but the first focus is not on commonality. That is a barrier to inclusion: it can promote tolerance over acceptance. It may take our attention away from what I see as common needs, such as feeling a sense of belonging, being understood and being treated with respect and dignity (O’Brien, 1998). Then other factors, such as politics, power and hierarchies come into play as decisions are made about who should be included, by whom and where. This goes some way to explaining the weaponisation of both inclusion and exclusion that encourages people to march behind ideological flags so that they can reinforce their existing path dependencies and stake out their ground. To be included, some people have to deal with barricades as well as barriers.

## Educating for diversities

The Education Endowment Foundation (2020) highlight in their guidance report on SEND that the language we use in this field is important in enabling inclusion. I propose that the consideration of language, and the power inherent in it, has been, and still is, of critical importance to optimise participation. One approach is to actively highlight ‘difference’ over ‘difficulty’ and ‘disorder’. As a case in point, Ring et al. (2018), in an aim to promote inclusion and increase understanding, use the term ‘Autistic Spectrum Difference’. Difference is deliberately used in their research as something that is positive and deserving of acknowledgement. Difference interests me as a concept. Conceptually, difference can be generated from an agreed starting point of sameness which then highlights and respects variability within a community of sameness (O’Brien, 2005). Therefore, consideration of difference can be empowering rather than subjugating. ‘Difference’ is a positive and enabling concept in a world that respects diversity.

Perhaps then we should talk more about respecting diversity rather than enabling inclusion? Diversity is a term common in many workplaces outside of education, as are initiatives to respect diversity in relation to varying group demographics and differing cultural perspectives. However, the term ‘diversity’ may also be problematic. Diversity may be too broad a concept and thereby generate wicked symptoms and outcomes. In the end, a linguistic shift to ‘respecting diversity’ from ‘enabling inclusion’ may make no material difference to thinking, policy, practice and the ecology of inclusion. We have to consider the deeper purpose of education and take action

accordingly. Instead of aiming for the least restrictive environment for those who experience SEND, we should establish the most enabling environment. We need to value commonality, similarity and difference – in combination - so that we can maximise understanding, participation and belonging for everyone, everywhere.

We must always be open to continually and critically reflecting on how we want the world to be and how we want to be in the world. My current thinking is that we should consider replacing a focus on inclusion with a focus on respecting and responding to diversities. Here ‘diversity’ is broken down into a word that highlights multiple ways of being – ‘diversities’. It also encompasses differing goals. Educating for diversities helps us to be more aware that everyone is the same, groups of people are similar and everyone is different. Thinking about educating for diversities, and embracing lived as well as conceptual complexities, could ultimately help us to create an empowering, respectfully responsive and more humane education system that really is for all.

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