

Inclusion ... a process



Removing barriers

When considering the topic of educational inclusion, it is interesting to note just how far the education system in England has progressed in recent times. The very term 'inclusion' acknowledges a history of 'exclusion' in the UK. It was only in 1971 that Local Education Authorities took responsibility for educating students who had previously been considered 'unsuitable for education'; the Health Authority and Social Services provided any teaching and learning prior to 1971.

The Education Act 1993 states that LEAs and school governing bodies 'must have regard to an SEN code of practice'. Since then inclusion has been defined in the National Curriculum with further guidance from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES).

The Special Needs and Disability Act 2001 gives all students the right to be educated in a mainstream school unless:

- their parents choose otherwise
- educators deem this to be 'incompatible' with the 'efficient education of other children'.

The Disability Discrimination Act 2001 declares that schools should not treat disabled pupils less favourably than their peers and must make 'reasonable adjustments' so that they are not disadvantaged. These three Acts underline the UK government's much vaunted commitment to removing barriers in education.

The question is this: which one is the most important? Inclusion? Standards? Accountability?



In 1998 Alison Comline graduated with a BEd (Hons) in Religious Studies and Primary Education from Westminster College, University of Oxford. From 1998 to 2004 Alison taught 16–19 year olds with severe learning difficulties. In 2002 she completed a BPhil in Learning Difficulties from the University of Birmingham. In September 2004 she resigned from her teaching post to be a full-time mum.

Educational priorities

The recent, unprecedented rate of change within education as a whole, and special education in particular, seems certain to continue undiminished into the foreseeable future. However, the political context is not predictable and 'the process' of change is somewhat fragile.

The problem is that the UK government has two other educational priorities:

- ensuring ever-improving standards of pupil academic attainment;
- increasing school and teacher accountability.

At times, these priorities seem to contradict and undermine the inclusion agenda.

It is not surprising that a government committed to 'Education, Education, Education' should have three educational priorities. The question is this: which one is the *most important?* Inclusion? Standards? Accountability?

Towards inclusive schools

Ofsted and HMI carried out a survey (mainly between May and November 2003) to assess the degree to which inclusion is becoming a reality in schools and to make recommendations to support the government's strategy for special education needs (SEN). The *Removing Barriers to Achievement* report was published by the DfES in 2004. It concluded that, although there is a growing awareness of the benefits of inclusion – which has led to some improvements in children's learning – it has had little effect on the proportion of children with SEN in mainstream schools or the range of needs catered for.

As teachers, are we open in our attitude, flexible in our teaching?

A minority of mainstream schools meet special educational needs very well. But most mainstream schools fail to properly evaluate their provision for pupils with SEN and there is limited data on the outcomes for these pupils.

The need to enable SEN pupils to participate fully in school life and achieve their potential remains a significant challenge for many schools. The admission and retention of pupils with social and behavioural difficulties continues to test many a school's inclusion policy. Ofsted and HMI reported that, in lessons observed, teaching was variable and often low quality. Poor use was made of teaching assistants and support staff.

The survey recommended that the DfES should ensure that 'the ability of mainstream schools to cater for the diversity of special needs and disability is enhanced'. This will involve: nurturing productive links between mainstream and special schools; monitoring and reviewing admissions, provision and standards to ensure that pupils with SEN in mainstream schools play a full part in school life; and making sure that teaching is relevant to the needs of SEN pupils in mainstream schools.

Process and partnership

The notion that 'inclusion' is 'a process' has presented a challenge to all involved in the education of young people. The direction of policy is clear: the UK government expects LEAs to move the process forward at a local level by working in partnership with schools, health authorities, social services, voluntary agencies and, of course, parents and the young people themselves. Partnership is the key to success.

Whilst I believe the inclusion principle in terms of rights and equal opportunities is now broadly accepted the debate is switching to the very real challenge of what 'the process' will look and feel like at classroom level.

Not long ago I watched a regional news broadcast in which parents, governors and members of staff of a special needs school were marching and protesting to save their school. Parents were worried and anxious concerning the future educa-

As teachers, are we prepared to strive to overcome barriers to the provision of an inclusive education for all?

tion of their children whom they regarded as vulnerable in a mainstream setting. In contrast, parents fighting for inclusion are frustrated by a system in which national government policy supports their ambition but, at local level, schools deny access.

Sue's experience

Schools deny access on a number of grounds: the unsuitability of their premises, insufficient funding, lack of resources, inadequate staffing levels or lack of staff training. Whether these are just excuses or real barriers is open for debate. What is clear is that there is a lack of commitment to turn vision into reality, and unwillingness to adapt and change.

Sue, a personal friend and mother of a teenage girl with Downs Syndrome and complex learning needs, stated that she is 'in principle 100% for inclusion, for all children irrespective of ability'. She argues that when schools are effectively resourced, funded and managed, and each pupil is supported to reach her/his learning potential, this not only benefits the individual pupil with SEN but society as a whole.

If the inclusion process is not implemented vigilantly it can lead to discrimination and bullying

In Sue's experience, inclusion has worked for her daughter in a mainstream primary school. With excellent support from a teaching assistant, Sue's daughter flourished academically and grew in confidence; she made friends and had an active social life. But at secondary level it was a different story. She was denied access to mainstream education, and became withdrawn and upset. She was forced to enter full time special education, and lost many of her friends.

Good for us all

Inclusion provides an education that accepts learning difficulties and disability. If promoted positively, it helps to facilitate an inclusive education system *and* an inclusive society. In short, inclusion is good for us all.

But, if the inclusion process is not implemented vigilantly it can lead to discrimination and bullying. Siblings of children with SEN often have to confront prejudice. I personally encountered verbal and physical abuse at school due to the fact that my sister has Downs Syndrome. With the backing of good friends I was able to educate my classmates, helping them to see that my sister was worth knowing and I was not 'thick'!

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The inclusion process needs to start from where we are now in mainstream and special schools. The UK government's (1997) *Excellence for All Children, Meeting Special Educational Needs* document states that, by 2002, 'Special and mainstream schools will be working alongside and in support of one another' (DfEE, page 7). Sadly, in 2006, this is not the case everywhere.

Inclusion works

But there are examples of special and mainstream schools working together. For example, I taught in a school for pupils with severe learning difficulties, profound and multiple learning difficulties and multi-sensory impairments. The whole ethos was: Inclusion, Inclusion, Inclusion. Early links for the Nursery children with pre-school groups progressed to links with local primary and secondary schools and sixth form colleges. There was contact with churches in the town and the pupils made use of leisure and shopping facilities in the community. Within the school less able pupils were involved in all aspects of school life with the more mobile pupils helping those in wheel chairs and all staff learning basic British Sign Language as an aid to communication.

The post-16 group that I taught ventured into the community as much as possible. We went to local shops; we socialised in local cafes; we used local sports facilities. Students had work experience in local businesses and helped at the social senior citizens' group run by students at the local high school. The students linked into courses at the local sixth form college and students from that college (and local secondary schools) came into our school to teach cricket and coach football skills. The students wanted to be treated like any one else and participate in everything education could offer. They wanted to prepare for life in the community – now and as a school-leaver.

Inclusion everywhere

It seems certain that there will be a gradual redefining of the role of the special school as 'the process' moves forward towards offering a 'seamless' model of provision. Special schools need to be at the heart of the inclusion process

working alongside mainstream schools. I recognise that for a small percentage of children there remains a need for special schools.

All schools (mainstream and special) striving towards the goal of full inclusion need to evaluate what they do and how they do it. They need to implement changes that will enhance learning for all. As students develop, their needs change and therefore the school is required to change in order to provide effective learning. This highlights that the inclusion process is an ongoing process.

I am in favour of inclusion in all aspects of life; in playgroups, primary and secondary schools, colleges, work places, churches and the wider community. Christian teaching values every human being because everyone of us is made in the image of God. As Christians working in education, we should all be advocates for those in our education system who are often regarded as being a problem because of the complexity of their needs and the additional resources they require.

As teachers, are we open in our attitude, flexible in our teaching? As teachers, are we prepared to strive to overcome barriers to the provision of an inclusive education for all? I pray so.

■ Alison Comline

References

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