A critical evaluation of the claim that ‘special schools are places of last resort’ (Warnock, 2005)

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The purpose of this paper is to critically explore the arguments surrounding the future of special education with regard to the current focus on inclusive practice in mainstream education. A report undertaken by Mary Warnock in 2005 highlighted what is thought by some to be the devaluing effect inclusion is having on the special education system and brought into question the value of inclusive education (Warnock, 2005). Many critics have since presented arguments both for and against current inclusive practice. The article focuses in particular on the debates surrounding segregation, labeling, human rights and equality in both mainstream and special education. The paper concludes that the notion of total inclusion is not without a number of drawbacks. However, the findings also show that a movement back towards segregated schooling would be counter-productive.

Keywords: Inclusion, Segregation, Special Education, Warnock Report

The above statement made by Warnock (2005, p.32) suggests that our society currently views special schools as ‘places of last resort’. Warnock argues that the ‘ideal of inclusion’ creates anxiety amongst parents and the view that their children must be ‘saved’ from special education. Warnock does not believe that this is a just portrayal of special schools, as they can provide disabled children with a good education which also meets their particular needs. However, Warnock’s (1978) original report caused revolutionary changes to our education system. It altered the way our society views students with disabilities and moved towards a philosophy for inclusive education.

In 1978, Mary Warnock issued a report that resulted in the removal of all categories of handicap and replaced them with the spectrum of Special Educational Needs (SEN) (Warnock, 1978). Subsequently, the 1981 Education Act established Warnock’s recommendations and the new five-stage spectrum of needs was created (DfEE, 1981). When the National Curriculum was established in 1988 all pupils, including those with SEN, were entitled to access it. Five years later the 1993 Education Act came into force, which aimed to increase schools’ diversity and extend parental choice. This policy promoted the education of children with SEN in mainstream schools where and when possible (DfES, 1993). Following this, in 1994 the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs made the role of the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) statutory (DfEE, 1994). The 1997 Green Paper: Excellence for All Children focused on increasing inclusion and collaborative practice between special and mainstream schools (DfEE, 1997). Subsequent to this, the 2001 SEN and Disability Act (OPSI 2001) was implemented and it became unlawful for the education system to discriminate against pupils on the basis of their disability. Finally, ‘Barriers to Inclusion’ was a government strategy put in place in 2004.
(DfES, 2004), which emphasised the need for the whole school community to work together in order to meet the needs of all pupils (Gibson and Blandford, 2005).

The policy surrounding SEN and mainstream education, since the Warnock report, has been mostly centred on the philosophy of inclusion. This brings forward the question: Do special schools still have a place in our society? Critics of special schools, such as Oliver (1995), believe that special education must be completely deconstructed to make way for full inclusion. However, critics of inclusion, such as Allan (2008), feel that there is still a place for special schools and that the ‘ideal’ of inclusion is not working.

Throughout this article I will critically analyse the arguments surrounding this debate. I will do this by exploring the following questions: Do special schools create segregation for disabled people in school and the wider society? Does special education emphasise diagnostic labels and create prejudice? Should inclusive education be viewed as a human right? Do both special schools and mainstream schools provide disabled pupils with an effective and equal education? Does inclusion have a detrimental or beneficial effect on the attainment of pupils and school league table results? Is it justifiable that our society views special education as a last resort?

Oliver (1995, p.112) argues for the social model perspective, that special education has been a complete failure and has only succeeded in segregating disabled people from society. He believes that special schools cannot provide disabled children with an education that is equal to that of non-disabled mainstreamed pupils. Instead Oliver feels that special education has led to disabled children leading ‘impoverished and restricted lives’ due to the segregation and isolation caused by this system. The Inclusion Charter (2002) cited in Thomas and Vaughan (2004, p.140) states that:

‘continued segregation of disabled and non-disabled students can only help to foster stereotypes, while inclusion has the potential to get rid of stereotypes by enabling young people to learn about each other’s common humanity as well as their uniqueness’.

The Inclusion Charter highlights and supports Oliver’s view that inclusive education is an important step towards a more understanding and integrated society. The continuation of special education would deny future generations the opportunity to overcome these stereotypical views of disability.

The Centre for Studies in Inclusive Education (CSIE) (cited in Cigman 2007, p.777) argues that:

’Segregated schooling appeases the human tendency to negatively label and isolate those perceived as different. It gives legal reinforcement and consolidation to a deeply embedded, self-fulfilling, social process of de-valuing and distancing others on the basis of appearance and ability in order to consolidate a sense of normality and status’.

According to the CSIE one of the reasons behind the failure of special education is that it reinforces negative labels and emphasises difference. Subsequently, this humiliation damages the dignity of the child and causes them to become part of a ‘self-fulfilling social de-valuing’ process (Cigman, 2007, p.777). This statement suggests that special schools are in breech of Article 17 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations,
2007), which states that it is the right of a disabled person to have their physical and mental integrity protected.

Children within the special education system are usually labelled by a medical diagnosis in order for the school to gain the funding available to provide the students with the best support and resources for their needs. However, even though the original intentions for labelling are often good, these labels can also lead to the stigmatisation of disabled students. This is usually due to a lack of understanding about certain conditions in our society. In some cases labels can stay with an individual throughout their whole lives, causing discrimination to occur during their adult lives as well as their childhood (Lauchlan and Boyle, 2007).

The deconstruction of special schools can be seen as the first step in allowing disabled people to live ‘normal’ lives without prejudice. This is a view that is also presented in the Inclusion Charter (2002) (cited in Thomas and Vaughan 2004, p.140):

‘De-segregating special education is ... a crucial first step in helping to change discriminatory attitudes, in creating greater understanding and in developing a fairer society’.

Deconstructing special education may not have an immediate effect on how our society views those with disabilities. However, it is suggested by the Inclusion Charter that ending this segregation is the first and most important step in developing an equal society.

Nevertheless, Cigman (2007, p.778) critiques this argument by suggesting that this view of segregated schooling is often old fashioned and out of date.

‘The idea that special schools are inherently humiliating or demeaning is often (but by no means always) advanced by people who experienced the pain and humiliation of old-style segregated education’.

In the past special schools were places where children were kept away from ‘normal’ society. The institutions they once were have created a legacy of stigma and inferiority, which has been attached to special education ever since. However, much has changed in recent years and special schools are now places where disabled students can receive a more specialist education, which can cater to individual needs effectively (Cigman, 2007 and Warnock, 2005).

Cigman (2007) highlights the fact that mainstream education can also be a humiliating experience for children with disabilities ‘... mainstream schools do not provide a non-humiliating educational experience for some children’ (p.779). She goes on to suggest that students who try and fail to attend mainstream education suffer from a great deal more embarrassment and humiliation than a child who has voluntarily chosen to go to a special school. This can make a crucial difference to a child’s sense of self-respect and pride.

Humiliation can also occur for students with SEN in mainstream schools due to the segregation they face through nurture groups and special units. A nurture group is an early years intervention resource for children with additional needs. They are intended to bridge the gap between the needs of mainstream classrooms and children who, for a number of reasons, cannot cope with this learning experience (Doyle, 2005). However, Bishop and Swain (2000, p.19) suggest that this inclusive provision can be ‘problematic’ due to the fact that children are separated from their peers. They go on to state ‘Our research suggests that exclusion
within mainstream schools may be fostered under the flag of inclusion’ (p.24). I feel that this view was reflected in a lecture given by Stephen Watterson (2009) about his nurture class. He stated that the children in his nurture group are not taught with their original mainstream class at all during the day, and do not even attend for registration or story time. As well as this, they also arrive and leave school at different times to their peers. Although this situation is not representative of all nurture classes, the children in this nurture group seem to have little or no contact with the other classes in the school. I felt that this could create a segregated and isolated experience of education for these children.

Oliver (1995, p.113) suggests that special units are ‘necessary’ in order for inclusion to be successful. However, I feel that this issue of segregation can also relate to the use of special units in mainstream education, as children are taken away from their peers in order to receive certain provision and support. During my time at school, children with SEN would leave their usual classes to attend certain lessons in the special unit. This drew attention to the fact that they were ‘different’ from the rest of the class. Subsequently, there was a huge stigma attached to attending the special unit and bullying became a major problem for these children.

As well as this, students with SEN that wish to be educated in mainstream schools usually have to gain a statement, which provides them with vital funding and resources to help them with their education. However, the use of statements relies on the application of diagnostic labels, which means that children are labelled in mainstream as well as special schools (Lauchlan and Boyle, 2007). Molloy and Vasil (2002, p.661) argue that ‘Once a diagnostic label is attached there is a risk that all the child’s characteristics are filtered through this diagnosis or explanatory mechanism’. Therefore, negative emphasis could also be put on these labels in a mainstream environment and prejudice could occur as a result, especially if negative attention is drawn to these students when they are taken out of their classes for special support.

Warnock (2005, p.32) suggests that students with disabilities could face alienation and bullying in a mainstream secondary school environment. While she believes that young people in primary school can be ‘very accommodating to the idiosyncrasies of others’ and teachers have the time to get to know their pupils and their specific needs, she goes on to state:

‘In secondary schools, however, the problems become more acute. Adolescents form and need strong friendships, from which a Down’s syndrome girl, for example, who may have been an amiable enough companion when she was younger, will now be excluded. The obsessive eccentricities of the Asperger’s boy will no longer be tolerated and he will be bullied and teased, or at best simply neglected (pp.32-33)’.

In this statement Warnock comments on the difficult transition between primary and secondary school and how this can have a negative outcome for students with SEN. Bullying can also have a humiliating and segregating effect on students. Ochs et al (2001) argue that ‘… children who are institutionally identified as having ‘special needs’ are particularly vulnerable to social distancing’. This argument supports Warnock’s statement and the idea that children with SEN could face alienation from their peers due to a lack of understanding relating to their disabilities. This argument also highlights the need for mainstream pupils to be clearly informed about disabilities in order for inclusion to be a success, and also to ensure the well being of students with SEN. However, I must highlight the fact that children may also experience bullying in a special school. This is not a problem faced only in mainstream secondary schools.
It is my belief that special schools have caused the humiliation, segregation and isolation of people with disabilities in the past, as they were once places where children with SEN were hidden from society. This may be why, as Warnock states, special schools are currently seen as places of last resort. I also agree with Oliver’s (1995) argument that special schools do not prepare disabled students for living independent adult lives in ‘normal’ society. Inclusive education, if carried out effectively, can provide a way for our society to overcome these prejudices towards and stereotypical views of disability. This can be achieved by the philosophy of inclusion, promoting understanding amongst future generations, thus helping our society to overcome its fear of difference and the unknown (Ochs et al, 2001). However, my research has shown me that current inclusive practices may also be leading children with SEN towards humiliation and segregation in mainstream schools, as Allan (2008, p.6) argues ‘Suspicions have been voiced, however that inclusion is no better than integration and has merely replicated exclusionary special education practices’. This suggests to me that the ideal of inclusion is not producing the results that its supporters hoped for, and is in fact segregating children with disabilities on the same level as special education. This has left me wondering if inclusive education in practice will ever change our attitudes towards disability and defeat prejudice in our society.

Critics of special schools have argued that the education they provide is not equal to that of non-disabled students and also does not meet the needs of disabled children, as Oliver (1995, p.112) states:

‘The history of this provision has been one of abject failure, whatever criteria we use to judge it. If we say the purpose of such provision is to provide an equivalent education to that of non-disabled children, it has failed... If we say that its purpose is to provide a special form of education to meet the needs of disabled children, again it has failed’.

Warnock (1978, p.6) comments on the importance of a good and equal education for all disabled pupils, no matter what their disability, when she states:

‘... education, as we conceive it, is a good, and a specifically human good, to which all human beings are entitled. There exists, therefore, a clear obligation to educate the most severely disabled for no other reason than that they are human’.

Oliver (1995) does not believe that special schools are supplying their students with an adequate and equal education. He believes this can only be achieved through the complete deconstruction of special schools and the implementation of inclusive mainstream education. Stainback and Stainback (1996, p.xi) argue that by implementing a philosophy that all children can learn and belong in a mainstream school and community, the diversity will ‘strengthen the class’ and this will offer all its members ‘greater opportunities for learning’.

In 2007 the UK government signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Article 24 of this convention states ‘Persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live’ (United Nations, 2007, p.14). The CSIE would argue that this entitles all disabled students to an inclusive mainstream education. Stainback and Stainback (1996, p.3) suggest that:
Exclusion in schools sows the seeds of social discontent and discrimination. Education is a human rights issue and persons with disabilities should be part of schools, which should modify their operations to include all children.

By making this statement Stainback and Stainback suggest that inclusive education is a human right and it should be the responsibility of mainstream schools to change their structure in order to accommodate the full inclusion of children with SEN.

Studies carried out by Staub and Peck (1994) and Manset and Semmel (1997), (cited in Topping and Maloney 2005, p.7), found that inclusive education is having a beneficial effect on the attainment of both pupils with SEN and ‘normal’ students. Staub and Peck reviewed many studies of mainstreaming, and they found there were no negative effects on the education of pupils with SEN or their classmates. Manset and Semmel reviewed the learning outcomes of mainstreamed and segregated pupils. They found that there was no difference in mathematics but there was a small advantage in literacy for mainstreamed pupils. The evidence presented in these studies supports Oliver’s view that a mainstream inclusive education can provide disabled students with a fair and good education.

Black-Hawkins et al (2007) use Kingsley Primary School as a case study to highlight how inclusive education can be successful. This primary school was at one time in special measures due to poor attainment. However, the recruitment of a new headteacher enabled the school to remain inclusive and go on to achieve better results in the SATs tests. Due to spare capacity, Kingsley Primary School run an open admission policy, and rarely have to choose whether children should or should not be admitted. The school’s staff have managed to structure their teaching in order to help children gain good results in the SATs. They have achieved this by allowing for an extra teacher to give support in Years 2 and 6, and by supporting the children with SEN through the use of a special needs department and time to work individually or as a small group. This has allowed the school to become highly successful and to gain a good place in the league tables.

However, it has been argued that mainstream education is not always the best option for every child with SEN. Allan (2008, p.1) quotes the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers in the UK as stating ‘Total inclusion is a form of child abuse, especially if the child is in a completely wrong environment for their educational needs’. This is an extreme view; however, some would argue that it is not unfounded. Sinclair (1998) cited in Cigman (2007, p.777) argues:

‘Disability advocates believe that disabled people should be able to go anywhere and do anything in mainstream society ... However, there are concerns within the disability community that inclusion is not always the best option for every person with every disability, and that involuntary inclusion is as problematic as involuntary segregation’.

This quotation suggests that if a student with SEN is unhappy in mainstream school and is not achieving their full potential, then it should be their choice, or the choice of their parents, to attend a school that will provide for their needs. Otherwise the ideal of inclusion is as negative for disabled people as segregated education. Shakespeare (2005) also highlights the need for individual choice when he states:
‘Contrary to the slogans of some campaigners, it's my personal belief that we shouldn't be demanding the immediate closure of all special schools. To me, it seems plausible that there are a very small number of young people whose special needs are better met outside the mainstream classroom. And there are many more whose transition to mainstream needs to be carefully organised, not rushed through on the cheap’.

There may be a number of students that would benefit from special education, and they should be allowed the opportunity to attend a special school if they wish.

Special schools can provide pupils with a wide range of specialist resources, which may not be readily available in mainstream schools, to help support their needs. Shah (2007, p.431) suggests that:

‘A number of arguments have been used by policy makers, professionals and parents to argue that segregated special schools are the best option for some disabled students, with their supportive barrier-free environment and specialist resources and support to meet their students’ needs’

Students with SEN who want to be educated in a mainstream school have to receive a statement in order to gain the necessary funding and support available to them. Gaining a statement can be a long and complex process and Warnock (2005) argues that some children are waiting too long to receive this vital provision. This could have a detrimental affect on the attainment and well being of these students.

Even though a study carried out by Manset and Semmel (1997 cited in Topping and Maloney 2005), gives evidence that inclusive education has a positive effect on the attainment of pupils with SEN, Kauffman and Hallahan (1995 quoted in Hornby 1999, p.192) state that ‘... other writers have warned that widespread adoption of inclusive models could lead to a deterioration in the education provided for many children with SEN, as well as special education being dismissed’. This statement suggests that there is a concern that young people with SEN in a mainstream environment may encounter deterioration in their attainment levels due to a lack of provision for their particular special needs.

Another issue that may also have an impact on the attainment of pupils with SEN is the well being of their teachers. MacBeath et al. (2006 cited in Shah 2007, p.428) argue that ‘...mainstream schools often could not provide the facilities and expertise required for teaching some young disabled people’. Subsequently, this can put huge pressure on mainstream class teachers, as Croll and Moses (2000, p.62) state ‘Teachers and heads were very conscious of the pressures of class sizes and resources...and stressed the problems they would have in coping with greater levels of difficulties’. If the teachers are having problems coping with the stresses of class size and feel ill prepared to deal with students with SEN, then this could also have a negative impact on their students’ enjoyment of education and their attainment.

Taking this into account I propose the question: should inclusive education be considered a human right? According to the CSIE (2009) website the UK government is currently contesting Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The government believes that Article 24 is written in a way which causes people to misinterpret its meaning. They go on to argue that the general education system in the UK includes special schools as well as mainstream schools. The government wishes to attach the reservation: ‘The
UK reserves the right for disabled children to be educated outside their local community where more appropriate’ (CSIE, 2009). Even though the CSIE argue that this is stripping disabled children of their right to be educated alongside their non-disabled peers, the government suggests that inclusive mainstream education was never meant to be viewed as a human right in the UK.

All children should be entitled to a sufficient and equal education. However, I am not sure whether I agree with Oliver’s view that this can only be achieved for disabled children if special schools are complete deconstructed. I understand that Oliver’s personal experience of special education has probably had an impact on his argument; nevertheless, I question whether this is an outdated view of special schools. In my opinion, some students would benefit from an inclusive education and others may only be able to have their needs met in a special school at this time. It seems provision needs to be improved before full inclusion can become an option. I am unsure whether inclusive education should be viewed as a human right. If it has a detrimental effect on a child’s education or on the well being of staff, then it is not the best option. Article 26 of the Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone is entitled to a good education, and Article 25 states that people’s well being is of the utmost importance (United Nations, 2009). However, Article 24 could create a situation where these rights are breeched on a regular basis.

To conclude, special schools are currently viewed by society as places of last resort. However, is this a just opinion to have about these institutions? Is the quality of education they provide being undermined by an ideology of inclusion? The arguments surrounding this debate are extremely complex and therefore it seems that there is no clear answer to these questions.

Oliver’s (1995) view that special schools lead to the segregation of disabled people in their community is extremely valid. Special schools were once a part of a system that kept disabled people away from mainstream society, as at the time they were seen as lesser beings. This is an old-fashioned view of special education; however, it is understandable why this has created the current negative view of special education. I do believe that special schools present a negative image of disability and this can stigmatise people with disabilities in their community. However, I am not sure whether full inclusive education, in practice, will be able to overcome this. From my research it seems that current inclusive provision is leading to the segregation and isolation of children with SEN in mainstream schools (Allan, 2008).

I am also critical of the argument that special schools cannot provide disabled pupils with an adequate and equal education (Oliver, 1995). I recognise that Oliver was once educated in a special school, and therefore, his argument is applicable. However, I feel that this view of special education may be out of date. Special schools provide resources that may not be so easily available in a mainstream school. The staff are also trained specifically to cope with the needs of students with SEN, which sadly is not always the case in mainstream education. Taking this into account I am unsure if inclusive education should be viewed as a human right. I believe that it should be the right of a disabled person to have a choice where they undertake their education. It should also be a right to enjoy an equal and adequate education, which allows pupils to achieve their full potential, no matter where it takes place, as Farrell (2006, p.2) argues ‘The prime feature of schools cannot be inclusion; it must be education’.

My research has shown evidence that there are a number of problems with the implementation of inclusive education, and currently there is still a place for special schools in our society.
We should not currently view special schools as ‘places of last resort’, as they are still necessary for certain students. As well as this, students with SEN should have the choice of what education is right for them. However, I still believe that we should be moving away from the medical model ideology of segregated schooling. If inclusion is not currently working then our society should be looking at new ways of educating pupils with SEN or making inclusion a success. Farrell (2006, p.23) proposes ‘optimal learning’ as an alternative to inclusion. He suggests that special schools and mainstream schools could work together effectively to create an education system which allows pupils to achieve their full potential. As well as this, students would also have the opportunity to learn more about each other, thus taking the first step to overcoming prejudice and stereotypes. Oliver (1995) provides the very different solution of implementing a completely new curriculum in mainstream schools, which can be followed by both disabled and non-disabled students equally. However, this would mean a huge change in our education system would have to take place, which is unrealistic.

With this in mind I feel that it is important to stress that inclusion is a new concept. It will take time to develop an appropriate education system which supplies all our children with an adequate and equal education and which can also bridge the gaps created by segregated schooling. However, I do believe that this can one day be achieved, as Mittler (1999, p.133) suggests ‘Inclusion is not a goal that can be reached but a journey with a purpose ... teachers will build on their experience and increase their skills in reaching all children’.

References


