EM0W02 Policy, Practice, Inclusion and Equal Opportunities

The Inclusion of Children with Special Educational Needs in the

Early Years: the issues

This assignment will explore the factors that influence the provision of an inclusive education for children with special educational needs (SEN) in the Early Years. The assignment will begin by giving a brief history of social opinion and policy in order to outline the definitions of integration and inclusion. The value of, and possible barriers to inclusion will be discussed. Finally key points will be reflected upon, highlighting ways forward in this area.

The social history of disability and those who are 'different' is full of moral discourse and political persuasion as to how dangerous these people are for society. In 1915, Goddard wrote,

"For many generations we have recognised and piled the idiot. Of late we have recognised a higher type of d efective, the moron, and have discovered that he is a burden; that he is a menace to society and civilization; that he is responsible to a large degree for many, if not all, of our social problems."
(In: Vlachou 1997 p.15)

Over time this view has been con cealed in humanitarian ideologies as a reason for segregation. Thus, segregation was presented as a way of protecting children from harsh realities and providing for their needs. Vlachou would suggest that,

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"*the popular image of society protecting its more 'vulnerable' citizens has remained, as it was a good policy for masking society's contradictions. Translating this to the language disabled people use in order to understand their position, protectors became the oppressors and protégés became the oppressed.*" (p.15)

After years of struggle between humanitarian discourse and the rights of people with disabilities, the concept that segregated education was a major cause of widespread prejudices against children with disabilities and special educational needs became apparent. Further more, Thomas, Walker and Webb (1998) suggests that there is much evidence from educational research indicating that special schools have not been as effective as expected.

The Warnock report (DES 1978) instigated the re direction of special education policy, traditionally based on segregation and appeared to symbolise radical change in the educational provision of children with SEN. From this developed a small scale integrated system which was often unsuccessful and limited. To integrate, first and foremost, implies that the individuals to which it refers have been perceived as different, inferior and that they have to fit into existing mainstream policy and practices. Jenkinson (1997) would suggest that, *"….the right to an education in the regular school, and even the provision of support staff, are simply not enough."* (p.29) However, the DFEE (1997:44) made a more forceful impact

when stating that children with SEN should "join fully with their peers in the curriculum and life of the school". This suggested that integration was no longer appropriate and instead an inclusive approach should be embarked upon.

It is argued (Jones 2004) for inclusion to be successful society needs to change its' views.   An ideal soci ety would be an inclusive one, where diversity is always viewed as positive and a person's worth is not measured in terms of their abilities, achievements or background. Attitudes should be those of acceptance if inclusion is to work. Jenkinson would con cur stating,

"Positive attitudes, reflected in a commitment to encouraging the progress of students with disabilities in the mainstream, are essential." (p.29)

However, teachers may feel threatened by having to deal with a child with SEN, particularly if they have no training in the area and lack confidence, in addition to having to give instruction to a further 30 children or more. Parents of children with SEN may lack faith in mainstream education, whereas other parents may feel that the attention has been drawn away from their children as more time needs to be spent dealing with disruptive outbursts and one to one tuition. Research into attitudes of professionals including teachers and support staff, as well as students has been mixed.

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Siraj-Blachford and Clarke (2000) indicate that adult prejudices' can be seen in children as young as three therefore, early years educators are in an ideal position to influence the attitudes of our youngest children signifying that "*early years staff need to offer all children guidance and support in developing positive attitudes towards all people.*" (p.9) The notion that segregation is indeed a factor in prejudice attitudes towards disability and SEN is a well accepted one. Increased contact, familiarity, understanding and friendship between non-disabled and children with disabilities or SEN within the early years, forges acceptance and helps to break down barriers that are at the root of discrimination and prejudice beliefs. Gray (2002 3.9) would agree with this when stating,

"*Research suggests that preschool children do not put a negative value on difference at this stage…. Lewis and Pretzlik (1999) found that sick and disabled pupils were initially popular with peers and argued on this basis that prejudice was learned rather than instinctive.*" [online]

The Disability Rights Task Force (2000) suggests that inclusion of disabled pupils into mainstream education would act as a powerful tool in expelling stereo-typical and negative attitudes (para 3) [online].   However Jenkinson suggests that this understanding of disability has been only partially supported.

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"Early studies in the United States of attitudes towards mild intellectual

disability suggested that increased contact may result in negative attitudes   as

classmates become more familiar with the less acceptable aspects of

behaviour of students with disabilities." (p.34)

Jenkinson does not indicate the age of these children however, in addition

uses the phrase "increased contact" suggesting that these children have not

been peers from an early age. Further more, Gray indicates that children who

have attended 'special schools' may, " *have low expectations of about their*

own contribution to society".

Others would argue that segregation allows children's individual needs to be

met more efficiently and promotes a more stable social development by

providing a less discriminative environment. Gray reported that 60% of

children with SEN were bullied in comparison with 25% of non SEN children in

mainstream schools. Influences such as the common portrayal of disability

and difference as identifiable with pity, fear and charity or negative images

portrayed in books, on television and in children's toys could be at least be

partly responsible for this disturbing issue.

Albeit the evidence so far is strongly weighted in favour of inclusion, however,

the concept of total inclusion, incorporating children with the most severe

disabilities may be more problematic. A consideration such as complex

medical equipment and someone who is trained to operate such equipment

seems, at first glance to be a ridiculous situation for a mainstream classroom.

As does a curriculum to meet such a diverse range of needs, however, the

proposed new Early Years Foundation Stage for chi ldren aged 0 to 5 years

does indicate an accessible curriculum for all children of pre -school age. The

current Birth to Three Matters Framework (2002) accepts diversity as 'normal'

when stating,

"Although their responsibilities may differ, children with disabilities or learning

difficulties are entitled to the same range of experiences as others" .

The Birth to Three matters Framework goes on to discuss how "practitioners"

are "well-placed" to recognise and support very young children with SEN and

advises that the practitioner gain advice and support by working closely with

both parents and SEN support services. The Curriculum Guidance for the

Foundation Stage (2000) suggests,

"The focus should be on removing barriers for children where these already

exist and on preventing learning difficulties from developing." (p.18)

However, the current National Curriculum at key stage 1 is far less flexible

and would have to be adapted if inclusion is to be successful across the

spectrum. Educational prioritie s and needs differ considerably and the

curriculum needs to reflect such diversities in educational need, such as the attainment of self-help skills.

For inclusion to be successful early years educators' need to be committed to the concept, persist in the face of failure and act as positive role models not only to the children but the whole community. Some would criticise that full inclusion can only occur in an idealistic sense; this essay shows that problems do exist, namely social attitude and accep tance. Society and the concept of inclusion are ever changing phenomena's however, and early years educators can influence this change in order for inclusion to become a reality.

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