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Removing Barriers to Achievement – a strategy for inclusion or exclusion?

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Abstract

This paper will argue the need to recognise that as long as education policy is founded on the idea that inclusion into the mainstream of schooling, as it is currently conceived, and achievement measured against a set of norm related standards, is the route to a good education, children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) will continue to be disadvantaged and to receive an inferior educational opportunity. Taking an analysis of recent and current UK policy for inclusion as its starting point the paper will argue that far from ensuring greater equitability for children with SEN, it has done little to increase genuine educational access and may indeed be seen to have increased exclusionary practices.

Having presented this critique the paper will then look at the role of teachers, upon whom major responsibility is placed by these policies for developing genuinely inclusive practice in mainstream settings. The case will be made for a model of professional development which supports them to engage as critically reflective, practice based, researchers, able to recognise and combat exclusionary practices and to act as agents for change.

Is Current Strategy for Inclusion Working?

Six years ago, in response to the government Green Paper, Excellence for All Children; Meeting Special Educational Needs (DfEE 1997), I wrote a critique of education policy for inclusion in the UK. This critique centred around the failure of policy and legislation concerning inclusion to challenge assumptions and misunderstandings, to define and clarify the underlying conceptual issues and to adequately address issues of social injustice and equity in the education system, and indeed society itself. Since the publication of the Green Paper in 1997 there have been a considerable number of policy initiatives relating to the education of pupils with Special Education Needs (SEN) all of which build upon the idea enshrined therein that: “There are strong educational, as well as social and moral grounds for educating children with special educational needs with their peers” and which “aim to increase the level and quality of inclusion within mainstream schools…” (DfEE p. 43)

The Special Educational Needs and Discrimination Act (2001) and the Disability Discrimination Act (2001) further reinforce the agenda for inclusion within the mainstream of education as does the revised Code of Practice for Children with Special Educational Needs (2002). In 2001 the DfES provided statutory guidance for Local Education Authorities, often referred to as the Framework for Inclusion, which states

“Inclusion is a process by which schools, local education authorities and others develop cultures, policies and practices to include pupils.

With the right training, strategies and support nearly all children with
special educational needs can be successfully included in mainstream education.” (DfES 2001 p.2)

While these policy initiatives all make reference to the need to recognise that the education of some pupils may need to take place in part, or in very exceptional cases wholly, outside the mainstream there is a clear imperative that for the majority, inclusion into the mainstream of schooling is the aim and intended outcome.

This concentration on policy relating to the inclusion of pupils with SEN into the mainstream of schooling has also been reflected in many other countries in Europe and further afield, and there is no doubt that it remains an issue of hot debate and concern to many. Significantly, however, many questions have been raised, and continue to be raised about the efficacy and the effectiveness of this policy, about just how far it is actually resulting in more inclusive approaches to education and whether it contributes to the needs of all children being safeguarded and adequately identified, addressed and met. (Audit Commission 2002).

In the UK, the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED), having examined the impact of the Framework for Inclusion on practice (2004), found that while it had contributed to raising awareness about the benefits of inclusion and to some improvement in practice, it had made little difference to the numbers of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools or to the range of needs being met. Only a minority of mainstream schools were meeting the SEN of all pupils well and that

“…taking steps to enable pupils with SEN to participate fully in the life of the school and achieve their potential remains a significant challenge for many schools.” (p. 5)

OfSTED also found that schools were failing, in general, to systematically evaluate the provision they made for pupils with SEN and that teaching was of variable quality. Partnership and collaboration between special and mainstream schools were found to be the exception rather than the rule and, perhaps the most worrying finding, in more than half the schools visited there were no disability access plans and that where these did exist they focused in the main on accommodation. The conclusion of the report states

“While most pupils with SEN are educated in mainstream schools progress towards inclusion in mainstream schools has slowed….. Some pupils with SEN continue to face barriers to participation and achievement….. Expectations of the success that pupils with SEN can have remains at the heart of the matter. Many of these could do better provided that the curriculum, learning and other support were better adapted to their needs and greater rigour was applied to setting and pursuing targets for achievement.” (op cit. pp 23-24)

These are worrying findings indeed and reflect the doubts that many continue to express about the policy for inclusion and its relationship with provision in mainstream schools (Dyson, 2001; Benjamin, 2002; Ainscow Booth and Dyson, 2006; Barton and Armstrong, 2007). As Mary Warnock recently put it

“……we need to ask whether children who have special needs, that is children who for various reasons have difficulties in learning at school, do in fact participate more in the enterprise of education if they are taught in mainstream schools..” (2005 p.40)

Reflecting on developments in the area over the last thirty seven years or so, in what she calls a ‘new look’ at Special Educational Needs she offers her view of inclusion as “a common enterprise of learning” (op cit. p. 39).
It seems timely, then, to revisit and once again interrogate the concept of inclusion in recent and current government policy and strategy to see if the criticisms above and those which I levelled at the Green Paper in 2000 still hold true today or whether the current agenda for inclusion has changed or developed.

**A Framework for the Critique**

Thomas Skrtic (1991, 1995) discusses the importance of critically analysing and reflecting on the concepts which underpin policy in SEN in order to reveal their problematic and controversial nature which in his view is often ignored by policy makers and unchallenged by practitioners.

“As a method I use it as a way to look behind special education and to question and thus bring a sense of crisis to the unquestioned assumptions that ground the professional practices and discourses of the field of special education……..” (1991, p. 29)

For Skrtic it is these assumptions and the failure to challenge them which prevent genuine change and development and enable the dominant deficit discourses associated with SEN to prevail. He proposes that education professionals should engage with a process of critical pragmatism as a way of illuminating and evaluating their practice.

“Applied to the professions critical pragmatism is both a way of continually evaluating and reappraising what a profession does (critical practice) and a way of continually evaluating and reappraising how it carries out such critical appraisals of its practice (critical discourse) …it does not seek objective knowledge or monological truth……. It is a pedagogical process of remaking ourselves as we think, act, write, read and talk more about ourselves and our practices and discourses” (op cit p.29)

Fulcher (1999) also highlights the need to interrogate and understand concepts which underpin education and to critique and theorise education policy in order to understand the effects on its implementation in practice and to narrow the gap between rhetoric and reality. She points to the complexity of the relationship between policy and practice

“ Policy is made at all levels; no one level determines another, though it may establish conditions for other levels. One reason government-level policies may fail, then, is that their social theory of how that bit of the world works – the bit they hope to influence is wrong. (p.15)

The aim and purpose of this critique is to participate in and engage with the process of developing critical practice and critical discourse by interrogating and questioning recent government policy for inclusion with a view to identifying its potential to successfully impact on practice in the area of SEN. The intention is also to illuminate and provide deeper understanding about the problematic and complex and often misunderstood nature of concepts such as inclusion and exclusion, participation, success and achievement, which underpin this policy. The critique will also address the potential of policy founded on concepts about which there is no clear consensus or shared understanding to improve, the experience and educational opportunities available to those pupils identified as having SEN. It is not the purpose of this paper to provide a critique of current practice or of research into practice but rather the intention is to attempt to add greater clarity and understanding about what policy for inclusion really means and its implications for practice in order that practice and research in the area can be better informed.
Recent and Current Government Policy for Inclusion in the UK

The latest government publication in the UK to address the issue of inclusion and provision in mainstream schools for pupils with SEN, Removing Barriers to Achievement (DfES 2004) claims to set out

“……the Government’s vision for the education of children with special educational needs and disabilities. It provides clear national leadership supported by an ambitious programme of sustained action and review, nationally and locally, over a number of years, in four key areas.” (Introduction)

The four key areas addressed are;

*Early Intervention* – ensuring that children with difficulties and their parents have access to suitable help and childcare

*Removing Barriers to Learning* – by embedding inclusive practice in all schools and early years settings

*Raising Expectations and Achievement* – developing teaching skills and strategies and focusing on progress children make

*Delivering Improvements in Partnership* – a hands on approach to improvement.

This agenda seems at face value to offer nothing but positive possibilities for children with SEN and their parents. It begins with the affirmation that “All children have the right to a good education and the opportunity to fulfil their potential.” (Introduction, DfES 2004). This is indeed a statement with which it is difficult to find fault. However it then goes on to provide a strategy for action which is riddled with assumptions and inconsistencies and which fails once again, as did the Green Paper in 1997, to adequately define, or recognise the problematic nature, of the central concepts to which it refers such as inclusion itself, equal educational opportunity, a ‘good’ education, and achievement. The barriers to achievement themselves are not explicitly identified in the document instead a number of continuing challenges, highlighted by the Audit Commission’s report *Special Educational Needs - a mainstream issue* (2002), are used as the starting point for the strategy and action plan. These challenges centre around the failure of mainstream schools and their staff to adequately meet the needs of many children; the uncertain role of special schools and the variation in support available from families from schools, local authorities and health services. The strategy presented to address and meet these challenges aims to

“……personalise learning for all children with SEN, to make education more innovative and responsive to the diverse needs of individual children, so reducing our reliance on separate SEN structures and raising the achievement of the many children – nearly one in six – who are considered to have SEN.” (Introduction, DfES 2004).

The document makes clear that inclusion and the embedding of inclusive practice by teachers who are skilled and have the expertise necessary to identify, address and meet children’s diverse needs
are central to the achievement of the aims and intended outcomes of the strategy. Running through and underpinning the whole strategy is the notion that inclusion itself has the potential to address issues of disadvantage and to remove barriers created by social deprivation thus implicitly inclusion is conceived as social inclusion. This approach reaffirms that proposed in the Green Paper, Excellence for All Children (DfEE 1997) where the impetus to increase inclusion within mainstream schools is linked closely with the idea that the majority of children with SEN will make an economic contribution to society as adults and that their education alongside their peers will ensure that this contribution is better valued and of better value. Dyson (2001) identifies this approach to inclusion as a growing trend in government policy manifesting itself in initiatives such as Excellence in Cities (DfEE 1999) and Education Action Zones (DfEE 1999) which although they apparently embrace the inclusion agenda in terms of SEN, go beyond way it, and in some cases sit uncomfortably with it as they seem to be concerned more with remedial, compensatory approaches geared towards creating a cohesive society, than with inclusion as an entitlement to full participation and equal educational opportunity.

“In crude terms, whilst the inclusion agenda focuses on presence and participation, social inclusion focuses more on educational outcomes and, particularly, on the re-engagement of marginalised groups with learning, whether or not that engagement takes place in the context of the ‘common’ classroom, school and the curriculum.” (Dyson 2001 p. 27)

Inclusion/Social Inclusion and Equal Educational Opportunity

The social inclusion agenda is, then, concerned with ensuring access to the mainstream of activity in society and with preventing alienation and dissatisfaction. It is also concerned with compensating for social disadvantage and deprivation and is linked to ideas of accessibility and widening participation and can be seen as a move towards Rawls social/democratic definition of social justice (1972). Referring to the speeches of David Blunkett, when he was Minister for Education, Dyson (2001) points out that

“ What is significant…. Is the way that the notion of inclusion slips from a classic concern with access for ‘SEN pupils’ to a new discourse ……….. What a more extended reading of Blunkett’s speeches reveals, in fact, is that social inclusion is concerned with far more than where children with special educational needs receive their education. Rather social inclusion ………..is about building a cohesive society, by ensuring that no social groups become alienated from the mainstream. This in turn means equipping potentially marginalised groups to become active citizens and crucially, with the skills they will need to survive in an increasingly competitive and skills-hungry job market.” (p.27)

He criticises this approach as narrow and instrumentalist, particularly because it is inevitably linked closely to the wider standards agenda with its focus on outcomes and acquiring a common set of basic skills which are geared towards the labour market. He suggests that this demonstrates an ambiguous commitment to genuine educational inclusion for all children since it is possible for schools to achieve success and high ‘standards’ and the engagement of their disaffected pupils through what can be seen as a range of exclusionary measures which may well militate against full participation and engagement. This theme is taken up by Benjamin (2002) who points to the contradictions inherent in policy for inclusion which proposes that children with SEN should participate fully with their peers in all aspects of school life when schools themselves are dominated by the need to compete against each other in the league tables and by the continuous drive towards improvement against national standards. Full participation for children with SEN means that they are inevitably set against their peers in a competitive race where they are doomed to fail. Benjamin
presents an interesting thesis that schools deal with the presence of children with SEN by legitimising failure within a model of continuous improvement and by adopting a ‘can-do culture’ (p.138) where the position is taken that success is attainable for all. Children with SEN are grouped in such a way that where they are unable to attain the national assessment standards they are provided with learning support and individual education plans (IEPs) through which personal targets are set so that they can be seen to progress and achieve. While this can be seen in many ways to be a positive approach, having a great deal to recommend it in terms of developing learners’ self confidence, it is nevertheless a deficit model in terms of their real life opportunities, since only those groups identified as having SEN are dealt with in this way and of course the reality is that in terms of national standards and the world outside the school they are still failures. Thus exclusionary practices are legitimised within a policy for inclusion preventing the dominant discourse and approaches from being challenged.

“For students who are not going to succeed in dominant terms, the standards agenda is instrumental in constructing barriers to their participation. Here lies one of the most fundamental contradictions at the heart of New Labour’s education policy. The kind of full inclusion policy apparently promoted in Excellence for all Children implies a set of values about intrinsic human worth which has effectively been overruled by the competitiveness of the standards agenda.” (op cit. p.56)

There is no doubt that recent policy for children with SEN (DfEE 2004) is underpinned by the assumption that achievement is all about meeting national standards and targets and that the chief vehicle for ensuring that all children are able to do this is inclusion in the mainstream of education. This raises what can be seen as perhaps the central issue of contention in policy concerning inclusion, the move from assertions that the route to an equal educational opportunity for children with SEN is the removal of barriers to participation (Green Paper 1997) to the more recent idea that the ‘right to a good education’ will be assured by removing barriers to achievement (DfEE 2004). While these do not seem, at face value, to be mutually exclusive ideas and can be, and indeed are, presented as complementary strands of the drive towards more inclusive education, the discussion above highlights the problematic nature of both when applied to the current context of mainstream schooling.

**Barriers to Participation and Achievement**

In order to interrogate these tensions further it is useful to look at the concepts of participation and achievement themselves and to determine how they are understood within discussions about inclusion and inclusive practice in current policy. Young (1990) points out that full and equitable participation for all requires a fundamental shift in the ways in which public institutions, which can be seen to include schools, operate

> “Groups with different circumstances or forms of life should be able to participate together in public institutions without shedding their distinct identities or suffering disadvantage because of them. The goal is not to give special compensation to the deviant until they achieve equality but rather to denormalize the way institutions formulate their rules by revealing the plural circumstances and needs that exist, or ought to exist within them.” (p.140)

Current policy for inclusion continues, however, to be founded on the notion that participation and access to an excellent educational opportunity for those groups identified as having SEN, and indeed many other groups, the deviant, is to be achieved through exactly the sort of compensatory normalisation approaches mentioned by Young above. The barriers to participation are chiefly seen
as these groups’ lack of skill or ability to meet a set of norm related standards, or indeed to conform
to certain predetermined norms of behaviour. The strategy for the removal of these barriers is
concerned with providing early intervention and extra support; individualised learning; extra
training for teachers to provide them with additional or specialist skills and strategies and in some
cases extra resources (DfEE 2004). While these measures may be seen to be laudable, in terms of
developing good practice, they are, however, all concerned with compensatory and deficit
approaches geared towards the normalisation and indeed standardisation, of groups and individuals
rather than contributing to the denormalization of the institutions, systems and rules which
comprise Education and schooling.
Those identified as having SEN are only one of a number of groups which can be seen to be
educationally disadvantaged and in many cases disaffected by the current system of schooling and,
of course, the group identified as having SEN is not itself an homogenous group with a common
identity. Full participation for all requires acknowledgement of these differences, respect for
personal identity and an understanding that compensatory approaches aimed at providing access for
all to the same educational opportunity by enabling individuals to fit into the same rule and norm
governed school system are unlikely to contribute towards genuine inclusion and participation.
Indeed it is possible to see such measures as reinforcing the notions of deviance because of their
failure to recognise the plurality of circumstances and needs highlighted by Young above. Nowhere
in the strategy is there any attempt to address the inaccessibility of the schooling system itself with
its rigid norm and standard related measures of success and achievement which, as discussed above,
can be seen to be the greatest barriers of all to full participation for all children.
The view of individual educational achievement as success measured against a set of
predetermined, norm related standards has become a given in education policy in the UK (and
indeed in many other countries) since the late nineteen eighties and is linked closely to the notions
of effective and successful schools. Schools where pupils are successful in meeting the standards
achieve high standing in the league tables and therefore high status. This view of achievement for
schools and pupils inevitably, however, creates many tensions for the project of inclusion.

“The standards agenda operates as if standards are absolute, and
the legitimizing narrative operates as if those absolute standards
can be made accessible to everyone. The ultimate aim of the successful
continuously improving, school is to produce entire cohorts of students
who attain the national average standard or better. Such an aim is cruel,
as well as being manifestly nonsensical, since an average standard, by
its nature, requires half the population to fall below it.”
(Benjamin 2002 p.47)

For children who are unable to achieve the standards and who fall below the average standard in
spite of all their efforts and those of their teachers, who are constantly pressurised to become more
effective at supporting them in the drive to reach the average or exceed it, the whole experience is
inevitably demoralising. A system where achievement and success are measured in this way is also,
by its very nature, going to be hostile to the notion of full participation for those who are identified
as requiring the dedication of extra precious resources in order to support them in their struggle to
attain standards which in the end they are unlikely to be able to reach, especially when elements of
competition are also added in the form of league tables for schools.
Benjamin (2002) argues that

“… the normative, competitive and unsustainable standards agenda
is itself central in the production of some very intransigent ‘barriers
to learning and participation’. …the standards agenda positions students
to whom normative versions of success are not accessible as marginal,
thus producing the conditions of exclusion within a system that claims to

be moving towards inclusion.”
(p. 136)

For these marginalised groups the barriers to achievement, measured as success against the standards, are insurmountable and compensatory measures of support, such as individualised learning, extra resources and specialised teaching skills, can only lead to the reinforcement of their failure. Achievement conceived in this way can be seen to create the greatest barrier to success. To remove the barrier it is necessary to reconceptualise achievement in such a way that it is attainable and accessible to all. If the aim is to ensure that all children can genuinely participate and achieve in a really inclusive educational experience, and not just observe from the margins, it is necessary to develop a new and very different set of rules and measures of success.

Far from removing barriers to participation and achievement, then, the current Government policy, with its continuing preoccupation with national targets and standards can be seen to be maintaining them or indeed even contributing to erecting them while the strategy for SEN proposed in Removing Barriers to Achievement simply ignores this fact.

The strategy also lays emphasis on the importance of the context in which children with SEN are expected to participate

“Inclusion is about much more than the type of school that children attend: it is about the quality of their experience’ how they are helped to learn; achieve and participate fully in the life of the school. But we know that the reality does not always match this. Schools and early years settings still vary enormously in their experience in working with children with SEN, and in the specialist expertise and resources available to them” (DfEE 2004 p. 25)

Specialist support, resources and advice provided through a range of partnership and multi professional collaboration are seen as vitally important means to ensuring that inclusion in the mainstream of schooling is the route to success and achievement for children with SEN. Without doubt properly resourced, multi professional, collaborative approaches to supporting children identified as having SEN can be seen to be essential to the project of inclusion. However the notion that they are sufficient to ensure that these children will be able to participate fully and achieve successfully in the competitive, rule governed, exclusive mainstream of schooling demonstrates a lack of genuine understanding of the complexity of concepts such as participation, success and achievement.

Perhaps a useful and very simple metaphor which may assist with illustrating the barriers to participation which exist in mainstream schooling is that of a game with a set of fairly complex rules which has been played for some time. There is a group of players which is very successful at playing the game, achieves high scores and continuously wins in competitions. Over the years the successful players from this group have dominated the game and been responsible for developing it, teaching it and have also become responsible for making policy relating to it. Various groups of watchers, who have until now been excluded from the game on the grounds that they don’t know or understand the rules or that they do not in some way meet the criteria for entry, now want to join the game and it has been agreed that they should be allowed to do so. Of course in order to move from the position of excluded watchers these groups have to learn the rules and to be coached, and in the initial stages of play, possibly to be supported, with allowances made for ineptitude. Almost inevitably there are some, who in spite of all this coaching and extra support, are not able to catch up with the nuances of the game and very few, if any, are able to play at the standard attained by the group which has played and had ownership of the game over a long period of time. Full and equal participation in the game for the excluded groups is therefore impossible. All players are dissatisfied, the original group because the game has been diluted and altered, scores lowered and competitions lost and of course because the game no longer fully belongs to its members. The other
groups also have problems because their members are unable to feel any ownership for the game or to experience any real success. It is only possible for these groups to play the game on the terms of the original group and by conforming to the original rules. For some this is simply not possible and for others it is possible to conform but they are not prepared to do so. For full participation to take place in a game for all these groups it is necessary to join together and to create a new game, agreed by all, in which all can have a role, feel ownership and therefore participate equally. This of course is a difficult project since power struggles will inevitably arise between the groups but if the outcome can be visualised as an exciting, innovative new game perhaps it can be achieved. Although this is an extremely simplistic way of looking at the issue of participation it is useful in that it highlights at least some of the barriers to participation experienced by children identified as having SEN in mainstream settings and indeed by many other groups and individuals. The imbalance of power between groups; dominant norm and rule governed concepts of success and achievement and behaviour, which are inevitably unattainable for all; compensatory deficit models of support; competition; tensions and struggles arising from attempts to challenge and change the status quo, are all barriers which exist in the mainstream of education and militate against participation. Success and achievement for players in the original game, just as in current schooling, depend on the ability to learn, know, behave and play effectively within a set of long established rules or norms, to gain high scores and to compete well in competition and league tables. The removal of barriers to participation and the inclusion of all children, as a right, in the mainstream of schooling can be seen then to require, like the game, a redefinition of these dominant rules and norms and a total reconstruction of what is meant by success and achievement if there is to be genuine full participation by all.

The role of Teachers in Promoting and Developing Inclusive Practice

There is no doubt about the importance placed in all recent and current policy for inclusion on the role of schools their managers and their teachers. For the purposes of this paper I want to focus on teachers and, in particular, on the sort of professional development they need in order to deal with the tensions, clearly apparent from the discussion above, created by a system of education driven by a standards agenda which is inevitably in conflict with the idea of full participation for all as enshrined in inclusion policy (Benjamin 2002). If Schools and schooling require, as suggested above, total redefinition and reconstruction in order to ensure that all children are able to participate and engage fully in an inclusive educational experience it is essential that teachers are supported to understand and respond to the challenge and to recognise the importance of their role in the process. Giroux places responsibility for reshaping and reforming education squarely on the shoulders of teachers who he sees and having the power create or to block change and development;

“it is through the mediation and action of teacher voice that the very nature of the schooling process is often sustained or challenged. That is, the power to shape schooling according to the logical emancipatory interest is inextricably related, not only to a high degree of self understanding, but also to the possibility for radical educators to joint together in a collective voice as part of a social movement dedicated to restructuring the ideological and material conditions that work both inside and outside of schooling.”
(Giroux 1990 p. 207)

Given the discussion in previous sections of this paper, there is no doubt that if we are to move to a model of education provision that ensures full access to an equal educational opportunity for all children, there is a need to challenge a great deal of what goes on both inside and outside of schooling. The process of transforming education for equity requires that teachers understand and challenge the contradictions that underpin the notion of purporting to provide educational excellence through a vehicle (the current provision of schooling) which is founded on competition, organised and resourced according to market forces, geared towards eliminating difference through
standardised practices and assessment and informed by a view of academic excellence as the acquisition of basic skills. There is also, clearly a need to challenge the dominant assumption that schooling, which can itself be seen as a vehicle for the perpetuation discrimination and inequality, as discussed earlier, can be responsible for readdressing social disadvantage and for ensuring social justice. These are vast challenges for teachers and are unlikely to be dealt with during their initial training or indeed even during their professional development which is more likely to be focussed upon subject expertise, the efficient delivery of the National curriculum and the effective implementation of the standardised assessment procedures and processes etc.

As mentioned earlier, key areas of focus in the latest UK policy for SEN, *Removing Barriers to Achievement* (DfES 2004), are the embedding of inclusive practice throughout all phases education, raising teachers’ expectations and the development of teaching skills and strategies which focus on what children ‘can do’ to enable this. If education professionals are to promote and deliver genuinely inclusive education; full access and participation for all children; empowering approaches to learning and teaching which emphasise and celebrate the enrichment of difference and diversity they need a commitment to continuing professional development (CPD) which is designed to equip them to meet the challenges they will inevitably meet.

Giroux (1990) proposes that teachers need to develop as ‘transformative intellectuals’ (p.196) committed to a process of continuous critical reflection on their own practice with a view to improving it and who, informed by genuine critical theory, engage constantly in challenging and enquiring into the practice of their profession with a view to reshaping and developing it to be more equitable and empowering.

“As intellectuals, teachers need to refine and change the fundamental nature of the conditions under which they work… teachers must struggle to create the ideology and structural conditions necessary for them to write research and work with each other… As intellectuals who combine reflection and action in the interests of empowering students with skills and knowledge, teachers need to address injustice and become critical actors.” (ibid., p. 197)

Certainly such an approach can be seen to be an excellent and important model for CPD designed to support teachers charged with implementing the current policy for inclusion because it is underpinned by and recognises the need to challenge and criticise the status quo, to actively engage in researching practice together with colleagues, and indeed pupils. It is a model through which it is possible to bring about real change and to redefine and develop practice with a view to making it more equitable and just. Central to this approach is an emphasis on the need for professionals to develop as critically reflective researchers.

**Continuing Professional Development and Inclusive Practice**

In a small scale qualitative piece of case study research I carried out a few years ago (Lloyd, 2002) I followed the development of a group of education professionals studying for a Masters degree in SEN in the Netherlands. The programme was delivered in English and was designed to focus on inclusion and developing inclusive practice. The programme of study was informed by Giroux’s view, that in order to change and develop their practice, education professionals need to develop as critically reflective active researchers and was underpinned by a model of quality, informed educational action research (Altrinchter 1993) because;

- it is concerned with challenging, critically reflecting on and evaluating practices in education and the policies and values which inform them, with a view to changing and improving them;
- it is a collaborative, participatory approach to research which is dependent on the full engagement of all participants for its validity;
• it aims to empower, make more equitable and more democratic the processes and practices of education;
• it opens up its findings to other professionals for critical reflection and debate in the search for greater understanding and with a view to informing further research and enquiry;
• it can be seen as an invaluable and essential tool for the development of informed critically reflective practitioners, and therefore as a crucial element of programmes of professional development.

The aim of the programme of study was to support and enable the participants to change and develop their practice to meet the demands of new (at the time) policy for inclusion in the Netherlands and the aim of my research was to evaluate with them the potential of this specially designed programme and, in particular action research, as a tool for developing critically reflective practice. I was also interested in the impact of their professional development through the programme on their practice during and after the three year course of study. I have reported on the research fully elsewhere (Lloyd 2002) and intend, for the purposes of this paper, to turn to the findings in relation to the model of professional development employed and its impact on the development of inclusive practice.

There were fifteen participants in the study group and I used a variety of methods to collect data including document analysis (using their written assignments), questionnaires and follow up interviews. From the original fifteen I identified three who were enthusiastic about continuing with conversations and interviews after they had completed their studies and from whom I gathered the majority of data about impact on practice.

The words of the participants themselves, best express the experience of the professional development and the impact it made on them and their practice.

‘I started as a teacher who looked for the recipe for practical solutions and became a critically reflective practitioner. I often experience the dilemma of my old views and this new changed attitude. Reflection upon my motives is valuable and I realize that this will be an ongoing process in the future... I realize that the fact that I transformed (and will continue to do so !) means that I internalised the view that professional development is not about being successful but about learning.’

On the issue of becoming more critical and what it means one participant told me;

‘I began to constantly question what I was doing and what I say about what I am doing.’

For another

‘The course created a snowball effect for me as I used my evaluation of one project to work on another. I am in a continuing process that I want to continue’

The professional development also had impact on others as well as on the participants themselves because of the way it changed their approach to practice and this included their pupils as well as their colleagues. For one participant, working in a segregated special school for Severe Learning Difficulties there was a very real change in his expectations of what the pupils could do for themselves which resulted in adopting a far more participatory approach to his practice.

‘I have learnt that I want to involve pupils/students by giving them an active role when decisions have to be made. This role must be on equal positions. I developed myself into a teacher who advocates self-directed learning. I want
to talk to and with the pupils/students not about them. I am convinced that the pupil/students can speak very well for themselves...I do not want to be a patronising teacher, I want to develop myself as a facilitating teacher who wants to be a guide for his pupils/students by having a professional consumer dialogue with them. They are the consumers, so they will know what is good for them.’

Others mentioned that they had discovered that they felt empowered to influence colleagues as result of their own development.

‘I managed to start a dialogue with the group of teachers and created a process through which they felt strong enough to innovate new ideas, to experiment and reflect critically on their own practice....I experienced myself that it is possible to empower teachers to adopt and active role.....During the project I had been a coach of the change process.’

The data collected during the case study provided clear evidence that very real and important changes had taken place in the practice of the participants and that they experienced a process of professional development which is, in many cases still continuing. (Many of the original group are still in contact and continue to inform me regularly about the developments in their practice). The impact on their professional development as critically reflective practitioners changed perspectives about their practice; developed their critical awareness so that they looked more critically at themselves and not just at the pupils; empowered them to take responsibility for change and to act as change agents; provided them with a more systematic approach to evaluating practice and stimulated them to engage in more critical discussion with colleagues. Perhaps one of the most important and interesting comments was

‘I learnt to be critical about what I say I am doing as well as what I am doing.’

A vitally important development if teachers are going to meet Giroux’s demand that they become ‘critical actors’ (Giroux, 1990, p.197) able to analyse and reflect critically on the controversial discourses underpinning education policy with a view to meeting the challenges they present to implementation. The evidence produced by this case study is entirely qualitative and very subjective but nevertheless it is very rich data. The process of carrying out the research generated a continuing professional dialogue with members of the group which, as mentioned above, continues to provide evidence of the positive impact of the programme of study. This programme of CPD, designed carefully to enable the participants to

• understand the concepts underpinning the notion of critically reflective practice;
• engage as critically reflective practitioners and to carry out quality action research projects which they designed, implemented and evaluated, with a view to changing and developing their practice in inclusion;
• recognise and challenge the controversial and problematic nature of inclusion and policy for inclusion;

can be seen to be an important, and indeed transportable, model. It is an empowering model which provides practitioners with vitally important tools necessary if they are going to deal with the tensions and begin to address the challenges presented to them by the current policies for inclusion. Questions remain, however, about how this sort of CPD can be accessed by teachers and about who will provide the funding for it in an educational environment which is driven by a model of compliance to predetermined standards and fuelled by competitive league tables designed to measure competence/achievement in literacy and numeracy and where the purpose professional development is seen, for the most part, as increasing teachers’ and schools’ efficiency and
effectiveness.

Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to critically examine the current policy for inclusion for children with SEN, in the UK, to see if six years on from a critique which I wrote of the Green Paper *Excellence For All Children* (DfEE 1997), there has been any attempt to address the central issues that critique raised at that time. In spite of the fact that in the intervening period there has been further legislation and policy documents have proliferated relating to the topic of inclusion the current examination seems, unfortunately, to reinforce my original conclusions rather than demonstrate any really positive change or development. Indeed the current Government strategy for SEN and inclusion (DfES 2004), like the Green Paper (DfEE 1997) presents a simplistic view of inclusion which fails to recognise its problematic and controversial nature and reaffirms deficit, compensatory approaches to provision and practice as the route to ensuring an equal educational opportunity for children with SEN. There is no recognition of the inherent injustice of an education system where, the curriculum continues to be exclusive and to emphasise narrow academic content and where the measurement of success and achievement is concerned with attaining a set of norm related standards. Just as in previous policy the latest strategy is founded on a deficit view of children with SEN and once again resorts to notions that compensation and normalisation are the means to ensuring access to equal educational opportunity. There is also a failure to recognise the potential of the current system of schooling to construct difference as a negative condition and to create SEN by perpetuating the notion that access is dependent on conformity rather than celebrating difference as enriching and recognising that genuine access to educational opportunity is dependent on a concept of full participation. The assumption remains, as before, that inclusion for children with SEN means access to the mainstream of schooling as it is currently conceived and that in order to achieve success they must be assisted, by a range of support measures, to strive for the goals dictated by the standards agenda. There is nothing in the strategy that challenges the mainstream of schooling to change in order to become accessible to all children, irrespective of ability, by expanding and changing the curriculum or developing and broadening what is meant by success and achievement or altering the way in which they are measured. As with the metaphor of the game used earlier in this article members of the excluded groups can join in if they submit to the rules and demonstrate that they can play and conform to a standard of behaviour which is acceptable. Nowhere in the documentation is there any indication that there is a willingness to change or reconstruct the game (current schooling) or even a recognition that inclusion conceived as full participation probably requires that a new game altogether.

In my earlier critique of policy for inclusion I suggested that if education is to become more equitable, “to meet the challenge of providing excellence for all children” (p.143) and to offer real participation for all children that it requires considerable reconstruction.

“I believe that we need to move away from this preoccupation with effective and efficient schools and schooling, as currently conceived, to the notion of an optimal learning environment. A barrier – free, flexible, responsive inclusive learning environment where everyone is entitled to participate fully and to develop his/her potential.”

(Op. Cit. p 146)

This belief remains unchanged and in spite of the fact that the current strategy purports to centre around the removal of barriers it seems unlikely to secure this entitlement because, as with previous policy and legislation, it totally fails to meet the challenge of deconstructing and reconstructing what can be seen as the really insurmountable barrier – the current mainstream of education. This critique presents a very bleak picture and therefore, conscious that a great deal of the responsibility for the successful implementation of current policy for inclusion seems to be placed on teachers who are expected to create a barrier free learning environment which will support
inclusion and inclusive practice the paper then addressed the role of teachers and proposed a model of CPD which might support them. The case was made that teachers require an empowering model of critically reflective CPD which will enable them to challenge the status quo and provide them with the necessary tools to do this. A small scale case study research carried out to evaluate just such a model provided evidence that in spite of the failure of recent policy for inclusion to provide a genuine blueprint for equitable, excellent educational opportunity for all children, teachers who engaged with CPD which required that they carry out quality action research and that they critically analysed and evaluated their work with a view to changing it and developing more inclusive practice felt empowered as change agents and that they had made considerable impact on their practice and that of their colleagues and, perhaps most importantly, on the experience of their pupils. It had informed their understanding about the complex and controversial nature of inclusion; changed their perspectives about the learning and teaching process; enabled them to identify and challenge their own exclusionary practices and indeed that of others; provided them with the necessary tools to interrogate, analyse and evaluate their practice more effectively; encouraged them to develop a critical dialogues about inclusion with colleagues and, perhaps most importantly, made them feel that they really could bring about change. Given the importance placed on teachers and their central role in current policy for inclusion these can be seen as crucially important skills, abilities and tools for all teachers to acquire as part of their professional development and the adoption of the model of CPD proposed above can be seen as a vital part of a powerful ‘bottom up’ strategy for actively challenging current exclusionary practice and positively contributing to the removal of barriers to genuine inclusion.

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