

‘Good Faith and Effort?’ Perspectives on educational inclusion

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This paper considers what might ‘count’ as educational inclusion from the perspectives of six women who are both mothers of and teachers of children with special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities. The mother-teachers draw on their own personal and professional experiences to consider meanings of inclusion in relation to ‘their’ children. Their voices suggest that it is the detail of daily interaction and the commitment to ‘good faith and effort’ on the part of both parents and educational professionals that matters. For the purposes of this paper I shall consider the discourses of SEN, learning difficulties and disability together, although I am aware of the danger of reductionism in doing so.

Introduction

I have a son; a wonderful young man aged 24, married and enjoying an independent life with his wife, who is disabled. In 1981, when he was 13 months old, an infantile stroke left him with a left-sided hemiplegia, epilepsy and learning difficulties. From that time on, I ‘became’ the mother of a child with special educational needs and our struggle for his right to be a valued member of society began. My experiences as both a teacher and mother over the last 22 years or so have inevitably affected my views, my values and my determination to explore issues of inclusion and exclusion beyond the rhetoric of policy.

The aims of the paper

The paper poses the following questions: what does educational inclusion mean for children with special educational needs and their families? How can we, as teachers, parents and members of a caring society, find effective ways of supporting potentially vulnerable children within an education system which, both explicitly and implicitly, through people, processes and procedures, encourages and values the development and contribution of all its members?

The answers to such questions are complex in the extreme and I have no quick fixes. What this paper aims to do is to consider what might count as inclusion and to this end it offers some insights into the perspectives of those with a very particular interest in the subject. The paper is based on the perspectives of six women who are both mothers of and teachers of children perceived as having SEN/disabilities. It does not seek to offer generalisable ‘truths’ but it does offer experiences to which the reader might relate. It does not seek to add to the debate about what inclusion means although it does offer some meanings of inclusion. It is not a consideration of how policy can construct inclusion, although it is about how inclusion might be constructed. It is not about whole school policies of inclusion to help formulate school development plans, although it might inform how we might work towards a more inclusive school culture.

There are already many initiatives across the country seeking to make inclusion in schools meaningful, such as the Index for Inclusion (Booth et al., 2000). This paper is not a review, evaluation or critique of any existing projects. Rather it focuses on the nature of inclusion and what it means to the children and their families. The motherteachers’ comments are not directed at macro level national policy or even micro level school policy but focus on attitudes and understandings, care and respect. Their collective voices suggest that educational professionals can, both

individually and collectively, make a very 'real' difference.

Before listening to these voices, however, it is important to consider the policy context which forms such an important back cloth to any discussion of inclusion. The next section therefore, briefly revisits and outlines the two major foci of education policy over the last 25 years and considers the tensions which, it is suggested, are created by their juxtaposition and interaction.

The policy context

The last 20 years have seen major policy initiatives aimed at supporting children with special needs in mainstream schools. But policies supporting inclusion are only one aspect of the educational policy landscape. There has also been a move by governments of both the left and the right to raise educational standards through policies of competition and parental choice. It is argued that the creation of a quasi market (Barton, 1998) in education has produced a 'potentially hostile context' for the development of policies of inclusion (Fulcher, 1999, p. 151). Research suggests that the creation of this quasi education market has created tensions for many children, their parents and teachers, especially those who are concerned with the education of children who experience learning difficulties (Gewirtz et al., 1995; Barton, 1998). For parents of children perceived as 'different' the tensions can be even greater and can be felt as a rejection and exclusion of their children and themselves.

These two 'key principles' of education policy, the raising of educational standards, 'generally equated with measurable outcomes' (Gilbourne & Youdell, 2000, p. 20), and the development of inclusive education form the policy context for the paper.

Policies of competition: 'standards, standards, standards'

By the mid 1970s the partnership between parents and schools, envisaged by the 1944 Education Act, was breaking down amid changing economic and social conditions which placed increasing demands on the education system, while funding declined due to a worsening world economic situation. There were calls for the Department of Education and Science (DES) to take greater control over education and 'irresponsible' and 'unaccountable' teachers (e.g. Cox & Dyson, 1969; Cox & Boyson, 1977).

After 1979, the battle over autonomy in the classroom became enmeshed with the battle between the national government and the local authorities. The Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher felt it timely to combine attacks on Local Education Authority (LEA) control of education with attacks on the inefficiency of the service and ineptitude of the teachers. Parents slowly emerged as the moral guardians of education (Dale, 1989) and from 1979 onwards consecutive governments sought to 'raise standards' in education through policies which promoted parental choice, competition and examination success. Successive education acts (1979, 1980, and particularly the Education Act of 1986, and the Education Reform Act of 1988 [ERA]) marked the beginning of a period of turbulence and change in English and Welsh education policy, marking the move from equality to quality (Flude & Hammer, 1990). The effect of the two Acts changed the nature of the role of parents, creating them as 'consumers' of education and emphasising private interests and rights (Munn, 1993). The shift from equity to parental rights was continued by the 1991 Parent's Charter (the basis for the 1992 Education [Schools] Act) and by the mid 1990s 'raising standards' had become the rallying cry for politicians (Corbett, 1998).

The rationale for the changes lay in the belief that the 'market led assumption of demand and supply relationships' would necessarily lead to the improvement of school based education and result in the closure of schools which did not meet customer demand (Gilbourne & Youdell, 2000, p. 18). Parental choice, open enrolment and league tables created what Corbett (1998, p. 2) refers to as a 'cruel hierarchy in the state sector', in which 'the least marketable schools are finding themselves

with higher proportions of children labelled as “SEN” and increasing the possibility of the development of ‘sink’ schools (Gerwartz et al., 1995). This culture of competition formed an important part of the background to the other key education policy initiative, the drive for inclusive education.

Policies of inclusion

The changes brought in by the Education Reform Act (1988) and subsequent acts have considerably affected the cultural climate within which SEN reform and policies of inclusion take place. In this context, ‘inclusion’ refers to the education of all children, particularly those with SEN, in mainstream schools and requires schools to consider their structures, teaching approaches and use of support in order to respond to the needs of all children. Until the last 20 years of the twentieth century, special education was largely neglected and marginalised at national policy level (Bines, 2000), but in 1974 the Warnock Report was commissioned by Margaret Thatcher (then Secretary of State for Education) to review the provision for children with special educational needs. Its findings (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1978) were to form the basis of the 1981 Education Act. Since then, successive governments have increased the number of policy initiatives which support the inclusion of children into mainstream educational institutions at all levels.

It is worth noting that no additional funding was set aside for the implementation AQ2 of the 1981 Education Act. The delegation of budgets to schools (LMS) has brought with it some extra funding but it has meant that SEN is having to compete for funding with subject areas of the curriculum within schools and the provision for SEN often depends on the level of parental advocacy (Bines, 2000). This competition and inequity of provision places great pressures on SEN professionals, ‘who have to work within the internal market of the school to secure policy commitment and resources’ (Bines, 2000, p. 22).

Yet, as I have already noted, the last 20 years have seen a significant policy move both nationally and internationally, towards educational inclusion. In the UK, a raft of legislation has appeared directed at supporting children with special educational needs and inclusion in mainstream schools (e.g. Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 1994, 1997a, 1997b, 1998, 1999, 2000; Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2001). The Green Paper (DfEE, 1997b) and the Programme of Action which followed (DfEE 1998) recommended strategies aimed at supporting inclusion through home-school partnerships, early intervention, staff training and development, revision of the SEN Code of Practice, changes in the nature of LEA support, as well as research support for ‘best practice’. These documents call for ‘more inclusion where parents want it’ but they add ominously, ‘and appropriate support can be given’ (DfEE, 1998). It is argued that the struggle to secure resources for such support will not help the implementation of policies of inclusion (Bines, 2000).

In 2001, the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA) came into force, amending the 1996 Education Act. The new Act states that all schools must ‘plan’ for the inclusion of all children, the underlying assumption being that all children will ultimately attend mainstream schools. It strengthens the right of children with statements to mainstream education and requires schools to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ and meet ‘anticipatory duties’. However, many teachers feel that the government is sending out ‘mixed messages’ (Birkett, 2000) creating tensions for many schools. Many staff feel they need further support to adequately address issues of inclusion (Clough, 1998b; Birkett, 2000). Policies of inclusion have to exist within the context of the broader, general education policy but this is not going to be an easy relationship and it is one that many argue is incompatible (Warnock, 1996; Barton, 1998; Armstrong, 1998). In such a relationship there will be winners and losers and it is suggested that the losers will be the children who are deemed as having special educational needs (Slee, 1996; Warnock, 1996; Barton, 1998).

Within this context of tensions and conflict I wondered what teachers and parents of children with special educational needs understood inclusion to mean. What did they feel really mattered in relation to issues of inclusion and exclusion? What made a 'difference' to their feelings of 'difference'?

The research

The paper focuses on six in-depth interviews (carried out between Autumn 1999 and Spring 2001), with mothers of children with special educational needs/disabilities who are also teachers of children with special educational needs/disabilities. Their children range in age from 3 years old to almost 19. They have a number of different special educational needs, learning difficulties and disabilities including: Downs syndrome, Cornelia de Lange syndrome, cystic fibrosis, epilepsy, hemiplegia, dyslexia, autism, and emotional and behavioural difficulties. The mother-teachers work in a range of different educational contexts: mainstream primary and secondary; special primary and secondary; special residential; and higher education. While their stories and experiences are very different in substance, the commonalities of their experiences are many. It is my regret that as a result of opportunistic sampling, I did not interview mothers from different ethnic groups (all the women are white); different social groups (all are teachers and therefore despite their origins regard themselves as middle class); and all are in longstanding, married relationships (none are single parents). I had initially thought that it would be difficult to work within the constraints of two variables. Yet, whilst I acknowledge that single mothers or mothers from other ethnic groups may have different perceptions, I hope that they can relate to some of the views expressed here and the insights offered.

Relating to the stories is important for they are offered not as 'true' accounts' but rather as post hoc constructions to direct the reader to particular meanings and understandings.

The positionality of the reader in approaching the text is significant for it is an important factor in providing meanings for the stories. It is how the reader responds which ultimately matters (Sandelowski, 1994).

My own 'insider perspective' as the researcher draws on the recent growth of feminist, auto/biographical research, which considers reflexivity important (e.g. Sparkes, 1994; Atkinson, 1998), and challenges notions of the 'value neutral' position of the researcher (e.g. Smith, 1987). Clough (2002, p. 17) argues that, 'Despite the sterility of instruments' researchers 'never come innocent to a research task', while Booth (1996, p. 37) maintains that, 'Standard tests such as reliability, validity and replicability are neither appropriate nor adequate when lives are not consistent'. Therefore, the aim must be to 'tell the truth as one sees it' (Clough 2002, p. 17).

The mother-teachers

Sonia teaches in a residential special school and long stay centre for pupils and adults who have epilepsy. Christopher her son, has autism and multiple and profound learning difficulties and disabilities and attends a special school in a neighbouring authority.

Deborah is a SENCO in a mainstream secondary school. Her daughters, Sally and Lara, are both dyslexic and attend the same school as Deborah.

Kate is a SENCO in a mainstream primary school. Her daughter Kirsty has Cystic Fibrosis. Truda is from Ohio (USA) and lectures in initial teacher training (children with hearing impairment and language difficulties). John, her adopted son, has learning difficulties and emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Joan teaches at a special school and has a senior management post with responsibility for inclusion.

Her son, James, has Cornelia de Lange Syndrome and is about to leave his special school to attend college. Julia teaches in a special secondary school for pupils with Severe Learning Difficulties. Her son, Martin, has Downs syndrome and has just left the local mainstream secondary school.

Perspectives on inclusion

Although the stories of the mother-teachers differ in substance and context, connecting threads run through them, suggesting more commonality than dissimilarity (see also Read, 2000; Roll-Peterson, 2001). The next section considers some of these shared perspectives.

All 'our' children

The women in the study are both mothers and teachers and as such experience both inclusion from two perspectives which inevitably inform each other. Grumet (1988) suggests that teachers accord their class children much the same rights as they do their own. Sikes (1997, p. 76) reports that many of the parent-teachers in her study felt that their feelings of care and love for the children in their classes became more intense when they had their own children. She quoted one parent-teacher as saying, 'God, that's my child that's happening to'.

Her words are echoed by Truda:

You know, I am standing right here on your shoulders, I'm just haunting you out there. ... If you don't want to be there, don't be. Don't be there and say 'Sorry'. You might have my kid some day!

Julia also noted that she felt very close to the children in the school, which she put down to the fact that she had her own experiences with Martin at home:

It is almost like an extended family really. Many of the children are the same age as my children and like many teenagers they enjoy 'sounding off' being stropky. ... Do I talk about my children at school? Probably too much; but the kids love it. They want to know their names. Both my children have been into school. Martin loves going in.

For Kate, a SENCO in a mainstream primary school, the birth of her daughter with cystic fibrosis had changed her way of thinking professionally. It meant making connections with parents and respecting their feelings. She now understood how parents felt and this made her more careful about the demands she placed on them:

I used to say quite glibly, 'Oh your child needs to be on the special needs register' ... and not worry really about what they were going to think or feel about that. Whereas it must have been devastating for a lot of them ... I would definitely think more carefully now as a SENCO.

Truda was also conscious of her role as change agent for other children. However she stressed the advocacy role parents had to take on:

Quite frankly the focus is on Jack and if other kids ripple the effect then go for it. Other kids will benefit but it needs their parents as well. Often it really is the parents. They [the authorities] are accountable to money not your child. My responsibility is to be accountable for my son.

'Careful teaching'

Traditionally, special education has been seen as charitable and caring, removed from the competitive world of public examinations, success and failure, and from the more 'macho' culture of mainstream secondary schools in particular (Salisbury & Jackson, 1996). In the present ethos of competition, 'caring' presents a challenge for teachers (Corbett, 1992). Corbett regards teaching and caring as 'synonymous'. Writing of her own experiences as a teacher she defines 'caring' as

reflecting on:

The way I communicated and responded. In this respect it was about trying to treat vulnerable people with dignity. I see this as 'careful teaching', not separating the care from the teaching. (Corbett, 1992, p. 237)

For the mothers in my own study this was one of their main concerns, that their children were treated with dignity and 'care'. Sonia believes that mainstream schools in their present form are unable to provide this level of care and dignity for children with profound learning difficulties and disabilities such as Christopher. 'Careful teaching' is an important part of her notion of what counts as inclusion. Christopher attends a special day school, and Sonia is vigilant in ensuring that he is 'included' in the daily life of the school and that his needs are met with kindness and dignity. This means ensuring that Christopher is not left in his travel chair in the middle of the afternoon rather than in his chair at the table with all the other children:

Children like Christopher need constant care as well as teaching; they need feeding and cleaning up. This would involve at least two people and I doubt that LEAs or schools would be willing to fund this in different mainstream schools especially in the present climate and push for positions in the league tables.

For Sonia, inclusion lies in attention to detail and open home-school relations, which reflect whether professionals value the child; whether they 'care' for him, ensuring his comfort and safety. Inclusion within a special education setting was important to Sonia. She was concerned that in the secondary phase of his education, the only special school available was based on:

A secondary school model with the National Curriculum with specialist teachers and I don't know how Christopher will cope with that. I have this feeling that eventually Christopher will be excluded within the special school because he will get therapies rather than National Curriculum. I don't think he will go round with his class. He will be siphoned off.

Having her own child who needed such close attention made Kate aware of how much can be learnt from close observation and talking to parents. She became more aware of some of the difficulties faced by the parents; e.g. how difficult it was for some of them to get into school for an 8.30 am meeting, when they also had two other children to get to school:

Now I recognise that just getting there at all for anywhere near that time, and actually being worried enough to get there in order to have the review can be a considerable achievement.

For Julia, careful teaching meant respecting children with SEN and giving them more responsibility. Julia encouraged Martin to join in the family responsibilities for the household and wanted to give the teenagers at school more responsibility:

We ought to be trusting them more and giving them more responsibility. ... There is a fear that children can't be left on their own in this special school ... in case there are accidents ...

Julia noted, somewhat sadly, that physical contact in schools today was very difficult for teachers. She acknowledged that in many situations an arm around a shoulder with a kind word of encouragement was important and helpful. She saw it as a parent might, but many staff did not feel comfortable with this today as once they might have done. While the mothers clearly had different notions of what 'careful' teaching entailed, it was clear that the differences lay in the detail of the context and that what mattered was the teachers 'respect' for the dignity of the children and a

willingness to listen to their parents.

‘Welcome to our school’

The mother-teachers were united about one of aspect of what counted as ‘real’ inclusion. Whether their children were in special schools or mainstream schools, what really mattered was whether they were made to feel welcome. This notion of being ‘wanted’ was a commonly recurring theme. Truda spoke passionately when she remembered one of John’s first teachers who, although very individualistic, was able to establish a routine for him and encourage him to work with his peers. Whilst all the mother-teachers felt that professional training was important, their overriding concern was that the teachers should ‘want’ their children in their schools and classes. For Julia this was what counted as inclusion:

They said they would love to have him. It was the first time we felt welcome I think. And that first year he was there it was just wonderful. He was a different child, a completely different child. We went in once ... and saw Martin walking across the playground with a register tucked under his arm, and he saw us and he went cock-a-hoop. He had been given the job of taking the register back and it’s such a little thing, but so very important to him. That made our day. It was almost like a new start for us. (Julia)

Unfortunately, Julia felt that for many parents, the experience of inclusion today was more about opposing forces and continued resistance, much of it passive, from schools which would just allow inclusion to fail and then children with SEN who presented a challenge to the school would be ‘taken away’:

Mainstream schools don’t work for a lot of children. ... They (LEAs and schools) will let parents become disenchanted and then they will take the children away. For others it will be assumed that they could never attend mainstream schools. Their parents will never be encouraged to try to send their children to mainstream schools, so that the powers that be can say that the parents don’t want inclusion. There is a lot of fear amongst parents and special schools. Both fear that they might lose out to inclusion.

Joan remembered her feelings about the choice of school for James:

I was led to believe that I was going to be consulted and able to choose the school we wanted for James and I found that really scary. The truth was that they go through the motions. They already know what they are going to do. He was going to go to special school. It was ever so easy to persuade me, after all that is where the money is, the facilities.

Joan felt that James had experienced a number of inclusive opportunities over the years, sometimes attending mainstream school for one day a week. The family had lived in a village at the time and the school was small and his brother was known there. However, when they moved, the head of the new mainstream school was ‘not receptive’:

Although she said yes, she meant no. She dillied and dallied and um’d and ah’d and things weren’t right and we lost. It took about a year before she had the courage to say no, we don’t want James at our school! ... We got another placement but it would have been nice for him to go there, as that was where all the other local children went.

However, when James left that school the difficulties really began. Travelling to a special school away from the school of his brother and sister and the other children around him left James isolated. His schools friends lived a distance away. Joan had wanted James to attend a mainstream school so that he could be part of the community. She felt that segregated schooling had led to a segregated

adult life for James.

Normality

Wanting their children to be perceived as 'just normal' was immensely important to these mother-teachers. Yet the very notion of difference is 'problematic' for it 'is always perceived in relation to some implicit norm' (Peters, 1996, p. 231). Fulcher argues that notions of difference

Divide[s] the school population into those with and those without handicaps. It constructs the notion of normal and abnormal, of belonging here or elsewhere ... (Fulcher, 1999, p. 8).

The discourses around special educational needs have developed from models of disability constructed outside education and such a discourse, 'defines individuals by their deficits, rather than by external factors' (Allan, 1999, p. 8).

For Kate, Kirsty was 'just a normal baby who needed a bit of extra something at the beginning and end of each day in order to make her day completely normal'. She wanted the teachers to 'know her as Kirsty and then realise her needs are beyond that'. Joan wanted James to have 'all the opportunities that everyone else had ... I wanted him to be seen as just normal'. Sonia's amazement when the health visitor suggested that Christopher might go into permanent residential care is clear: I can remember standing there thinking, 'what's this woman talking about', you know, because it never entered our heads ... I mean he is our child. He was very, very floppy and he still is quite floppy and you have to be careful picking him up ... However, apart from this and his epilepsy, touch wood, he has no other problems at all.

The 'normality' of their lives is a constantly recurring theme amongst the mothers echoing the views of the mothers in Read's study (2000). However, the medical model of special educational needs and disability creates a language which is founded on difference from the norm and the notion of being 'special'.

The language of inclusion

The language of this discourse uses terms such as 'special educational needs', which Corbett believes reflects the powerlessness of people with learning difficulties. She argues that we should 'relish difference' but reject being 'special' (Corbett, 1996, p. 49). Sonia recounted the time when two children with epilepsy from the residential special school had attended a mainstream primary school for one afternoon a week until one of the governors complained on behalf of some of the other parents:

We got the impression you can catch it (epilepsy) like flu, you know, if you touch this child you are going to be epileptic.

Sonia recalled the sadness she felt about the lack of knowledge and understanding and 'fear of the unknown'.

The language used by the mother-teachers as they recounted their experiences reflected the negative responses of others. Deborah spoke of being 'utterly frustrated, angry and depressed ... nobody would support me'. She spoke of the 'tensions' and 'pressure' which were 'horrendous because no one understood the problem'; 'I felt like a charity ... everyone trying to give me a break ... as though I was the problem'. What got to her was the 'loneliness and the criticism'. She recognised this in other parents when she said, 'if they've fought all the time, they're angry and very stroppy'.

This notion of fighting and struggling was common amongst the mother-teachers. Truda spoke of 'fighting' for John to go to a mainstream school. She spoke of her expectations

when she adopted him:

I believe that at one level I knew what I was getting into when I got him. But I never knew it would be this difficult.

Kate uses words such as ‘devastating’ and, again, ‘fight’ (regarding getting a statement for Kirsty). Joan spoke of the ‘struggle’ to get support for both James and herself as a working mother and spoke of feeling ‘very isolated’. This was a view repeated by Julia who believed that the structures and processes to which children with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their families are subjected combine to isolate, separate and define them as different, separating them from the support networks of other young families, a view supported by the mothers studied by Read (2000), Dowling and Dolan (2001), and Roll-Peterson (2001).

‘Good faith and effort’

The mother-teachers agreed that inclusion was a multifaceted and difficult process, which although it could be defined at policy level rhetoric, was much less easy to define in reality. Kate maintained that professionals needed to keep ‘all avenues open’ and to have the professional humility not to ‘pull rank’; to allow the child’s needs to be paramount rather than their own professional position. They needed to offer support to parents, and parents in their turn needed to understand that the answers were not always readily available. Professionals had to be patient with parents and parents with professionals.

Kate spoke of inclusion as being about ‘finding a balance between the philosophy and the reality; then we might get it right for the kids’. Julia recognised that there would be mistakes but this would not stop her from trying, or supporting other mothers who were trying. Truda believed that the way forward was through ‘good faith and effort’. Teachers needed to show that they were ‘trying’. If they did this then as a parent she was ‘going to knock myself out to be supportive, to help’. All those involved with inclusion took some risks, the teachers, the parents and, of course, the children. But if there was ‘good faith’, then it was worth the effort.

Truda noted that inclusion required a complete reversal of earlier ‘given truths’ and therefore it was not surprising that there were problems. It would take time for both parents and teachers to gain the confidence and belief that inclusion could work:

Parents ... and the teachers don’t have the visual concept of these kids in a regular classroom. We educated parents for so long in special ed.: ‘Give us your poor, give us your disabled, we can help them, we can protect them’. Then we turn round and say: ‘Oh lets put them back into regular ed.’. You can’t do that. But that essentially is what has happened in the US. That kind of neck whipping you know. So you can’t expect parents to roll over into that kind of thing. The first thing I want to do is to sit down and really talk with the parents long term. It is a persuasive mode from my side. No one is saying ‘quick fixes’ because if you do you are going to be in trouble.

The notion that there are no easy answers, no packaged solutions to inclusion, can be a daunting one but all the women were sure that ‘inclusion’ per se mattered and that it had to be interpreted in different ways in different contexts. One size would not fit all, certainly not in the short term. Listening to parents, professionals and the children themselves was vital.

According to Truda it takes professionals and parents who are ‘willing to take some risks’, to see inclusion as a positive issue, for ‘it takes the notion of the pioneer at some levels’. Perhaps inclusion shouldn’t be seen as so difficult, for, as Truda reflected, ‘regular’ classrooms are already on a continuum which need ‘stretching’ further to meet the needs of all children. It was a question of belief:

People have to believe that all the kids are right there, in regular classrooms. But the continuum or the stretch of the regular classroom is much 'bigger' than we ever allow. You know, put a kid with mild learning difficulties in it: a kid with a little bit of gifted ability, and if we want to stretch it a little bit more then we can put in a kid with more significant disabilities. John stretched them. They'd never worked to stretch that far before (Truda).

Reflection

I work closely with many teachers in both mainstream and special schools and I have the greatest respect for their determination to support children for whom the present education system is a very real challenge. Their willingness to work around the system and think creatively about issues of diversity and inclusion is never ending. For both teachers and parents 'risk' is a very 'risky' business today, especially in an educational climate of zero tolerance of failure (Davies et al., 1998).

There is a suggestion that given the competitive market, within which schools operate, many schools would apparently rather the 'risk' was one of being seen as not inclusive. Educating children with special educational needs seems to present risks on many levels already. The children can face isolation if they travel to special schools miles away from home; if they attend mainstream schools they may risk bullying and isolation. Inclusion can be a risk for schools if performance indicators are to be the overriding concern; and there is always the risk that other parents may choose to take their children elsewhere. There is a financial risk in that, under the present system, money may have to go to support children in both special and mainstream schools to meet the needs of all children. Committing education to 'real' inclusion for all children could even be a political risk for governments. It would seem reasonable to say that 'inclusion' in its present form is very much about 'risk'.

The question surely is about who should be taking these risks and for what gain? There can be little doubt that in the system as it is at the moment, the ultimate risks lie with those who are already the most vulnerable, the children themselves, and often for very little gain. As a society shouldn't we be the ones willing to take more positive risks? By this I do not mean placing vulnerable children in inappropriate educational contexts, but to be willing to commit ourselves to the challenge of inclusion; to commit ourselves to 'good faith and effort' in the cause of equity and social justice.

We need to acknowledge the 'risks' and believe that they are worth taking. I said at the beginning that this paper was not about what inclusion means, but rather about meanings of inclusion. Within the meanings suggested here, special schools still have an important part to play within the education system but they too need to reflect on their own visions of inclusion; within a competitive education market 'caring' for children matters; feeling welcome within the school counts; sharing and giving responsibility to young people demonstrates respect and offers them dignity; having friends matters.

For these mother-teachers inclusion is not about quick fixes or certainties but about shared willingness and commitment to try. It is not about grand rhetoric but the small detail of everyday lived experience. The mother-teachers here are willing to take risks in different ways, as teachers and mothers, on behalf of their own and their 'other' children, but these have to be taken within a system which cares for and about their children and has something to offer them in return for the risks they take. Emerging from their voices is the plea that we should not dismiss inclusion because it takes time to get it right or because we make mistakes along the way, but that as educational professionals, parents and community, we persevere with 'good faith and effort' to ensure that ultimately the 'risk' of inclusion is one which is worth taking.

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344 B. A. Cole
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