

# Why is inclusion a difficult concept for schools to deliver?

## Introduction

Inclusion is a difficult concept to deliver as a result of the fact that there are many different definitions for it (Hodkinson and Vickerman, 2016; Armstrong et al., 2010) and that it covers a huge range of issues including providing for those who have Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), protecting those who are vulnerable to exclusion, providing a learning environment for every member of the school community and promoting an ethical and visionary approach towards education and society as a whole (Ainscow et al., 2006 cited in Devarakonda, 2013, p. 6). This essay will outline the history and the current position, inclusive of the issues which surround the concept of inclusion and inclusive education.

## History

Many of the issues that surround this particular concept revolve around the fact that it is most associated with the area of SEND, as a result of historic theories and practices within education. Until the latter part of the last century, any form of disability or learning issue was regarded as something which was in need of cure (medical model - Dowd et al., 2007), leading to the use of different categories and/or labels which reinforced this notion and led to those with issues being treated as a homogenous mass as opposed to individuals (Topping and Maloney, 2005; Burke and Cigno, 2000). This medical or diagnostic model was eventually challenged by the findings of the Warnock Report (HMSO, 1978) which readjusted the focus from conditions and difficulties to individuals, in order to afford them the opportunity to become accepted members of the community through societal change (social model - Carson, 2009; Thomas, 2007). This report highlighted the fact that as many as one in five children would need some form of educational support, thus making it necessary to make provision for those with SEND within mainstream education (Warnock, 1978). This publication also formed the basis of the *Education Act* of 1981 (HMSO) and subsequent Education Acts which placed the onus on local authorities to make provision for individuals with difficulties within mainstream education unless this was not the wish of their parents or it was felt not to be in their best interests.

Globally, the United Nations also produced documentation which reinforced the rights of children (*United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, UNICEF, 1989; *Salamanca Statement*, UNESCO, 1994) which influenced government legislation and approaches towards the notion of inclusion. In addition to this, the notion of inclusion has been promoted from a number of different directions, including that of

providing equality of access to education for all children (Armstrong et al, 2011), the necessity for attitudinal changes in society (Armstrong et al, 2011) and the impact of labelling children (Armstrong et al, 2010). The new millennium saw the government of the United Kingdom bring in the *Special Educational Needs and Disability Act* (Her Majesty's Government [HM Government], 2001) and the *SEN Code of Practice* (Department of Education and Skills [DfES], 2001), both of which reinforced the fact that the needs of each individual were paramount in terms of their education, even if this meant readjustments being made to either the curriculum or the fabric of buildings to facilitate equality of opportunity. This was further reinforced by successive legislation such as the *Childcare Act* (HM Government, 2006) and the *Equality Act* (HM Government, 2010) which specifically target equality of opportunity for children and their families.

### **Current Position**

Current legislation concerning this issue includes that of the *Children and Families Act* (HM Government, 2014) and the revised *Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice* (Department for Education [DfE]/Department of Health [DoH], 2015). The *Children and Families Act* (HM Government, 2014) has been designed in order to affect a more comprehensive and more easily administered care package which combines education and healthcare within an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHC) which supersedes Statements of SEN. This document not only includes definitions of disability but provides families with opportunities to have a greater influence on care packages in order to support their hopes and ambitions which should help to improve overall outcomes for young people (Irwin Mitchell, 2014). The revised *Code of Practice* (DfE/DoH, 2015) dovetails with this document, giving providers specific guidance and statements of expectation in respect of those who are diagnosed as having SEND, as well as drawing providers attention to related guidance and legislation including the *Equality Act* (2010), *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (2013) and *Supporting Pupils at School with Medical Conditions* (2014). It also enshrines the right of children and their parents to make a contribution towards all decisions which surround their support and care and the contents of an EHC.

As we can see, the emphasis is still very much on meeting the needs of children who have specific issues and/or disabilities. Much has been written both by academics and legislators in respect of providing inclusive education for children. However, whilst there is an emphasis on those who have issues, it is all too easy to lose sight of the overall picture and providing for *all* children within the education system. It is important to recognise that the plethora of definitions and/or ideas which surround inclusion as a concept only serve to confuse the issue, making it difficult to deliver in practice,

particularly when the emphasis moves away from SEND. For example, Darlington (2003, p. 2) states that inclusion is a process and that it is not a simple notion which is predicated upon placement; it involves important principles which include "... valuing diversity, entitlement, dignity, individual needs, planning, collective responsibility, professional development, and equal opportunities." Similarly, Aspis (2004, p. 29) states that "inclusive education should create opportunities for all learners to work together. This requires a recognition that learning is enhanced when individuals of different abilities, skills and aspirations can work together in a joint enterprise." This echoes the thoughts of Booth and Ainscow (2011, cited in the Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education, 2018, para 2) who emphasised the need to develop values and school communities which allow increased participation in every aspect of school life for all children, irrespective of their background and their ability/disability.

It is important to recognise that there are difficulties that arise when societies seek to provide a genuinely inclusive educational experience for children. The first is that of teacher training - Devarakonda (2013; echoed by Khoaeane, 2012) raises the issue as to whether practitioners are prepared adequately for addressing the needs of those with SEND whilst simultaneously catering for the needs of everyone in their classroom (echoed by Black-Hawkins et al, 2007). In addition, educational providers have conflicting pressures which exert an influence on their approach and attitudes towards the delivery of their educational provision. On the one hand they have the task of maintaining and indeed raising the attainment levels of all pupils in their care whilst on the other they must adhere to their responsibilities surrounding the issue of equality of opportunity for all pupils (Goepel et al., 2015). These pressures are exacerbated by the publication of league tables and the resultant setting of targets which make educators wary of fully embracing the notion of a child centred, inclusive educational package (Glazzard et al., 2010). It is encouraging to note that these pressures on practitioners are not increased, generally, by the attitude of parents towards the inclusion of those with SEND. de Boer and Munde (2014) report in their study that parents show a positive attitude towards inclusion overall, with their only hesitation being about the inclusion of children with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities.

## **Conclusion**

As we can see, the notion of inclusion and inclusive education is difficult to grasp. The majority of literature focuses upon providing for the needs of those who have any form of learning issue and/or disability - these can either be specific physical issues, those that are rooted in medical conditions that impact upon cognitive function or those that are related to emotional problems. However, a broader view of inclusion (that of embracing diversity and difference, supporting *all* to facilitate their participation in

community activities, the reduction of exclusion, discrimination and barriers to learning and the recognition that an inclusive education is the foundation of inclusive practice in society) necessitates educators adopting a more flexible, child-centred approach which is sometimes at odds with the pressures that are brought to bear upon them in respect of standards and targets. Clearly, it is important that settings and individual practitioners look to mould their approaches to the needs of the children in their care, but this can only happen if there is adequate training both in terms of catering for the needs of those who have specific conditions and in how to deliver an inclusive provision in the classroom. Not only is this task and unenviable one, but it is one which bears further investigation in terms of teacher training and the overall aims and objectives of education - it is important to acknowledge the role of qualifications for future careers and usefulness of each individual within society, but not at the cost of ensuring that each child feels valued and has equality of opportunity in their formative years.