

# **SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS**

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**3RD  
EDITION**

# **SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS**

**A GUIDE FOR INCLUSIVE PRACTICE**

**EDITED BY**

**LINDSAY PEER  
& GAVIN REID**

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# 4

## INCLUSION AND SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS A DIALOGIC INQUIRY INTO CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

ARTEMI SAKELLARIADIS

### Learning objectives

This chapter will help readers to:

- Better understand the people behind the label of SEN
- Articulate a rationale for including disabled children and young people in ordinary schools
- Demonstrate the benefits of inclusion for all
- Explore controversial issues from a range of perspectives
- Challenge conventional forms of academic writing

***'I still don't get why you insist'*** Sophia chides. ***'If you ask me, it's quite simple. Inclusion is all right for some, but there will always be those for whom it can never work. I wish you would just accept that and spare us all the hassle.'*** I bite my lip and walk in silence, trying to conjure up a constructive response. She does not mean to be curt, I am sure. She probably thinks she understands obvious and insurmountable difficulties, assumes there is no merit in my position and sees no reason to discuss it. Sophia nudges me out of my thoughts.

***'Well...?'*** she raises an eyebrow expectantly.

***'Well...'*** I formulate my answer as I speak it, ***'this brings back memories. Years ago, when I was a teacher in a special school, an adviser had said that all of our pupils would have been***

*better off in an ordinary school. Thinking he was being deliberately irrational in order to provoke, I had refused to engage in conversation. And here I am now, making a similar claim and hoping you will discuss it with me.'*

**'Are you seriously telling me...'** she pauses and casts me an inquisitive look. **'No, you're teasing again. Come on, let's not waste our time, there are so many other interesting things to talk about.'**

*'Sophia I promise you, I have never been more serious about this. I honestly think that the human rights agenda behind the call to include disabled children in ordinary schools is not yet widely understood. Please let us have this conversation now. You know that others are listening in, which makes this all the more important.'*

### Discussion point

The question of whether education should be transformed so that disabled children, or those identified as having special educational needs, can be consistently included in their local schools continues to spark debate. Where do you stand? Take a few minutes to articulate what you see as the main advantages of mainstream and of special schooling.

**'OK, let's go for it, it won't take long. Just tell me, what makes you think staff in mainstream schools are well equipped to teach children with profound and multiple learning difficulties?'**

She is evidently thinking about young people with high-level support needs, the preferred term put forward by disabled people (Alliance for Inclusive Education, 2001), but I decide not to challenge her choice of words. She is clearly embarking on this conversation determined to swiftly prove me wrong, so I must pick my words carefully to help her acknowledge her assumptions and explore alternative perspectives.

*'Who do you think is well equipped to teach those with the most complex needs and what is it that equips them?'*

**'Well, specialist SEN staff, of course. They've had all the necessary training.'**

*'Are you saying that it is only their training that equips them to do a good job?'* I ask knowing that this lets her assume that 'training' is a matter of Initial Teacher Education.

**'And their experience, naturally. Knowledge and experience make a good teacher. What are you getting at?'**

I say nothing, allowing time for the circularity of her argument to dawn on her. Neither of us speaks and I let my mind follow my thoughts on what she has just said. Surely, it takes more than knowledge and experience to be a good teacher, but this is

beside the point. I remember something I wrote many years ago, attempting to expose how the availability of so-called ‘experts’ can disempower those who have yet to engage with a new experience: At the dawn of the twenty-second century, a mother and her expectant daughter are debating who will look after the baby. The daughter is adamant that, in line with current practice, her baby will be placed in a Baby Monitoring Institution (BMI) for at least one year. She argues that BMIs provide expert staff trained to attend to all health, nutritional, social and educational needs of babies and toddlers, whereas she is inexperienced and ill-equipped even to pacify a crying baby (Sakellariadis, 2003). Is there a parallel here? Does the availability and marketisation of ‘specialist’ special educators adversely impact on other teachers’ confidence to support the learning and development of young people with high-level support needs? I make a mental note to suggest this as a discussion point for students considering how inclusion policies are put into practice.

**‘Are you going to tell me what you are getting at?’** Sophia repeats her question, reminding me that she is not sufficiently engaged in this conversation to notice any discrepancies.

*‘I am just thinking that any teacher can access Continuing Professional Development and no teacher can become experienced in anything, unless they are afforded the experience in the first place.’*

**‘Surely you are not suggesting that we all need to become specialists so that any of us can teach any child with any disability!’** she presses on, apparently still oblivious to the circularity of her earlier statement. I bite my lip. If she had known what Richard Rieser says about the social model of disability (Rieser, 2000), she would have probably chosen a different form of words. Some people may have one or more impairments (long-term loss of physical or mental function), but that does not make them disabled. According to the social model, disability is an experience; people only become disabled when society fails to make adjustments or remove barriers. In this sense, a wheelchair user is not disabled by their physical impairment (they are able to move around, albeit by different means to most people) but may become dis-abled by an absence of ramps or by other physical barriers. I choose to say none of this to Sophia, who I sense is getting a little impatient. We need to wrap up on this issue of perceived competence of staff.

*‘No Sophia, I am not suggesting that at all. All we need to do as teachers is realise that the basic pedagogic principles are the same, no matter what we are helping young people to learn; from how to make friends to how to solve complex mathematical equations. We are well equipped to help young people learn and should not freeze in the headlights of relative inexperience. Plus, of course, we should remember that “we are all ignorant; just about different things” [attributed to Mark Twain]. When the time is right, we can seek knowledge about how some children learn or seek advice on how to support the learning and development of a particular child.’*

*So yes, maybe not everyone in the profession feels well equipped at the moment, but staff do not lack the skills; if anything, some people lack confidence that they already have sufficient skills to support any child's learning, alone or with the help of others.'*

I choose to leave it at that, aware that this may be a lot for her to process right now. Even though she may find this to make sense at face value, it probably represents a considerable shift in how she perceives the capacity of ordinary local schools to respond to the full diversity of learners. I hope she will engage with this sufficiently to realise the shift. If we had more time, I would have explained why seeking support is not an indication of weakness or inadequacy. I would also have reminded her of Gandhi's words that our ability to reach unity in diversity will be the beauty and test of our civilisation. I wonder if I should speak to her about the Salt Review. The final report (DCSF, 2010) confirmed that many teachers feel ill-prepared to teach learners with labels of severe or profound and multiple learning difficulties and suggested that this highlights a gap in initial teacher education. It also revealed a widespread perception that this group of learners requires 'carers' rather than educators. Sophia seems ready to pick up the conversation from where we left it and move us in a new direction.

***'And why should teachers have to make time to gain more skills which only duplicate the expertise already available in special schools?'***

I could raise the issue of children's rights and explain how these are breached by segregated schooling (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016) and how the UK has been criticised for sending increasing numbers of disabled children to separate special schools (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2017). Or I could mention national and international legislation or policies calling for the development of inclusive education for all (United Nations, 2015). But our time is limited, so I try something different.

*'Did you enjoy your holiday in Portugal last year?'*

***'I beg your pardon?'*** she gives me a baffled look, understandably surprised at the question's apparent irrelevance.

*'Please answer me. Did you enjoy your holiday in Portugal last year?'*

***'Yes thank you, as a matter of fact I did. Now what has that got to do with anything?'***

*'Well, I was just wondering why you chose a new hotel in Portugal, when there are other well-established resorts all over the Mediterranean.'*

***'Ah, now you are being unreasonable. You know I was visiting my sister who lives there. It wasn't just a holiday – I was catching up with family and friends.'***

*'And would you say that going to school is just education? Shouldn't every child be spending their school days with their brothers, sisters, friends and potential friends from their local community?'*

I think of my good friend Eva, a school friend whom I am still in touch with. Long-standing friendships are so precious! Only last week she went out of her way to help me find a carer for my mother. We have been there for one another in so many different ways over the years. I wonder if Sophia is still in touch with any of her school friends.

***'But they need the specialist provision, you know they do.'*** Sophia interrupts my thoughts. I had intended to ask her how she might feel if she were to lose her sight, or her hearing, or the use of her legs and her employer transferred her to another site, making her travel a long distance each day, so that she could be with others that have lost their sight, hearing or use of their legs. But now the conversation is moving in a different direction.

*'And just because they might need additional help with some things, you think it is all right to take something away from them? How come a perceived need for adult specialists is allowed to trump children's need to be with their peers and to belong in their local community?'* I stop short of saying that this is like putting a child in hospital without allowing family or friends to visit, on the grounds that the child needs the medical intervention.

***'Well you've got to be realistic. You either deprive them of their peers or of the tailor-made provision. Which would you rather do?'***

*'Neither, Sophia. Neither.'* I am unable to conceal a hint of impatience. I take a deep breath, then add in a calmer tone: *'With today's emphasis on personalised learning, there is no reason why tailor-made provision has to be offered in a separate place'* (CSIE staff and associates, 2009). I am painfully aware that many children and young people have been included in their local school without sufficient support and, consequently, have found the experience neither pleasant nor beneficial. Did anyone suggest that including everyone in ordinary schools is easy, or that schools can transform overnight? We know there is a tendency in organisations and systems to resist change, but does that mean that we stop trying? I remember hearing Peter Farrell responding to parents who were praising special schools following their children's unpleasant experiences in mainstream education:

We have good evidence that there are many children with a range of disabilities who are marginalised in mainstream schools, who are bullied in mainstream schools, who feel uncomfortable in mainstream schools. That is not to say that inclusion is not a good thing, it's just to say that we haven't actually got it right yet. (Farrell, 2010)

***'Well that's a lovely rhetoric but we both know that the provision is not there. Children with severe learning difficulties simply cannot access the curriculum. What would they do all day in a mainstream school?'***

I stop dead in my tracks. I lean against a tree, take off my right shoe and shake out a stone. I put my shoe back on, take it off again and shake it some more. Sophia seems

ready to move on, but I stay put. I take off my glasses and slowly clean one lens and then the other. Without uttering a word, I hold them up to the light then clean them some more. With the corner of my eye I notice Sophia adjusting her hair band. Her eyes are focused at some point in the distance and she seems to be thinking. Good. She needs to make a mental leap that my words alone cannot engineer for her. She needs to realise that the proposal is not simply to place children in local schools as we know them; they have been set up with a narrower population in mind. What is called for is a critical examination of how we see disability, a radical reconsideration of how we organise teaching and learning in schools and an innovative mindset allowing us to perceive pupil progress in light of ‘measuring what we value’, if we must measure anything, instead of ‘valuing what we can measure’ (Ainscow, 2005). I look at my friend tenderly. She sounded impatient a few minutes ago. She probably thinks that parents who want their children with high-level support needs to go to their local school are unrealistic and that their choices are more sentimental than rational. One day she might understand that lived experience has led some parents to expand their sense of what is normal; not in the sense of what is average or what is shared by most people, but more in a sense of ‘what can be considered a natural expression of our shared humanity’ (Sakellariadis, 2012). For the time being she, like so many others, is focusing on differences between disabled and non-disabled people and overlooks all of what we have in common. Sophia still seems absorbed in her thoughts. I wait patiently. A cat is sitting on a wall nearby, leisurely licking its paws. A welcome breeze brings the fresh scent of spring. We stay like this, almost frozen in time. Eventually, Sophia glances at me, her earlier look of concern gradually changing to a smile, as she sets us off walking again.

***‘I think I see what you are getting at. You are saying that whatever learning opportunities are available to children in special schools, could be made available to them in their local school. The option is not there ... not because it cannot be done but because the capacity has not been developed–’***

*‘Yet.’* I interrupt. *‘The capacity has not been developed yet.’* If only I could take her to Canada, show her some of the schools in the Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board, where they closed all of their special schools in 1969 and have been educating all children and young people in mainstream schools ever since (Hansen et al., 2006), or in New Brunswick where they have also had a fully inclusive education system for almost forty years (Flood, 2019). Or if I could show her some of the excellent inclusive practice already unfolding in some schools over here (Newham Council Communications, 2018). I wonder if Sophia knows how patchy the picture is in this county. CSIE has shown, through its Trends reports which date back to the 1980s, that in some areas much larger proportions of children are consistently sent to special schools than in other areas (Black and Norwich, 2014, 2019). It is not clear why this happens, but it seems to be linked to people’s understandings of disability, and of disability equality. Whatever the

reasons, it is intriguing that such a pattern of contrasting responses to diversity exists. Sophia is oblivious to my thoughts.

***'OK, so the capacity has not been developed yet in mainstream schools. However...'*** She takes a deep breath and I can sense there is something else troubling her, ***'...even if we agree that this is what we'd like in principle, surely in practice concentrating resources in one place makes more sense financially.'***

I knew this would come up sooner or later. Should I explain this, or shall I let her work it out for herself? How difficult can it be to figure out that paying for staff to travel to mainstream schools is cheaper than paying for pupils to travel to special schools, often over very long distances twice a day by taxi with a paid escort? Millions are spent each year for the sole purpose of getting children from home to a special school and back again. The Audit Commission had looked into this and reported that children's services rarely keep records in a way that enables them to evaluate the total cost of supporting an individual child. Transport costs and the costs of monitoring provision were identified as expenditure not being combined with the charges made by providers, as they came from separate budgets. The report suggested that without this financial information it is not possible to make informed judgements about the most cost-effective placement for a particular child (Audit Commission, 2007). Transport costs aside, how hard can it be to realise that for every special school that closes, funds needed to run the school and maintain the buildings could enable the same staff to help develop more inclusive practice in ordinary schools? Sophia would probably say that the resources she had in mind are more than the human resources of my argument. That might not stand up to scrutiny either. For a start, as Micheline Mason has said (2007, personal communication), what better resource to support disabled children's learning and development than their non-disabled peers? An invaluable resource always available, absolutely free, in ordinary schools. Doesn't Sophia know that what children learn in school is not limited to the curriculum subjects but includes, for example, how to be a 5-year-old, or a teenager, or any age for that matter? Yes, there is something to be said about physical resources, but my hunch is that Sophia's understanding would be different from mine. Am I ready to subject myself to the discourse of care and to assumptions about *Snoezelen* rooms or hydrotherapy pools as essential educational resources of unique benefit to disabled children alone? No, not now. I let her assumption about financial benefit lie and decide to explore another thought.

*'Are you saying that financial considerations alone should dictate decisions that affect the quality of people's lives?'* I am aware that articulating a vague concern can serve to clarify it and, occasionally, to expose it as unsound.

***'Well no, not exactly. I am not saying that finances should dictate where children go to school, only that cost should be taken into account.'***

*‘So, how should that impact upon a decision, if appropriate provision was available in either type of setting? Even if it was cheaper to send children to separate special schools, and therefore this question arose, would you see cost-cutting as sufficient justification for uprooting young people and keeping them apart from their local community, sometimes throughout their school lives?’* I stop short of asking her how she might feel if cost-cutting measures were affecting her own children. How would it seem if, responding to funding cuts, her local school removed art or maths from the curriculum? Maybe I should talk to her about Judith Snow, the Canadian activist, who compares the cost and effort of ensuring a disabled child has a good education in their local school, with the cost and effort of ensuring an Olympic diver prepares and performs well (Snow, 2001).

### Discussion point

Making available to disabled people facilities and services that most people take for granted, often necessitates additional expenditure (for example, the cost of providing hearing loops, accessible toilets, Braille signs or including disabled children in ordinary schools). What weight do you think such financial implications should carry? Who do you think should decide, and on what grounds, what facilities and services are made available to whom?

***‘But some may not benefit from being in their local community. Some of them are not in a position to make friends, are they?’*** Sophia naïvely questions the merits of togetherness and overlooks young people’s emotional well-being.

*‘I beg your pardon?!? Of course they are! With all due respect, do you think you might be finding such friendships hard to imagine because you don’t have any disabled friends yourself?’*

***‘Well no, but...’***

*‘Or is there a particular mould in your mind that a friend has to fit in, in order to be called a friend?’*

I had promised myself to remain calm throughout this conversation and I am not doing too well right now. But what is a friend, if not someone who loves you for who you are? And how are non-disabled youngsters to get to know and appreciate their disabled peers, if they are deliberately and consistently separated? Sophia has remained silent and I feel I owe her an apology.

*‘Look. I am sorry, I didn’t mean to sound terse. Let’s go back to my earlier question: would you see cost-cutting as a sufficient reason to uproot young people and keep them away from their local community?’*

***'I'm not sure. Why is it suddenly so bad to be away from your local community? Lots of children go to boarding school and that's not frowned upon, is it?'***

*'Well, in many ways it is, but I cannot see a sustainable comparison. Removing a young person from their local community to place them within a homogeneous smaller community of perceived privilege is hardly comparable to landing young people together in a disparate assemblage of ostracised youngsters, don't you think? Are you seriously comparing elitism with rejection?'*

***'Whoa, you've said too much there! Why do you say disparate? They have their disability in common, don't they?'***

She is confusing experience with impairment again. I let that go.

*'Sophia, would you choose to work in a school deliberately staffed entirely by brunettes?'*

***'Now you are being flippant; we are talking about responding to children's needs. Children who share a disability also share similar special educational needs. What is wrong with organising schools around those needs?'***

*'It would be like making all people with curly hair go to the same hairdresser.'* She is making sweeping assumptions again. If she has not yet grasped the full range of diversity, I cannot explain it here and now. But suggesting that everyone who has, for example, Down syndrome, should be treated in the same way is as naïve as suggesting that everyone who lives on the same street learns in the same way. To think that people with a particular impairment have more in common with others who have the same impairment than with their peers who do not, is also an assumption that does not stand up to scrutiny.

***'No, no. Let's explore this.'*** It is her that is pursuing the logic in the argument now, I am pleased to notice. ***'Don't you think that children themselves would prefer to be in a school with others like them, rather than being thrown in a place where they are forever standing out as being different?'***

*'They might do. But what would this mean for them in the long term? Most children would rather eat sweets than vegetables, but would you raise them on a diet of nothing but sweets?'* If we had more time, I would have tried to deconstruct the notion of what is best for the child. Sophia may not have been seduced by the perception of a cosy bubble if she realised the extent of discrimination disabled people face. Does she know that the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) has found that hundreds of thousands of disabled people regularly experience harassment or abuse but have come to accept this because of our society's culture of disbelief or 'collective denial' (EHRC, 2011)? Does she know that, as a means of putting this right, the EHRC has called for new research in order to better understand how segregated education, or inadequately supported inclusive education, impacts on attitudes towards disabled people and on disabled children and young people's life chances (EHRC, 2012)? The reciprocal link between ignorance and prejudice simply has to be broken. And if all this was not

enough, we also know that separate special schools have lower expectations of children; diversity tends to get pathologised and young people are often destined for a life in day centres. If Sophia chose to engage with the bigger picture, would she still opt to commit people to a life of social isolation?

***'Come on, let us be serious. Let us take children who suffer from autism, for example.'***

I flinch, but say nothing. To suggest that anyone 'suffers' from autism, or Down syndrome for that matter, is little more than a projection of our own assumptions upon their lived experience. I smile at the fleeting memory of Temple Grandin saying that if she could snap her fingers and be non-autistic, she would not: 'Autism is part of what I am. (...) I would not want to lose my ability to think visually' (Grandin, 2008). To mention this now could spark off a long debate on individual perceptions of disability, which we do not have time for. Sophia is already half-way through her next sentence: ***'What is wrong with putting them all in the same school with staff who really understand their needs and have developed appropriate provision? They would be in a happy, friendly and absolutely appropriate environment that fosters their development without the pressure of being different.'***

I could tell her about a number of adults with autism who fully support inclusive education in ordinary schools. I remember a keynote speech at a conference many years ago where the speaker, an adult with autism, described her parents' fight to get her in a mainstream school because they were adamant that autism doesn't need to see autism. I pick my words very carefully. *'At first glance the thought of a pressure-free environment may appear seductive. But if you think about it, a pressure-free environment is not a priority for everyone else, is it? Most children are subjected to the pressure of studying tough curriculum subjects and/or taking stressful exams; we justify this on the grounds that they are gaining knowledge and skills that will serve them well in adult life. Why should it be any different for disabled children? What exactly would we be protecting them from, by removing the pressure of being different, and how long do we think we can protect them for?'* She could have chosen to challenge me with the issue of schooling for Deaf children and the need to respect Deaf culture but, at the end of the day, I believe the same argument still holds. Surely, in the twenty-first century, everyone's right to belong in an inclusive society is no longer contested. If we want to live together as adults, we have to go to school together as children. When the London Borough of Newham was redesigning its educational provision in the wake of the 1981 Education Act, it sought an innovative solution to this challenge. Following extensive consultations and deliberations, the Council decided to 'build, develop and preserve Deaf culture within the mainstream' (Jordan and Goodey, 2002): a primary and a secondary school were set up to offer resourced provision for Deaf children, while every child had the choice of attending their local or one of the resourced schools.

### Discussion points

- Do you believe that every child or young person should have the opportunity to spend time with other young people similar to them? If yes, who should be the best judge of which similarities between young people are significant?
- Do you believe that every child or young person has a right to be part of the local community in which they live?
- If you have answered 'yes' to both the above, how would you suggest that both considerations can be honoured?

Sophia has been walking in silence for a brief while, potentially thinking about what I have just asked her. She now takes a deep breath and seems ready to resume our conversation.

***'I'll tell you what we need to protect them from. Bullying. Children can be so cruel, why subject children with special needs to it?'***

I make a mental note to return to her choice of words but, for now, respond to her question directly.

*'Yes, children can be cruel and so can adults, if they think they can get away with it. Are you saying that bullying only happens in mainstream schools and, therefore, those who attend separate special schools are in a bully-free environment?'*

***'How do you mean?'***

I wonder if she has ever set foot in a special school, but don't want to embarrass her by asking. We seem to be dealing with a large number of assumptions here, so I decide to deal with them quickly, one at a time.

*'Well, first of all let me tell you this: researchers have found that young adolescents categorised as having moderate learning difficulties were bullied just as much in either type of school.'* In fact, this research put forward a far more disturbing picture:

A notable emergent theme from the study was the high incidence of 'bullying' that was experienced. Though experienced in both settings, those in special schools experienced far more 'bullying' from children in other mainstream schools and from peers and outsiders in their neighbourhood. (Norwich and Kelly, 2004)

*'But even if we thought that bullying only happens in ordinary schools, are you seriously suggesting that we should send disabled children away rather than tackle the bullying? Is this what you would do about other forms of bullying?'*

***'What are you smiling at?'***

*'Nothing, sorry. The thought of removing children to protect them from bullying could be rather amusing in the context of other forms of prejudice-based bullying.'* I manage to stifle a

little giggle. *‘What do you suggest we do about transphobic bullying, for example? Take transgender children and adults out of ordinary schools and send them somewhere else to keep them safe and protected?’*

***‘OK, I guess you are right. You’d have to tackle the bullying, wouldn’t you?’***

*‘M-hm.’* If we had more time, I would tell her about the recent Ofsted report which says that disabled children are among those who bear the brunt of bullying, even in schools where other forms of prejudice-based bullying are more effectively dealt with. Ofsted says this happens because staff often dismiss offensive language as banter (Ofsted, 2012).

***‘Yes, OK, I’ll give you that. Protection from bullying is not really a reason to turn children with special needs away from schools.’***

Now is as good a time as any.

*‘Actually, Sophia, can we just stop and think for a moment who you might mean when you refer to children with special needs?’* She throws me a baffled look, then takes a few moments to think.

***‘Well I can’t give you a definition, but we both know who we are talking about, don’t we?’***

*‘We may or may not do. The point is, the words that we use serve to shape our thinking, and vice versa. I’m just wondering what we are doing to young people’s sense of identity and what power structures we are supporting, by referring to a potentially undefined group of people as “children with special needs”. Can you try to put into words for me who it is you think we are talking about?’*

Sophia walks on in silence, squinting her eyes and tightening her lips. I am not surprised that she cannot come up with an easy answer. In the words of Baroness Warnock:

The definition, as you probably know, which comes in the 1981 Education Act, is the purest vicious circle you will ever know. A special need is defined as *‘any need that the school needs to take special measures to meet’*. Well, that is not much of a definition but it is the only definition there is. (Warnock, 2005)

The term ‘special educational needs’ has been traced back to the 1960s, long before the Education Act mentioned above (Sakellariadis, 2017) and is not always used in ways which imply within-child deficit. I am reminded of the words of Alan Dyson: ‘Special educational needs are needs that arise within the educational system rather than the individual, and indicate a need for the system to change further in order to accommodate individual differences’ (Dyson, 1990). As I have written elsewhere, the difference between whether a child ‘has’ or ‘experiences’ difficulties is similar to whether a child ‘brings’ or ‘finds’ difficulties at school. To many this might seem like a futile word game; to others such differences are of paramount importance, not least because they can have a strong impact on young people’s sense of identity (CSIE staff and associates, 2009).

***‘Look, sorry, I can’t and I am beginning to worry that we are running out of time. Just tell me this: I can see some logic in including disabled children in ordinary schools, but we’ve got a system that works well. It has worked well for years. If it isn’t broken, why fix it?’***

*‘Because it doesn’t serve us well. Not all of us. Disabled adults have been saying for years that being sent to separate special schools leads to adult lives at the margins of society.’* If we had more time, I would add that this, in turn, keeps disabled people invisible, allowing prejudice and discrimination to persist. Disabled students experience numerous barriers to their learning and participation in university life, report that their needs often remain unacknowledged or unmet and that their perspectives are rarely sought or taken account of (Sakellariadis and Bainton, 2018). The absence of disabled people’s voices in debates about education for disabled children has been heavily criticised. Derrick Armstrong says these voices need to be taken seriously because ‘they challenge both the homogeneity of experience and the social relations that have constructed difference as “abnormal”’ (Armstrong, 2003: 116).

***‘So the people who designed this system were wrong?’*** She says this in a quiet voice, which might suggest that her steadfast support for the current system is beginning to waver.

*‘Well, yes and no. For a start, please don’t imagine designers of education systems sat around a drawing board conjuring up the idea of mainstream schools for some and separate special schools for others. Far from it, this dual system is more the product of evolution...’* (on another day I might have said happenstance) *‘...than that of conscious and deliberate planning.’*

***‘What do you mean yes and no?’*** She seems troubled by the suggestion that we have arrived here more by chance than judgement.

*‘Only that it is a system that reflects the moral values of its time. I wrote about this recently. Current ideas about schooling were established over 100 years ago, when disabled people were thought to have no place in mainstream society. Although cultural norms have significantly shifted and disabled people are being increasingly valued as rightful members of our society, current educational practice has yet to embrace these changing attitudes (CSIE staff and associates, 2010). Today’s schools have a moral and legal obligation to promote disability equality and to foster good relations between disabled and non-disabled people (Equality Act, 2010). Inclusion for all is a fundamental human rights question, to which education is called upon to find an answer (Sakellariadis, 2007).’*

***‘But what can we do? We are talking about the need for massive change here. How can we begin to bring that about?’***

*‘We don’t need to begin anything; change is already underway. We simply need to embrace the transformation and use every opportunity to explore our assumptions and reflect on our practice.’* I stop short of referring to a need to address our ‘collective indifference’ (Slee, 2010). *‘We also need to share examples of good practice as widely as possible and remember*

*that where there's a will there's a way.* I remember a recent report on the quality of provision for pupils categorised as having learning difficulties and disabilities, which concluded: 'Effective provision was distributed equally in the mainstream and special schools visited, but there was more good and outstanding provision in resourced mainstream schools than elsewhere' (Ofsted, 2006).

## Case Study

### Emersons Green Primary School

Emersons Green Primary School in South Gloucestershire is a mainstream school with a resource base for pupils with physical and/or visual impairments. Purpose-built and first opened in 2000, the school has been set up so that provision in the resource base (which opened in 2001) forms an integral part of the school, intentionally moving away from earlier models of locating a 'unit' in a particular space of the school building, separate from the mainstream classes. The school's inclusive provision is known and valued in this country and beyond. In March 2020, a team of student teachers from the University of Vermont (in the USA) came for a study visit to learn from the school's inclusive culture and practices.

The school ensures that everyone is welcome and feels valued. Learning is organised in ways which are meaningful and relevant to every learner, while the school ensures that academic, social, physical and other forms of learning are all celebrated. All children are fully included in mainstream classes and in every aspect of school life. In 2018, Ofsted reported: 'The school's inclusive ethos runs through the heart of everything it does. Leaders at all levels are committed to providing the best education for all pupils, no matter what their need. At breaktimes and in lessons, pupils of all abilities and needs work and play alongside each other.'

Situations which another school may have found challenging, if not impossible, here appear commonplace and ordinary. I was particularly struck by the way some children's need for regular tube-feeding is seen as an ordinary part of life, which does not stop them from being fully engaged in school activities. Teaching Assistants, trained by a specialist feeding nurse, carry out tube-feeding in class or wherever the child may be, for example in assembly or on a school trip, ensuring children continue to be fully included in all aspects of school life. This also extends to how learning is supported, for example through specialist technology, braille or multi-sensory learning using bespoke resources.

***'That makes perfect sense, thanks. Are there any resources that you would recommend?'***

We have now reached the station and are walking towards the platform. Are there more resources I would recommend? I certainly know of some excellent resources (Alderson, 1999; Booth and Ainscow, 2011; CSIE staff and associates, 2016; DfES and DRC, 2006; Hayes, 2004; Pearpoint et al., 1992; Tashie et al., 2006) but I hesitate to go through them now.

*'At the danger of sounding too simplistic, you don't need great big manuals lining your shelves. Developing inclusive education is not so much about what you do, as about how you do it. We are talking about a process, not a method.'*

**'What a wonderful note to finish our conversation on.'** Sophia stops by the station entrance and turns to bid me farewell. We both understand the need to bring our conversation to an abrupt close; I wish her a constructive journey, the editors check her ticket and she is on her way. My trusted writing partner, albeit a figment of my imagination, has served her purpose. No doubt she will be conjured up again when I next choose to write something as a dialogue, attempting to be both scholarly and engaging. Walking away, I try to remember something I recently wrote. The words come to me and I recount them with significant trepidation, lest they get misconstrued as unappreciative of the effort, dedication and well-meaning of special school staff. They should not be.

[We look] forward to the day when our society collectively and unanimously looks back in disbelief at the time when a small minority of young people were routinely ostracised from their local communities, in the name of their own good. (CSIE, 2010)

## Summary

Disabled adults and their allies know that children who are sent to separate special schools often end up living adult lives at the margins of society. They are clear that, if we are to live our lives together in an inclusive society, disabled children should be included in ordinary schools; all children should be encouraged to learn and develop alongside their siblings, friends and potential friends from the local community.

Others maintain that special schools are needed, on the grounds that they offer specialised provision not available in ordinary schools and provide a better environment for the pupils who attend them. Instances where inclusion has been insufficiently resourced and/or poorly managed are sometimes cited as examples to support this claim.

These positions are not mutually exclusive. The former represents a human rights position, the latter a partial reflection on existing practice. The fact remains that including disabled children in ordinary schools is possible and can benefit everyone. If real choice is to be extended to all parents, as current and previous UK governments have pledged, the choice of mainstream has to be made available to everyone. I have written

elsewhere that promising choice without developing capacity in mainstream schools to include disabled children, is like issuing a ticket and keeping the door locked (Sakellariadis, 2014). Developing capacity in ordinary schools will depend, among other things, on a national strategy for inclusion and on the extent to which educators embrace the moral imperative to transform education.

## Further reading

### Personal narratives

Chib, M. (2011) *One Little Finger*. London: Sage.

This is the autobiography of Malini Chib, a personal friend and an amazing woman who is a disability rights activist. Malini has cerebral palsy and a Master's degree in Gender Studies. She wrote this book over the course of two years, typing with one finger.

Higashida, N. (2013) *The Reason I Jump*. London: Sceptre Books.

Higashida, N. (2018) *Fall Down 7 Times Get up 8*. London: Sceptre Books.

Remarkable testaments of a young person presenting his personal experience of having autism.

### Professional experiences

Hansen, J., Leyden, G., Bunch, G. and Pearpoint, J. (2006) *Each Belongs: The Remarkable Story of the First School System to Move to Inclusion* Toronto: Inclusion Press.

The story of one local authority in Canada, which chose to close all of its special schools in 1969 and has been educating all children and young people in ordinary schools ever since.

Hart, S., Dixon, A., Drummond, M.J. and McIntyre, D. (2004) *Learning Without Limits*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Accessible and engaging, this book describes how a group of teachers uncomfortable with ideas of fixed ability developed teaching practices which avoid labelling by perceived ability.

Thomas, G., Walker, D. and Webb, J. (1998) *The Making of the Inclusive School*. London: Routledge.

Like other books telling similar stories (e.g. Jupp, 1992), this book explores philosophical arguments and presents the story of how a special school in south-west England transformed itself into an inclusive service, transferring all its pupils to ordinary local schools.

West, D. (2012) *Signs of Hope: Deafhearing Family Life*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

A creative and engaging representation of stories resisting conventional discourses of deafness.

## Theoretical perspectives

Goodley D., Hughes B. and Davis L. (2012) *Disability and Social Theory: New Developments and Directions*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

A detailed exploration of disability from a range of theoretical perspectives.

Rieser, R. (2000) 'Disability discrimination, the final frontier; disablement, history and liberation', in M. Cole (ed.), *Education, Equality and Human Rights: Issues of Gender, 'Race', Sexuality, Special Needs and Social Class*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

In this chapter, Richard Rieser clearly explains the medical and social models of disability and explores ethical, political, social and educational challenges of inclusive education for all.

Rustemier, S. (2002) *Social and Educational Justice: The Human Rights Framework for Inclusion*. Bristol: Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education.

This report articulates the human rights case for including disabled learners in ordinary schools and challenges traditional assumptions sustaining segregation.

Shakespeare, T. (2014) *Disability Rights and Wrongs Revisited*. Abingdon: Routledge.

This book offers an overview of the field of disability studies and proposes new research agendas.

## Evidence on inclusive education

Alana Institute (2016) *A Summary of the Evidence on Inclusive Education*.

European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2018) *Evidence of the Link Between Inclusive Education and Social Inclusion: A Review of the Literature* (S. Symeonidou, ed.).

## Useful websites

[www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/send-programme](http://www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/send-programme) The Anti-Bullying Alliance works to stop bullying and create safe environments for all children and young people. Part of its website is dedicated to reducing bullying for disabled children and young people and those identified as having special educational needs; it includes links to free resources and online training for professionals.

[www.csie.org.uk](http://www.csie.org.uk) The Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education (CSIE) is a national charity, founded in 1982, working to advance equality and eliminate discrimination in education. The Centre offers information and awareness-raising seminars; provides training and consultancy nationally and internationally; and produces a wide range of resources for schools, local authorities, parents and students, including student teachers.

[www.worldofinclusion.com](http://www.worldofinclusion.com) World of Inclusion is a consultancy that provides advice, resources and training in the UK and around the world to develop equality for disabled people especially in education.

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