My concerns about the issues of educational separation, segregation, selection and inclusion started early. At age seven my friend with a limp suddenly disappeared with dark rumours that he had been sent to the ‘daft’ school, as the local special school was known in the 1940s. At 11 I was separated from another friend when (after extra coaching) I passed an exam for a grammar school and she went to a secondary modern, and at 13 another boy I knew stopped talking to me after he went to a ‘public’ school. It all became clearer when I studied for a sociology degree and began to realise the important role education played in the reproduction of social inequalities, and the ways in which restricting access to some kinds of education acted as a dominant form of social exclusion.

In my first job as a social worker in Canada I learned about exclusion and ethnicity as I tried to find foster homes for ‘mixed race’ children. Returning to teach in England I taught ‘remedial children’, noting that those thus labelled were predominantly boys from working-class homes, and wondered what the difference was between these boys and those removed to special schools. I taught in primary schools between producing my own children, and a personal grief which raised my awareness, as they say, came when I lost a pregnancy, to be comforted by a nurse with ‘well, its all for the best, it would have been … you know, not quite right.’

In 1970, the year all children were finally brought into the education system, I began teaching in higher education, trying to bring into teacher education courses understanding of what now would be called inclusive education. I later worked with sociology professor John Rex on a study of Black and Asian households in Birmingham (1979), at the same time working on my own PhD, and using sociological insights to try to understand why a majority of children placed in special schools were from working-class and/or Black families and relegated to the ‘category of handicap’ known as ‘educationally subnormal’ (1981). By 1980 I had started a book which I hoped would introduce sociological perspectives properly into the area of special education (1982). The field was dominated at that time by medical, psychological and administrative perspectives and by educational practice based on the belief that it was acceptable for children to be categorised out of mainstream education as (according to the socially constructed labels of that time) defective, disturbed, disabled or less able.

I asked why education systems in modern societies had developed subsystems for those excluded as special or, later, as having special needs, and pointed out that occupational success, social mobility, privilege and advancement are legitimated by educational qualifications. To be categorised out of mainstream education represented the ultimate non-achievement in terms of ordinary educational goals. Answers to this question centred round the understanding that any form of special education or exclusion is as much to do with the political economy and class structures of the society as with the ‘benevolent humanitarianism’ of those who undoubtedly wish to help young people with difficulties.

In an article written in 1985 and reprinted several times (1989) I wrote about the ‘Expansion of special education’ in terms which, despite recent developments, I think still hold good. I wrote that in changed forms and rationalised by changing ideologies – notably the ideology of special needs – the exclusion of the difficult, the disaffected, the troubled and troublesome from the kinds of education considered important will continue. A labour market that took in unskilled special school leavers and low attainers has disappeared, and mainstream education cannot deal...
with the increasing numbers of young people unable or unwilling to develop their ‘human capital’ in a system where academic and technological qualifications reign supreme. I also wrote that there would be an expansion in numbers of professionals with their own vested interests, to deal with new categories of special needs, who would seek to expand their own areas of expertise; that conflicts rather than smooth teamwork were to be expected; and that most parents were likely to get the familiar raw deal as far as information and involvement were concerned.

The response to a developing sociology of special education – other books were produced with my colleague Len Barton and later David Galloway, Derrick Armstrong and Roger Slee – was pleasantly surprising. I had many letters and comments from practitioners as well as academics in the UK, USA, European countries, Australia, India and others, asserting that they had begun to look carefully at their own practice and the beliefs and values underpinning what they did in classrooms, schools and consulting rooms. Educational civil servants also read the books! In limited academic terms A Sociology of Special Education became a best seller and for a while was the most cited text on special education internationally. The ideas also attracted disagreement and occasionally abuse. Mary Warnock, in a review of the book, designated me as a neo-Marxist who had unfolded a ‘horribly fascinating alternative tale’ about special education! And I was, after all, just another person with vested interests.

However, the relationships between developments in the wider education system, and the exclusion of more children from mainstream, either in segregated or integrated settings, have not been further studied in much detail from sociological perspectives, although there have been a few excellent studies (see, for example, Vlachou, 1997). Neither has the rhetoric of inclusion and inclusive education, now a developing global ideology, been subject to much sociological scrutiny. In my view, it seems clear that creating competitive markets in education based on parental ‘choice’ of schools and fuelled by league tables and competition for resources, is totally incompatible with developing an inclusive education system. In England there is now a divided and divisive school system, with middle-class and aspirant parents avoiding schools catering for children with special educational needs, and some schools finding ways of rejecting socially and educationally vulnerable children. At the same time, raised awareness among knowledgeable parents and students, of the possibility of extra resources for those ‘special’ labels which do not carry a stigma, has led to an increase in demands for resources, to appeals, and in some cases, litigation. Much of the political focus on those labelled disabled or special continues to be linked to old economic questions about what to do with citizens who cannot be economically productive, and also to old questions about the social control of lower-class disaffected young people.

I have continued to try to make sociological sense of developments in both ‘special’ and the wider education system, and of the relationship of education to society and the economy (2001). I have held Chairs in Education at the Universities of Lancaster, Swansea, and Goldsmiths College, London, and despite the inevitable moves into management which promotion brings, have tried to carry on with research, teaching, and supervision of research students. I am pleased to have examined nearly 90 PhD studies over the past 15 years, many of them in the area of special and inclusive education and many produced and later published by those now well-known for their work in the area. I have also made visits to developing countries where the notions of inclusive education are performed very different from developed countries, but from whom we have much to learn.

Taking a critical sociological perspective on special, inclusive or exclusive education does not mean disconnecting from practical work to try to ameliorate social and educational inequalities. It does, however, carry a responsibility to say clearly that current contradictory policies will not achieve stated goals of raised educational standards for all, social inclusion or social justice.

References


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