Educational inclusion in England: origins, perspectives and current directions

FRASER LAUCHLAN and SUSAN GREIG

In this paper we examine different aspects of the inclusion debate, including how it has been shaped by the political context in England over the past 30 years. We then give consideration to the key argument that has dominated the inclusion agenda over the last decade: should effective inclusion be considered only as placement in mainstream school settings, or can one consider inclusion in a specialist placement as successful? Research studies examining the views of children, parents and teaching staff are also discussed. Consideration is given as to whether a ‘universalist’ view of inclusion (in which special schools should not be offered) is one that is feasible and desirable. The key arguments highlighted include those relating to ‘quality’ in education, academic and social inclusion, human rights, parental choice and teachers’ attitudes and skills. The role of some professional groups in supporting inclusion, such as educational psychologists (EPs) and Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCos), is also examined.

Key words: England, SEN, inclusion policy, inclusive education.
Introduction

There are different opinions regarding the definition of inclusion in education. Much has been written in recent times about its varying definitions, including the differences between inclusion and integration, the latter being a term widely used in the 1980s and 90s (Norwich, 2012). It is not the purpose of this article to search for an exact definition. While there is no precise consensus, most people would probably agree approximately on what they mean by inclusion. It is generally taken to mean that children and young people are included both socially and educationally in an environment where they feel welcomed and where they can thrive and progress. Inclusion is inextricably linked to legislation and policy development. A further significant aspect of educational inclusion is the importance of placement: in other words, should inclusion always be regarded as relating to attendance or otherwise at a mainstream school, or is it possible for children with special educational needs (SEN) to feel and be included while attending a special school? Similarly, is it possible for children with SEN to feel and be excluded while attending a mainstream school?

Cigman (2007) described two different perspectives toward inclusion in education. The first is that of ‘moderates’, who have a wider view of what inclusion means, including the use of special schools for a number of children who require it; ‘universalists’, on the other hand, view the use of special schools as undermining a policy of full inclusion for all, believing that they should not be used at all. It could be argued that ‘universalists’ have a more idealistic and optimistic view of what can be accomplished with inclusion, while ‘moderates’ are perhaps more pessimistic and/or realistic about the possibilities that a policy of inclusion can achieve. While this may be a useful distinction to make, the reality of inclusion in England is, of course, somewhat more complicated than this.

We can say this is the case at least in England, and also in a number of other countries. However, it is also true that this distinction has no meaning in other national settings. Consider the case of Italy, where, in stark contrast to England, the distinction between ‘moderates’ and ‘universalists’ has no relevance. Indeed, Italy could be considered one of the pioneers of inclusive education since it has pursued a model of ‘full inclusion’ for more than 40 years, with policies and legislation dating back to the 1970s. Its policy of closing all special schools in order to include all children with special needs within mainstream schools was
described as ‘truly revolutionary’ (Vitello, 1991). However, the reality in Italy is that such a policy of full inclusion has never been as straightforward and trouble-free as ‘universalists’ might want to think. Problems of resourcing, providing quality teacher training and development, availability of sufficiently adapted materials and a lack of research demonstrating the potential benefits (both social and educational) of inclusion have all resulted in a situation in which many teachers in Italy have begun to question whether the policy of full inclusion is workable (Lauchlan and Fadda, 2012).

A common complaint among teaching staff, not only in England and Italy but in many other countries too, is the lack of resources that are invested in supporting inclusion in mainstream schools (Boyle and Topping, 2012). However, as Topping (2012) argues, this common complaint is rarely followed up by providing clarity about the nature of the resources required, and indeed why they are needed at all. As Topping states, ‘pumping the wrong type of resources into a mainstream environment without a specific action plan may worsen the situation rather than improve it’ (p. 17). This raises questions about whether the ‘inclusion debate’ is only about resources (or lack of them), rather than about any underlying beliefs about whether it is better to include pupils with SEN in mainstream settings or to promote segregated provision, which can offer a more targeted curriculum based on the specific needs presented. Prior to considering such questions in this article, we shall now consider the background to the legislative and political context in which policy on inclusion in England has developed over the past 35 years.

**Legislative and political context**

Inclusive education in England does not occur in a political or conceptual vacuum: attitudes and practices regarding inclusion have long reflected the prevailing goals, values and understandings embedded in the legislation of the time (Barton and Tomlinson, 1984). A hugely significant development in the legislative context regarding inclusion in the UK was the publication of the Warnock Report (DES, 1978). Its recommendations subsequently informed the content of the 1981 Education Act: both were to provide the impetus for a significant shift in attitudes toward inclusion. The 1981 Act resulted in a move from special education to a more all-encompassing idea of SENs. Within this there was a noted departure in thinking about ‘integration’, moving toward ‘inclusion’, the latter being about
adaptations in provision to meet the needs of children. Thus, the 1981 legislation represented a shift away from a de facto assumption that certain needs would automatically be met in separate, special school settings; instead, it proposed a more inclusive model of including children with particular individualised needs in mainstream settings. In essence, the legislation was an attempt to promote a more positive, inclusive view of children and young people with SEN. The 1981 Act marked the advent of the idea that specialist provision should, where possible, be made available in mainstream schools.

The 1997 Green Paper *Excellence for all Children* (DfEE, 1997) and the 2001 Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA; DfES, 2001a) were intended to facilitate a greater commitment toward more effective inclusion of children with SENs within mainstream education by all those stakeholders who were integrally involved in their education, as well as indicating that all professionals have a part to play. The SENDA made it illegal to discriminate against pupils because of their SEN, which reinforced the notion that ‘all teachers are teachers of SEN’. This was extended further by the *Every Child Matters* (ECM) legislation in 2004 (DfES, 2004a). As a result of the implementation of ECM, there were considerable changes in the inclusive practices of many groups of professionals working in SEN (such as SENCos, educational psychologists and others). One of the biggest changes was an increased focus on working in a multi-agency context, functioning as part of integrated children’s services, and with an emphasis on the whole-community context rather than mostly being school-based. However, this legislation, introduced by the Labour government of the day, has not been developed further by the current Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition administration. In fact, ECM is not now the explicit statutory policy that local councils work within.

Following 30 years of cross-party movement toward inclusion, a change of government in 2010 appeared to some to result in a move in the other direction (Norwich, 2012). The Conservative Party had already made a commitment in their education policies to endorse special school provision before they came to power as part of the coalition government. Their 2011 Green Paper (DfE, 2011) outlined plans to ‘remove the bias towards inclusion’ (p. 5) by providing parents with a greater choice of schools, including special schools. Indeed, this can be traced even further back, to 2007, when a Conservative Party-sponsored Commission on Special Needs in Education (Conservative Party, 2007) stated that inclusion was ‘a failed ideology’ and that
‘parents have reported the benefits of a transfer to a special school in which their child’s needs can be properly catered for. There is clear evidence that many of these children make far greater progress and are much happier in the sheltered and expert environment of a special school’ (p. 12).

The new SEN Code of Practice, published in 2014, has endorsed this position.

The Code of Practice, originally published in 1994 (DfE, 1994) and revised in 2001 (DfES, 2001b) and again in 2014 (DfE, 2014), lays out guidance for the assessment and intervention for children with SEN. It remains a fundamentally important practice document regarding inclusion policy in England. The most significant recent changes in the Code include the extension of the age range to be covered from 0 to 25 years, ‘a clearer focus on the views of children and young people and on their role in decision-making’ (p. 14), closer co-operation between education, health services and social care (which does, in fact, more clearly reflect the previous ECM legislation) and ‘a greater focus on support that enables those with SEN to succeed in their education and make a successful transition to adulthood’ (p. 14). The document is explicit in its support of the continued use of special schools and for parents to have the right to choose:

‘Special schools, special post-16 institutions and specialist colleges all have an important role in providing for children and young people with SEN . . . Alongside the general presumption of mainstream education, parents of children with an Education, Health and Care plan and young people with such a plan have the right to seek a place at a special school, special post-16 institution or specialist college’ (DfE, 2014, p. 28).

It has been argued that the intention in this new Code of Practice and the planning documents for the current SEN reforms, which refer to ‘children and young people who are disabled or who have SEN’, is to narrow the scope of the SEN category rather than broaden it (Cline et al., 2014).

**Perspectives and arguments for and against a ‘universalist’ view of inclusion**

Warnock (2005) rejected the idea that inclusion is all about educating children all ‘under the same roof’. Instead, she argued, it is more important to ensure that all
children are engaged in a common educational experience and are learning and developing to the best of their ability, regardless of where that may be. In other words, it could be said that she is prioritising engagement in learning over placement (Norwich, 2012), a position that has been shared by others, for example in the case of pupils experiencing social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (Cooper and Jacobs, 2011). Extending this argument, some researchers have sought to demonstrate that teachers regard the withdrawal of pupils with SEN from the mainstream classroom to a separate setting within the same school as ‘inclusion’, since it allows these pupils to engage in learning the same curriculum as the other children. This would perhaps not be possible if they were to remain in the mainstream class with a higher teacher : pupil ratio and a resultant lower level of support (Norwich, 2008). Clearly such arguments reflect a ‘moderate’ position on inclusion, but it is perhaps difficult to judge whether or not they are reflective of attitudes among the key participants. Frederickson and Cline (2009) stated that the key stakeholders in education are children, parents and schools. The arguments from each stakeholder’s perspective are now examined.

**Children’s perspectives**

One way to consider a child’s perspective of inclusion is from a human rights position (Farrell, 2000). The British Council of Disabled People (BCODP, 2005) believes that all children with SEN must be supported in mainstream schools; not to do so is discrimination and hence an infringement of their human rights. Farrell (2000) disagrees with this view, however, seeing it as an oversimplification of the issue. He believes that the most important right is for a child to experience the highest quality education possible, wherever that may be. He does, however, admit that there are many difficulties involved in deciding what is the best education possible. From a methodological point of view, it is problematic to compare education in the mainstream with education in special schools as it is impossible to have a matched control group and because the settings vary in many ways. Advocates of the human rights position argue that, as inclusion is a basic human right, research investigating this issue is unnecessary and unethical.

Despite these arguments, it is nevertheless important to consider whether there is any research evidence either way. Since it is an undeniable fact that special schools do exist in England, it is essential that any data which sheds light on whether or not they are effective should be considered (albeit with the understanding that there may be different views on what is considered ‘effectiveness’);
conversely, it is of equal importance to ascertain an evidence base which indicates the benefits of pupils with SEN being placed in mainstream settings. It is nevertheless difficult to disagree with Farrell (2000) that the priority is to provide all children with a high-quality education, regardless of where that may be. Moreover, in considering the research evidence we are reminded of Gibb et al.’s (2007) argument that both academic and social inclusion are important elements of the child’s experience.

Ruijs and Peetsma (2009) reviewed existing evidence on the effects of inclusion of children with mild to moderate SEN into mainstream schools on their academic attainment. They found that most studies indicated results that were neutral or slightly positive. While they concluded that these results give ‘sufficient support’ (p. 78) to inclusion in mainstream schools, this would appear to be a somewhat optimistic conclusion given the evidence (or lack of it) that is presented in their article. Thomas and Loxley (2007) stated there is no evidence that special schools are more effective than mainstream schools. Conversely, Lindsay’s review (2007) found little evidence to suggest that inclusion in mainstream provision has any positive effects. Lindsay explores the difficulties inherent in assessing the effectiveness of inclusion, summarising them as including problems of defining the key terms involved and of demonstrating what inclusion ‘looks like’ in practice.

It is important to look at other possible measures of quality. Norwich and Kelly (2004) interviewed mainstream pupils with Statements, which were introduced after the 1981 Act as a means of assessing need in order to determine the level and type of intervention. They reported that these pupils received more help with their learning from teaching assistants than from teachers. Allan and Brown (2001) described the situation of children with SEN in mainstream schools having a teaching assistant ‘velcroed’ (meaning ‘attached’) to them as an undesirable situation (p. 203), because of the possibility that some pupils could become overly dependent on their teaching assistants. In their view, this can lead to reduced opportunities for pupils with SEN to experience independence and achieve their own success, thus ultimately compromising the quality of their education.

Pupils also reveal a positive perception of special schools (Allan and Brown, 2001). According to the pupils in Allan and Brown’s study, the overall pupil experience was positive, as illustrated by their achievements, progress and independence. These pupils were reported as feeling that they had access to a broad
and balanced curriculum with plenty of variety in special schools. When comparing being at a special school to attending a mainstream school, one pupil said ‘I like it here much better’ and another stated: ‘the teachers here treat you much better’ (p. 204).

In respect of the social effects of inclusion, the evidence seems to be much less clear. Farrell (2000) argues that mainstream pupils accept children with SEN without difficulty, but a review by Ruijs and Peetsma (2009) was somewhat inconclusive on this matter. Qualitative evidence appears to suggest their acceptance and social inclusion within school, but exclusion and prejudice outside of it. In Allan and Brown’s (2001) study, one child from a special school stated that in school ‘we help each other’ and another that ‘it’s like one big family’ (p. 204). A study by Norwich and Kelly (2004), on the other hand, found evidence of bullying outside school, with one pupil from a special school talking about ‘people out of school calling you names if, cause, if they find out about your school and being nasty to you’ (p. 55). In addition, pupils with SEN in mainstream schools reported significantly less bullying outside of school than pupils in special schools in similar situations, although it is accepted in Norwich and Kelly’s study that the needs of the pupils in the special schools may have been more visible or pronounced, making them a more obvious bullying target.

Frederickson and Cline (2009) view social and academic inclusion as potentially at odds with one another. They regard children with SEN in mainstream classes as being less likely to have access to the specialist assistance that will help them achieve their academic potential. In contrast, they suggest that if they are taught in special schools then they may feel socially excluded. This presents a difficult dilemma for many pupils and their parents when deciding whether the pupil should attend a special or a mainstream school.

Overall it would seem that evidence about the effectiveness of inclusion is largely inconclusive; certainly, further systematic research is needed. It is our view that it would be short-sighted and rather disingenuous not to carry out research into this area on the grounds that ‘inclusion’ is an issue principally of human rights.

**Parents’ perspectives**

As mentioned previously, parental choice is enshrined in the new *Code of Practice*, whereby the offer of both mainstream and special school placement should
be made available for parents (DfE, 2014). This certainly empowers parents, especially when they are able to utilise the advice of SENCOs, educational psychologists and others in informing their decision. In this regard, there is a delicate balance to be struck by those professionals working with the child and his/her parents. The BCODP (2005), for instance, takes what could be considered an extreme position: it believes that parents should not have any such decision to make, since to be educated in a mainstream school is a basic human right. The BCODP also believes that when parents choose a special school it is because they cannot ever imagine their child being included in a mainstream school: their belief is that their child would be in a tiny minority (perhaps even alone) and subjected to a negative social experience including bullying, stigmatisation and social isolation. According to the BCODP, there is a gridlock that needs to be broken; if more children with SEN were included in mainstream schools, then parents would perhaps have more confidence in choosing such a school as an option. The BCODP argues that many parents do not have the confidence to make that choice, in part due to a lack of evidence of children with SEN having a positive educational and social experience in mainstream settings.

In a study of parents who had been through SEN tribunal proceedings (Runswick-Cole, 2008), parents were determined to exercise their right to choose, with some parents advocating for a mainstream place and others advocating for a special school place for their children. Among the parents interviewed, Runswick-Cole found that some had originally wanted placement in a mainstream school but then changed their mind after a mainstream placement was attempted and was deemed to have failed. Runswick-Cole summarised: ‘it seems that parents have to give up on their initial hopes for a mainstream education for their children because of the effective exclusion that their children experienced within mainstream settings’ (2008, p. 178).

It is unclear whether parents really have a genuine choice in all situations they encounter. Reindal (2010, p. 2) calls special schools a ‘necessary evil’ because of the lack of ability of mainstream schools to cater for the needs of every child. Farrell (2000) adopts a different viewpoint, indicating that if all special schools were to close, this would remove a parent’s right to choose. In research reported by Zigler and Hall (1995), it was found that parents who opt for special schools were sometimes made to feel guilty and incompetent by professionals. What is apparent is the continued existence of special schools, while the ‘utopia’ of full inclusion has failed to materialise.
School staff’s perspectives

In the USA, Idol (2006) interviewed teachers from elementary and secondary schools and found them to have very positive attitudes toward inclusion: 20% of the participants wanted more help with adapting the curriculum but the rest said they felt very skilled in the teaching of pupils with SEN. One must consider, however, the social desirability bias of asking teachers directly in an interview context about their views on inclusion and how skilled they feel at their job, especially with a topic as sensitive as that of inclusion. In England, Ellis et al. (2008) found that, while teachers in principle were positively disposed to inclusion, they saw a range of challenges at a practical level in implementing this approach. More recent research by Boyle et al. (2013) indicated yet more positive perspectives toward inclusion among 391 secondary school teachers in a local authority in Scotland. The participants were taken from 25 different schools: 16 of these schools were mainstream secondary, while the others were from specialist provisions. Generally attitudes were positive regarding inclusion, with significantly more positive attitudes among female staff and those who were newly qualified. Interestingly, there was a significant decrease in positive attitudes among qualified teachers in the years immediately subsequent to their completion of a first year in teaching. The latter study did not directly address the question of whether or not teachers felt there was a role for special schools in an inclusive education system.

Croll (2001) asked 46 headteachers and 299 classroom teachers working in mainstream primary schools about their views toward inclusion using survey methodology. All of the headteachers and 98% of the teachers believed there was still a role for special schools. In addition, over half of the headteachers and one third of the teachers thought that more children should be attending them. These results may be surprising, even though the research was conducted more than ten years ago. The respondents’ views presented in the Croll study suggested that they were less inclusive than those gathered in the studies by Idol (2006) and Boyle et al. (2013). This difference could be due to the nature of the research methods used: it may have been easier for participants to be honest in a survey than in an interview. On the other hand, it may be indicative of the legislation which was introduced in between the two studies: the SENDA (DfES, 2001a) made it illegal to discriminate against pupils because of their SEN, and it is entirely possible that this may have influenced the teachers’ responses in these later studies. Another possible interpretation of the results is that in the time between the two studies, the SEN Code of Practice (DfES,
2001b) was updated and *Removing Barriers to Achievement* (DfES, 2004b) was produced, both providing advice about the ‘how’ of inclusion. This may have given teachers more confidence regarding the inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools. Meanwhile, it is most certainly the case that teachers appear more positive about the inclusion of some pupils with certain SENs rather than others. Many pupils who experience ‘emotional and behavioural difficulties’, for instance, are regarded as problematic cases when it comes to inclusion (Thomas and Loxley, 2007).

Increasing demands are placed on teachers in England, in part amplified as a result of external scrutiny by OFSTED. Teachers face a range of contemporary challenges such as large class sizes, the need to cater for students from increasingly diverse backgrounds, diverse social problems and the challenging behaviour of a proportion of the school population. Teaching pupils with SEN who were previously taught in segregated settings is a further demand placed on them. Westwood and Graham (2003) asked teachers via a questionnaire about the obstacles to inclusion in their classrooms. Lack of time was cited as the most common obstacle, followed by the need for constant close supervision of the student while attempting to balance their responses to the needs of the child with those of the rest of the class.

It would appear obvious that teachers need resources and support if they are to cater for the learning needs of all children (DCSF, 2008). However, as has been stated, it is crucial that sufficient consideration is given to how such resources are to be allocated, along with a specific action plan on what to do with them once they have been acquired.

**Conclusion**

‘Universalists’ would argue that the full inclusion of all children in mainstream schools is an ideal scenario (thus reflecting the society that we would like to be part of). However, the pathway to this state has not been straightforward. There have been some problems in appropriately resourcing the mainstream inclusion of some students with SEN in order to make it successful. This has resulted in some parents still choosing to send their children to a special school setting. Parents and children may also argue that their needs are better met by provision that can offer a specific, targeted programme and where they can be free from bullying and
social exclusion. They might even argue that there is not enough evidence that mainstream schools provide a fully effective inclusive environment for all pupils with opportunities for high-quality learning experiences, both social and academic. Even those children with SEN who attend mainstream schools can in a very real sense be ‘excluded’ when teachers make use of withdrawal ‘units’, streaming or within-class grouping. Such partial segregation nevertheless constitutes a way of trying to offer a curriculum that is suited to the individual needs of a child.

It appears likely that special schools will be needed in England for some time to come. It appears equally likely that discussions – often polarised and driven by fixed beliefs – about the efficacy of inclusive provision will continue in parallel. Meanwhile, on the ground, practitioners have to try to make sense of competing ideologies in arriving at a way of working which impacts positively on all learners.

References


BCODP. (2005) British Council of Disabled People’s Response to the Education and Skills Select Committee on Children with SEN.


DfES. (2001a) *Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENA)*. London: HMSO.


**Correspondence**

Fraser Lauchlan
University of Strathclyde, School of Psychological Sciences and Health
Graham Hills Building
40 George Street
Glasgow
G1 1XQ

Susan Greig
South Tyneside Educational Psychology Service
South Tyneside Council, Town Hall & Civic Offices
Westoe Road
South Shields
Tyne & Wear
NE33 2RL
Copyright of Support for Learning is the property of Wiley-Blackwell and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.