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Citation: Atkins, Liz (2012) Tom, Ollie and Emily: Reflections on inclusion as an exclusive experience. *Race Equality Teaching*, 31 (1). pp. 27-30. ISSN 1478-8551

Published by: Trentham Books

URL: http://www.trentham-books.co.uk/acatalog/Race_Equa... <http://www.trentham-books.co.uk/acatalog/Race_Equality_Teaching.html>

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Introduction

It is well recognised that individuals who belong to non-dominant or marginalised groups, such as those with disabilities or those from minority ethnic groups, are subject to various forms of overt and covert discrimination in their daily lives and in their interactions with organisations, institutions and broader structures such as the education system. This paper explores the experiences of three young people who formed part of a small scale study exploring young people's experience of inclusion in education. The young people had varying degrees of physical disability and the evidence from the study suggests that some of the strategies put in place to facilitate the inclusion of young people in education can, conversely, result in exclusive experiences for the individual(s) concerned.

Inclusion in education has become big business internationally over the past two decades and is enshrined in law in many countries including those making up the United Kingdom. Much has been published on the desirability of inclusion in education, as a means of working towards social justice, as well as on what may or may not be described as 'good practice' in terms of inclusion. This body of work encompasses all stages of education, and much of it is predicated on the assumption that inclusion, in terms of strategies such as addressing individual needs in the classroom, is a 'good thing'. That does not mean that I am making an argument against inclusive practice: rather, my concern is with the uncritical use of inclusive policies and practices which can, and often do, have unintended and often un-noticed consequences for the young person being 'included'. Over time, we have become so comfortable with the concept of inclusion (and, in some organisations, comfortable with the belief that inclusion is 'successful') that it has evolved into a notion that we have largely ceased to question, in terms of both the discourse and the practice surrounding it. Instead, as Graham and Slee (2008: 277) have suggested, we are increasingly using inclusive education as a means for 'explaining and protecting the status quo' rather than as a means for developing more radical and democratic forms of education. In other words, inclusive education is predicated on taken-for-granted assumptions about the Other as well as on a set of beliefs about the relative effectiveness of strategies for inclusion. Secure in the knowledge that we are 'doing' inclusion, as practitioners we often fail to question or even consider these critical issues. And yet, if as education practitioners our aim is to make social justice, then we have a *responsibility* to explore and to problematise such issues. Only by doing this can we try to understand what is *really* happening in the educational lives of young people who experience different forms of exclusion and marginalisation in the context of their positioning within a homogenised and deficit model of disability.

Methodology

This paper draws on three case studies to illustrate the ways in which young people with different abilities have experienced different degrees of exclusion in the context of the inclusive practice of the institution at which they were students. The small scale qualitative study in which these young people participated was developed as a pilot for a more extensive study. It utilised a snowball sampling method and data were collected online with the young people initially responding to a series of open questions. One of the young people profiled here later participated in a telephone interview. All the young

people who participated did so voluntarily after hearing about the study from a friend. Two of those included in this paper reported on their experiences of Further Education and one of his experiences of Higher Education. Consistent with the ethical framework for the study, all participants and organisations have been anonymised in this paper. Data were analysed using a thematic approach which explored responses related specifically to instances of inclusion and exclusion.

The following stories are about Tom, Ollie and Emily. All three define themselves as disabled, and all three have required some degree of learning support throughout their educational careers.

Ollie and Emily

Emily is a wheelchair user as a consequence of post-meningitis neuropathy. She is also diabetic. Ollie has a rare degenerative and life-limiting condition akin to muscular dystrophy and is also a wheelchair user. Both attended a specialist school for children with disabilities before moving on to Isaac Newton Further Education College. The college has a long history of partnership with local schools, including those categorised as 'Special Schools', and prides itself on its inclusive approach to education. Although Emily stated that she did not feel excluded in any way during her education, she did note that 'I wasn't very good at socialising with able-bodied students at Newton College' implying some degree of social separation between those young people with obvious disabilities and those without. Although Ollie had less difficulty socially, and has a wide circle of friends including both 'disabled' and 'able-bodied', he had his own source of irritation: '**why**, when everything was so inclusive in the classroom, did they make all the disabled kids sit together at lunchtime?! You couldn't move around and talk to your friends'.

Tom

Tom is 23. He has a severe form of cerebral palsy and uses an electric wheelchair; he requires the support of a 24/7 carer and uses a motability vehicle. He is also currently a student at a UK university where he is studying for an undergraduate degree. The University, similarly to the schools that Tom previously attended, has clearly made considerable efforts to enable him to access his degree programme. Despite this, Tom feels socially excluded at university, and recounts stories of both subtle and unsubtle forms of exclusion. For example, he describes feeling excluded because, as a wheelchair user, 'you can't sit with mates in class because the lecture halls are like cinemas and stepped'. Similarly, Tom's social interactions are hampered because 'between lectures I have to go accessible way which isn't always the main route', thus separating him from a majority of his peers. The solution to these difficulties is obvious as far as he is concerned: '[organisations should make] disability access the main focus rather than a spin off'. In addition to these challenges, which Tom uses as examples of ways in which he feels excluded by his university, he also describes more subtle forms of exclusion. Tom's disabilities mean that he requires a note-taker; he explained that in terms of learning '[I] need help note-taking and revising [and] struggle to write lots'. Whilst the note-taker is clearly an essential support in terms of **inclusion**, Tom noted that 'in group activities my note-taker can get in way of my own interactions', illustrating the way in which some interventions intended to support an individual can be both **inclusive** and **exclusive**.

Social in/exclusion

These 'little stories' reflect tensions between the commitment to inclusion and equality made explicit by the institution concerned, and the experience of the young people. It is worth noting that both Ollie and Emily highlight the importance of social inclusion/exclusion in their lives, something which is also given prominence by Tom in his story. In short spaces of time, such as that when Tom is using the 'accessible route' or sitting apart during lectures, the thread of conversations can change or be lost and group dynamics can shift almost imperceptibly. These changes in a group dynamic effectively leave young people such as Tom, who cannot be present all the time, constantly on the margins of their friendship group. This is significant since, irrespective of the acts of inclusion intended to integrate them into education, what appeared to be most important to these young people was to be socially included in the sense of participating in leisure activities (such as chatting, or having lunch together) with a peer group which included both disabled and non-disabled peers. This suggests that, consistent with earlier research (Atkins, 2009:140) social and leisure activity is forming a significant aspect of identity formation in the lives of these young people as they move towards adulthood and is the aspect of their lives to which they attach the greatest importance. This social aspect of education, which is often overlooked, is of considerable importance to young people both with and without disabilities. However, the challenges of overcoming different degrees of social exclusion faced by disabled young people imply that the social aspects of education may assume proportionately greater significance for them than their non-disabled peers as they make their transition to adulthood. A further implication of this would be that a failure to see beyond the classroom in terms of inclusion will necessarily result in exclusionary practices such as those described by Emily and Ollie and may engender greater degrees of social exclusion for other young people in similar circumstances.

Within the classroom, a failure to acknowledge changing group dynamics by the introduction of a note-taker, or other support worker, also creates the potential for further exclusion, in the way that Tom described. A note-taker or support worker has a professional role, and is therefore likely to inhibit relationships between the supported young person and their peers. Further, what is the role of this person in a group activity? Is it to remain silent and scribe (which might create constraints in some group activities) or to participate (which could deny a voice to the young person)? And if interaction between the young person and their support worker is necessary, how might that impact on the peer group dynamic at that moment in time? Irrespective of the approach taken, as Tom says, the very presence of another person has implications for the relationships between the supported student and their peers. Thus, there was a tension between his need for a note taker to facilitate access to his chosen programme, and the way in which the presence of the note taker engendered increased social exclusion by creating barriers to his personal interactions.

Barriers to personal interactions formed a recurring theme in each of the stories the young people told. Emily's sense of social separation from those she perceived as 'other' – the non-disabled students – was indicative of hidden forms of exclusion in that Emily believed that she wasn't very good at socialising with them (rather than that they were not very good at socialising with her). Barriers were also generated by the requirement of Isaac Newton College that disabled young people should sit in a defined area at lunchtime. The answer to Ollie's question about *why* he had to sit apart at lunchtimes

was apparently related to health and safety. Of itself this begs the question: what is more important –health and safety or enabling the social and leisure activities that contribute to identity formation? And if the issue of health and safety was paramount, perhaps in terms of ensuring the safe evacuation of wheelchair using young people in an emergency, could no-one think of a more effective way of addressing the concerns than segregating the disabled students? Approaches such as this within ‘inclusive’ organisations reflect the way in which specific, discriminatory practices can become normalised within an institution – even where that institution has a commitment to inclusive practice and equality - to the extent that professionals then cease to question them. Where such practices occur, they make a significant contribution to the marginalisation of certain groups of young people and stories such as Ollie’s highlight the need for practitioners to constantly problematise and question practice in the sense of asking ‘what are we doing and why are we doing it? What are the consequences of our actions and for whom?’

Discourses of in/exclusion

I have previously argued that the education system exerts particularly oppressive forms of power and control over young people in the context of the discourse it uses to describe them (e.g. see Atkins 2009; 2010). It does this by homogenising young people into deficit models associated with specific characteristics the group is perceived to have. Further, the discourse used to describe these groups of young people always has negative connotations. Thus, those young people who are unable to conform to the requirements of secondary education are described as ‘disaffected’ and ‘disruptive’ or ‘disengaged’, all of which imply a negative. Similarly, we discuss disability as opposed to ability and describe some young people (often including the ‘disaffected’ or ‘disengaged’) as having *special* educational needs. The term need implies a want or deficit, as well as a form of dependency. In addition, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that, amongst young people still in education, the word ‘special’ is being used as a derogatory noun (as, indeed, is ‘widening participation’). The use of derogatory discourse amongst young people reflects underlying societal attitudes which remain negative and exclusive despite a long standing inclusion agenda in schools and universities: this alone demonstrates the challenges facing education in terms of challenging marginalisation and exclusion and moving towards a more socially just and democratic system of education.

Normative attitudes and perceptions are also reflected in the inconsistency between the general sensitivity of some teachers to their pupils’ needs and the more limited emotional regard that they tend to have for non-compliant pupils or those who do not seem ‘bright’ (Hedge and MacKenzie, 2012: 332). Such inconsistencies and the use of discourses of deficit in relation to certain groups of young people are indicative of a tension between our normative assumptions, reflected in the discourses we use, and the generally held belief that we are successfully ‘doing’ inclusion. It is also worth noting that some professional discourse, used unthinkingly, can also have a negative impact in terms of the messages it communicates to young people or to others. Terms associated with models of deficit, such as special educational needs, exert considerable power in terms of the way they define and Other particular groups in the context of perceived characteristics which are different to the norm. Characterising young people in this way has significant implications for their identity formation, which in turn is likely to have a major impact on the relative success of their transition from school to adulthood with all that that implies.

Normative perceptions of in/exclusion

It is worth noting that Tom, Ollie and Emily have all attended colleges and Universities with a significant commitment to equality and diversity and yet, despite this, some of their experiences of inclusion have been exclusive. This raises two key issues. Firstly, it highlights the importance of interrogating practice and exploring the issues surrounding and consequences of Inclusive Practice. Secondly, it raises questions about the centrist and normative perceptions of disability and inclusion held by policy makers and professionals at both macro and micro levels and the ways in which these perceptions of the norm are communicated through professional discourse. These perceptions assume that we should be including the marginalised into a centre which Graham and Slee (2008: 279) have described as being 'but a barren and fictional place' and also reflects 'inclusion's need to speak of and identify otherness' (Harwood and Rasmussen, 2002 cited Graham and Slee, Ibid).

Normative perceptions can stand in the way of possible solutions to problems of exclusion such as those experienced by Tom. His idea that '[organisations should make] disability access the main focus rather than a spin off' seems simple and relatively instrumental; after all, it was achieved at the Olympic Park and Athletes Village. So why is it less possible in education? Setting funding issues aside, the most significant barrier to achieving the sort of thinking and approach to disability in education that Tom would like is the fact that all aspects of education are constructed around normative perceptions of the world which effectively exclude specific groups of young people who are perceived to be different. Thus, to achieve the kind of approach that Tom suggests would involve far more than thoughtful planning: rather, it would be necessary to 'disrupt the construction of centre from which the exclusion derives' (Graham and Slee, *ibid*). At a macro level this might involve a transfer of power and control from the centre to the margins, something which would have significant policy and political implications.

At a more local level, disrupting the centre would imply taking a radically different view to inclusion in education, something which would necessitate all teachers to be committed to the principles of equality and social justice in education. The assumption that all teachers are so committed is one of the taken-for-granted surrounding the concept of inclusion, and yet, as research amongst trainee teachers demonstrates, they sometimes hear messages in schools that conflict with the pro-inclusion messages they hear in the university (Beacham and Rouse, 2012: 12) suggesting that some teachers at least retain negative, normative societal attitudes and perceptions which influence the ways in which inclusive practice is implemented.

Conclusions

This small study has raised two key issues. Firstly, it is apparent from the data that some inclusive practices are having unnoticed, exclusionary impacts on young people. Further, it is apparent that the forms of exclusion that concern young people the most are aspects of social exclusion which prevent them establishing and maintaining peer relationships in the same way as other, less marginalised young people. Whilst this is an area which demands further investigation, it is clear that practitioners have a significant responsibility to critically examine inclusive practices within the classroom and to try to understand how these impact on the educational lives of young people. Only by small steps like this can we hope to move towards a future in which all young people, irrespective of their similarity or difference to one another, can enjoy a truly socially just and democratic education.

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Correspondence

Dr Liz Atkins
School of Education and Professional development
University of Huddersfield
Huddersfield
HD1 3DH

Email: l.atkins@hud.ac.uk

I will be happy to engage in discussion with colleagues about the issues raised in this article.