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‘When Something is Different People Fear It’: Children’s Perceptions of an Arts Based Inclusion Project

Teresa Whitehurst and Amy Howells

‘It was like looking through a glass window but to interact meant I was able to become friends with them’ (mainstream pupil)

Background

The notion of inclusion is not a concept which is new to us. Social inclusion has been incorporated into our everyday vocabulary and refers to ‘an array of strategies and initiatives designed to improve the life chances of disadvantaged groups in our society’ (Kinder & Harland 2004). It has long been recognised that the ‘education of children with special educational needs would be enhanced by closer working links between mainstream and special schools’ (DES 1978) whilst the Government’s new strategy for special educational needs asserts that ‘all children, wherever they are educated, need to be able to learn, play and develop alongside each other within their local community of schools’ (DfES 2004 p5).

Inclusion is based upon the premise that a gulf exists between those who are *enabled* and those who are *disabled* – a gulf which functions to enable some to participate whilst others are excluded. The distinction between those who are included and those who are excluded rests upon the historical conceptualisation of disability. Significantly, the ways in which disability is defined impacts upon the design of policy – policy which ultimately dictates how and why inclusion should work.

Oliver (1993) suggests that disability has been conceptualised as a ‘tragedy’ which has led policy makers to focus upon the extent to which policies can have a compensatory function. However, Sinclair (1993), an adult with autism argues, ‘There is a tragedy that comes with autism.....the tragedy is not that we’re here, but that your world has no place for us to be’

Historically, disability has been defined as an individual problem; one where it is incumbent upon the individual to make amends for their disability by adapting to society. This positivist stance takes as its point of focus the person with disabilities; someone to be measured and observed from the point of perception that it is possible to know and understand that reality because it exists and can be measured in some independent unbiased manner. Oliver (1993) postulates three definitions of disability: as an individual problem, as a social construction and as a social creation. Finding failings within the Social Model of Disability as an individual problem (with an onus on the individual with disabilities to adapt)

and as a social construction (with an onus on other people's perspectives and attitudes), Borsay (1986) developed a structural account of disability which defines disability as a problem created by the institutions, organisations and processes that constitute society. This model moves the focus away from the individual, away from 'simple' social construction and looks to the mechanisms within society to be influential in constructing definitions of disability which challenge disabling structures.

It is against such a background that we find ourselves awash with policies and strategies promoting social inclusion. Experiences of inclusive situations play a major role in the education of our children. However, 'inclusion is about much more than the type of school that children attend: it is about the quality of their experience; how they are helped to learn, achieve and participate fully in the life of the school' (DfES 2004 p25).

In complying with these guidelines we need to ensure that we continually question what it is that works and why, but in doing so consider the extent to which all voices are heard. Link integration schemes, which were a popular result of the Warnock Report, focused on the benefits of raised awareness and understanding of pupils with special educational needs amongst their peers (Jowett et al 1988) but evidence about how far that aim had been achieved was derived from the *teachers* involved rather than directly from the *pupils* themselves. Furthermore, Strain & Kerr (1981) identify that more positive

attitudes may not occur simply as a function of contact, but as a result of more 'appropriately structured social encounters' (Gash 1993).

It is important to recognise that there will always be young people for whom the experience of education in a mainstream environment is not an option. These are young people who, irrespective of their level of disability ¹, should be afforded the same opportunities as their mainstream peers. However, the practicalities of such an enterprise require careful consideration, enabling environments, effective partnership and a good deal of creativity. Inclusion must be seen as a dynamic process (Carpenter 2001) which evolves to meet changing needs (Shevlin & Carpenter 2004).

The Project

As a result of an arts-based project it has been possible to demonstrate how, through working in partnership, mainstream and residential special school pupils have been able to work and learn alongside each other.

The arts-based project took the form of a musical performance developed over a two year period and based upon the tale of The Monkey King, an ancient story from Ceylon. The project involved children and staff from Sunfield (a residential special school for children between the ages of 7 and 19 who have severe and complex learning difficulties including autistic spectrum disorders), children and

¹ The term 'disability' is problematic and its continued use within the context of this article reflects the name that the society gives to the gulf dividing the *enabled* from the *dis-enabled*,

staff from a local mainstream middle school and professionals from The Open Theatre Company and The Shysters Theatre Company in Coventry (both for actors with learning disabilities). The project culminated in a major theatre production presented at the Patrick Centre in the Hippodrome, Birmingham, attracting large audiences at each of its five performances.

The overall main aim of the collaboration was to create an enriching and self-extending experience for Sunfield students and to allow their abilities to be recognised and celebrated alongside those of their mainstream peers. It was envisaged that research based upon this project would enable us disseminate the elements of the collaboration which made it successful so that other people to envisage success in similar projects.

Our research aims throughout the project were to evaluate the mechanisms which were important in enabling students, both with and without disabilities, to work collaboratively on an arts based project and to achieve a greater understanding of what it means to work inclusively.

Within our evaluation of the project we particularly focused upon:

- How perceptions held by mainstream pupils changed as a result of working alongside peers with autism and severe and complex learning difficulties.

- What we learnt about how inclusion can work.

The Evaluation

Phase One: Individual interviews were conducted with each of the mainstream pupils, within their own school. Pupils had been working on the project at this stage for approximately fourteen months. We wanted to find out to what extent mainstream pupils perceptions of, and attitudes towards, children with severe and complex learning difficulties altered as a result of working collaboratively.

Phase Two: Once the collection of data from the initial interviews had been completed and the project concluded, we revisited the mainstream children to find out what they thought had been important in facilitating a change in their initially disabling perceptions and their ideas about what would enable future inclusion project to succeed.

Findings

The majority of mainstream pupils had little or no prior knowledge of specific conditions and furthermore, perceived children with disabilities in a 'dehumanized' way with perceptions of difference being paramount:

'I knew they existed - I'd seen a couple of them before but not really worked with them'

'Sometimes I didn't see them as people'

'I thought they were strange and different – they were strangers and I wasn't used to them but they were different to normal strangers'

The notion of difference perceived by pupils reflected their lack of understanding regarding disabilities:

'They weren't like us – I thought they would be more delicate'

'I thought they'd be walking around not knowing anything'

'I thought they were different and I was scared to touch them...I thought I may get what they get if I touch them'

Significantly, many of the comments made by the mainstream pupils appeared to connect their perceptions of children with disabilities with their own feelings around a lack of preparation for the experience. Pupils spoke of their feelings of inadequacy regarding their own abilities, feelings of unfamiliarity, both with the situation and with the children with special needs, and feelings of vulnerability:

'I was frightened because I didn't know how they would react'

'I didn't know how to approach them – I was apprehensive – didn't know what to expect from them'

'How are you meant to act around them? What are you meant to do? I was worried'

'Not sure whether I could talk to them or whether they would attack me'

Clearly, these pupils felt they did not possess the relevant skills to enable them to cope within this context, particularly in relation to communication. In an environment devoid of their normal referents mainstream pupils were apprehensive and unable to predict the future with any sense of certainty.

As a result of working collaboratively it was clear (from the children's comments below) that a shift in understanding had occurred. They found they were able to interact with children with disabilities, communicate and work alongside them with an increased level of confidence. *Practical knowledge* as opposed to *factual knowledge* appeared to be the key. Whilst factual knowledge remained limited, the more important factor for these children appeared to be the acquisition of practical knowledge and an acknowledgement that this had occurred as a function of interaction. Knowledge acquired appeared to enable them to form

opinions based upon experiences rather than upon initial perceptions. Important to this was *knowing* more about the children rather than their disability:

'I think knowing more about them helps – like knowing what they can and can't do'

'They're not normal – they have problems but they're all different. You have to know each one to know how to treat them and how to talk to them'

'I don't know about their condition but more about the person'

'They're normal – you see past the disability and don't just judge them by that'

Clearly, through discussion with the mainstream pupils it was evident that perceptions did change throughout the duration of the project and that pupils attributed this change to a level of understanding gained through interaction and not as a result of an enhanced knowledge base. The importance of this experience was eloquently captured by one pupil who stated:

'It was like looking through a glass window but to interact meant I was able to become friends with them'

Having identified that there had been a shift in knowledge and realising that it had been possible for pupils to overcome the difficulties that they had first perceived when volunteering to participate in this inclusion project, the project team met with the mainstream pupils to discuss the ways that these obstacles had been overcome and what they felt had helped them to make inclusion work.

Pupils felt that the whole process of getting to know the children with special needs, gradually over a long period and consistently, was important. Through working with the children and watching staff who knew the children with disabilities well, they were able to model the behaviour of staff, learn new communication strategies and find out things they had in common. Mainstream pupils had been surprised at the level of autonomy demonstrated by the children with disabilities – that staff had encouraged the children to employ their own calming strategies, for example. Building upon this, the mainstream pupils recognised and felt empowered by the knowledge of staff working with the children at Sunfield:

'You got to know them (the children) more.....it helped working with 'x'.....if there were problems then you looked at staff for the way they worked with him'

'It was helpful with the Sunfield workers – the people with the children told you all about the children.....we could watch the way they were and how they spoke to them – we picked up on that'

'We saw how the Sunfield people worked with them and put it together with how we would do things – it was like child to child bonding'

When asked what advice the pupils would give to other schools embarking upon similar inclusion projects, they responded by identifying good practice for both pupils and teachers. They suggested that pupils should:

'Start off friendly – get to know them – don't ignore them because it will make it harder later'

'Don't expect too much from them because they might not be able to do it'

'You must speak first – initiate the interaction'

'Talk to them as you would your friends'

In addition, pupils felt it was very important that the teaching staff at the mainstream school were aware of the level of disability of the children, were prepared and able to adapt to the situation by using a different set of resources

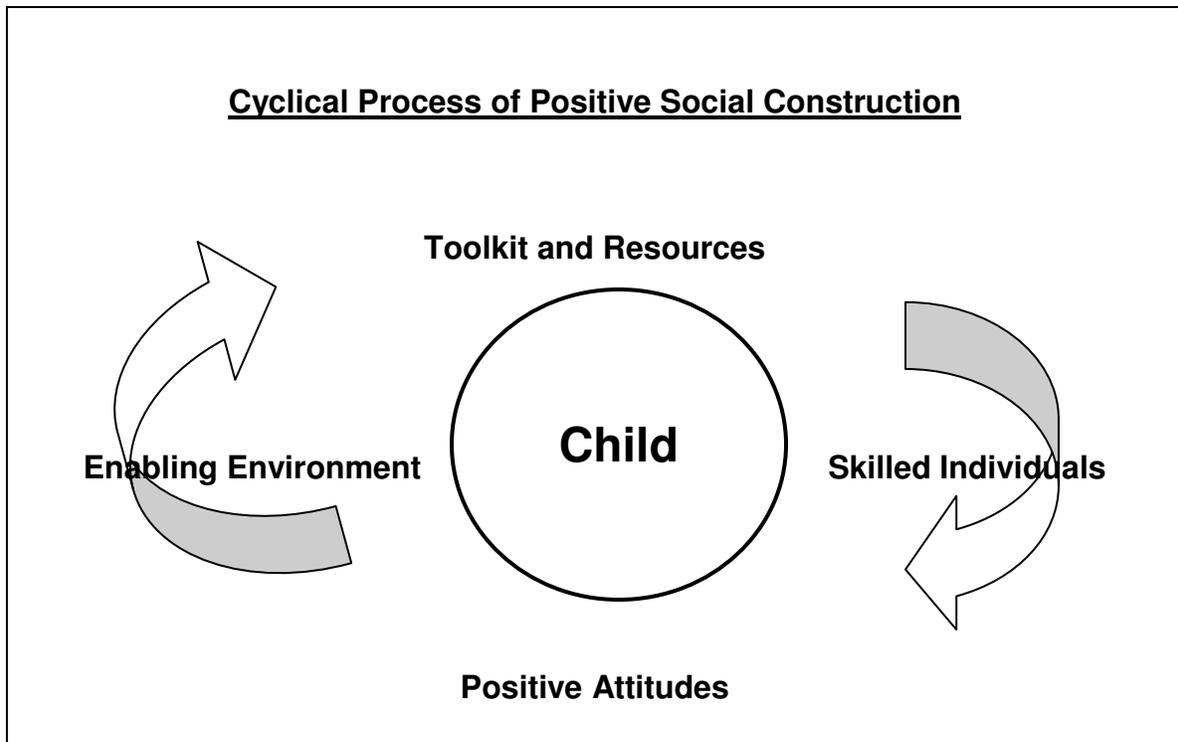
and that the mainstream pupils could look to, and feel empowered by, their teaching staff.

Conclusion

Clearly there is a need to prepare mainstream children well before embarking upon an inclusion project. However, this principle is not restricted solely to pupils but must extend to a whole school ethos approach, involving teachers as well as pupils. Inclusion must develop as a 'dynamic process in which teachers engage' (Carpenter 2001). Inclusion, as such is therefore an evolutionary process; 'it is a pervasive approach intended to influence, develop and change not only schools but also Society itself (Shevlin & Carpenter 2004). If we can empower young people with the skills and resources they need to be able to work alongside children with disabilities and in doing so, can help them to move away from perceptions of difference based on uninformed judgments to perceptions of understanding gained from experience we can help to create and support environments which are enabling. Inclusion becomes a 'socially valuing process: it states to each individual with disabilities 'you are a welcome, valued and equal member of our community' (Shevlin & Carpenter 2004).

This cyclical process (see Figure 1) moves the focus away from locating the problem within the individual and functions to create environments which enable *skilled* individuals to develop *positive attitudes* towards disability thus reinforcing the *enabling environment*.

Figure 1



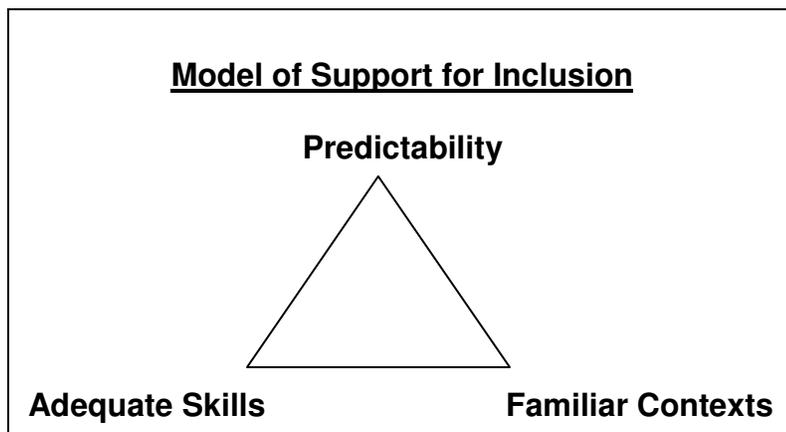
This Positive Social Construction approach recognises a structural model of disability, acknowledging that the way in which institutions, organisations and process are structured, can function to enable or disable, but also takes account of the ways in which disability is constructed by mainstream pupils and the importance of deconstructing this to create environments which enable. “Appropriately structured social encounters” (Gash 1993) rely upon not only creating a suitable environment for encounters to occur but to facilitate this by creating a medium with which *all* children engage. Presenting pupils with the opportunity to work inclusively on an arts-based project can only be determined an ‘appropriately structured social encounter’ when all parties can see its

purpose and feel safe, secure, supported and confident to interact within that environment. If we are to empower young people to work with children with disabilities then we must allow their voices to reach us; we must listen to their concerns, their fears and their vulnerabilities and develop tools and resources to put at their disposal. In so doing, we will be able to prepare young people, not *factually*, but *practically* with the skills they need to enable them to feel confident in meeting and working with children with disabilities. Such a model of support for inclusion (see Figure 2) allows young people to build up a picture of the future, enabling them to anticipate, plan and predict. The future no longer exists within the realms of uncertainty, doubt and fear. As one pupil stated 'If something is different we fear it' – is it not also true that we fear that which we do not understand?

Preparation before embarking upon inclusion projects is of paramount importance. Providing pupils *and teachers* with the necessary *practical* skills required to work alongside children with severe disabilities conveys a level of responsibility unto teaching staff, from both mainstream and special schools. An understanding of the *context* of the social encounter together with an understanding of the individual needs of *all* the children involved must form part of a reciprocal agreement of expectation. Informal meetings prior to embarking upon inclusion projects should form the basis of this understanding, allowing time to explore the expectations of mainstream pupils and teachers together with those from a special school setting. Small group work devoted to focused

sessions (rather than ice-breakers or 'getting to know everyone') appeared important to mainstream pupils. Having support on hand from professionals who knew the children with disabilities well was valued by mainstream pupils and gave pupils confidence. By de-mystifying the inclusion experience for mainstream pupils we can begin to create a context which is much more familiar to them; one within which they can engage and develop adequate skills. Development of adequate skills demands a sensitive approach within which this reciprocity of expectation is neither too great nor too demanding upon any one individual. This mutual level of understanding must be fully explored in order to empower young people to feel confident that a level of predictability about the future of their inclusion work can be achieved. Being confident of our own abilities, in situations which are familiar and non-threatening, enable us all to feel excited and enthusiastic about future events. In preparing our children well for inclusion we can ensure we not only meet Government guidelines but create experiences which afford all young people the opportunity to develop alongside each other as equals.

Figure 2



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