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Groundhog day for inclusive education

GARY THOMAS and ANDREW LOXLEY

Those who work in education strive to create more inclusive environments in school but are often stymied in their efforts by challenges coming from many and varied directions. Politicians, for example, exhort us to be more inclusive but create conditions that encourage separation and exclusion, and inclusive education’s history in special education means that the default response of the system around special education is to diagnose, treat and manage separately. That legacy continues to have its effects. Looking both at the history of the management of ‘special needs’ and at the continuing rise in numbers of marginalised, separated and excluded youngsters, we suggest that some fundamental shifts are necessary in the way that we think about and research into difficulty at school if we are to move beyond Groundhog Day.

Key words: inclusion, history of education, segregation, special education, research.

Introduction

Inclusion is in Groundhog Day, forever waking up and facing the same day with the same circumstances. In the film Groundhog Day the main character is forced to relive 2 February again and again (waking up each morning to ‘I got you babe’...
on the radio). In real life, though, inclusion wakes up each decade (or more often) to relive and re-confront barriers facing it not only from politics but also from its own history of managing ‘special needs’ and its heritage of research methods. We look at some of these barriers in this article.

Policy and politics

The word ‘inclusion’ is *de rigueur* for mission statements, political speeches and policy documents of all kinds. But the exhortation from every quarter to include does not marry with the political and economic environment manufactured for us by politicians. And this disjunction between the advocacy for inclusion and the creation of an environment inimical to its cultivation has consequences, particularly in education. It leads to a continual resistance to inclusion.

The disjunction accounts for the extraordinary resilience of segregative practice in schools. This resistance, where there is a rhetorical subscription to inclusion in the polity, leads to the bizarre situation of practice that purports to be inclusive in fact perpetuating and even extending segregative and exclusive systems and procedures in schools. There is a strong sense of a defence of the status quo in the resistance to change and the justifications of existing forms of marginalisation and exclusion. As Sally Tomlinson put it:

… over the years the exclusionists developed a cunning plan! They would … arrange an education system that excluded as far as possible the disabled, disruptive, those with learning problems … But all this would take place in the name of a benevolent inclusion.

Tomlinson (2018, p. xiii)

One sees the reality of this in schools, with the room to which excluded students are sent so often being called the ‘inclusion room’. Elsewhere in Tomlinson’s piece, she describes an ‘Inclusion Unit’ in a school in Hamburg, Germany, where children ‘diagnosed’ with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) were made to wear compression vests to keep them in their seats in class. She asks whether these ‘squeeze vests’ and drugs can, in honesty, be ways of including children and young people.

To think, or at least to assert, that such practices can possibly represent ‘inclusion’ seems to us less to represent simple hypocrisy and more to signify a classic
demonstration of Orwellian doublethink: people are forced by the pressures of their employment to think patently incompatible thoughts. Orwell described doublethink as ‘… to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancel out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them, to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it’ (Orwell, 1949, p. 32). People who work in schools are forced into a position wherein they are indeed compelled to use the terminology of inclusion while in fact being encouraged by government policy to marginalise and exclude.

That neoliberal government policy is manifested in increased competition amongst schools, operationalised in the emergence of academies, free schools, and specialist colleges in England (but not the other nations of the UK), and charter schools and magnet schools in the USA, Japan and other countries. The move to academisation in England has happened apace. At the beginning of the 2010s only around 5% of English secondary schools were academy schools. By 2018, the figure was over 70%. One of the main consequences of this is that the power of regularising go-betweens, such as local government (and, therein, local accountability), is deliberately trimmed down as academies and charter schools are ‘freed’ from various rules and statutory responsibilities.

With test results published in the new quasi-market, low-achieving children are clearly going to be less welcome in many schools, contributing, as they will, to a depression in a school’s published test results and the school becoming less attractive in the eyes of parents. The result is the use of covert forms of selection, the use of exclusion (see Power and Taylor, 2020) and ‘off-rolling’ – the removal of a student from a school roll without the use of a permanent exclusion (see Long and Danechi, 2019).

There are other more subtly-operating consequences of marketization that work to impede inclusion: the competitive environment develops the phenomenon economists call ‘monopsony’, wherein certain ‘buyers’ (the parents of more able children, for example) are able to dictate terms to the sellers (the schools). In these circumstances, schools will face persistent pressure to become more selective. And monopsony develops also as services for ‘special needs’ (such as school psychological services) are ‘contracted out’ from direct local government management. Reliant on being bought, such services are bound to be more susceptible to buyer pressure to accede to demands for transfer or exclusion. And the contracting out of services such as an inspection to private organisations such
as CfBT, Serco and Tribal in the UK (Baxter and Clarke, 2013) risks similar consequences.

All of this marketization has resulted, as Done and Knowler (2020) have shown, in much-increased marginalisation, exclusion and ‘off-rolling’ of children who will depress a school’s published score profile and harm its public image.

And, of course, the marginalisation and off-rolling are not merely the collateral damage of marketization. They are also a direct result of the policy. Remember what the new government (Cabinet Office, 2010) said in 2010: ‘We believe the most vulnerable children deserve the very highest quality of care. We will improve diagnostic assessment for schoolchildren, prevent the unnecessary closure of special schools, and remove the bias towards inclusion’. This follows up on the earlier invective from the Conservative Party Commission on Special Education (Balchin, 2007): any benefits of a policy promoting inclusion are, said the Commission …

… far outweighed by the grievous damage that this policy has caused, not just to children with SEN but to their peers in mainstream education … The needs, it seems to us, of the individual child should be paramount and not subservient to an ideology conceived on spurious egalitarian grounds.

**The history of inclusion: back to the future**

The stop-start-retreat trajectory of inclusion is not just down to government policy. It’s also down to history. It’s down to the way in which supposedly new routines, procedures and processes in fact reproduce age-old diagnosis-and-treat methods.

This was brought to life in 2010 in an analysis by Alfredo Artiles and his colleagues. They published a paper entitled ‘Back to the Future …’ (Artiles et al., 2010), critiquing a major new form of help in American schools, ‘Response to Intervention’ (RTI), that purportedly provided evidence-based instruction for students by bringing together the methods of general and special education (see Vaughn and Fuchs, 2003). Introduced in the USA by the Bush administration in the early 2000s, RTI became part of the 2004 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.
Sensible as the system seems, at first sight, Artiles and his colleagues argued that in reality the new procedures merely duplicated the identify-and-treat procedures of the past. As they note: ‘Although RTI is conceptualized as an educational approach that serves all learners, it is increasingly associated in practice with a new identification system for students with LD [learning disorders] and BD [behavioural disorders]’ (Artiles et al., 2010, p. 251; see also Artiles, 2015).

The point they make in ‘Back to the Future’ is that many of the procedures introduced with such high hopes merely repeated the mistakes of the past – a point validated by a national evaluation of the program (Balu et al., 2015), which found that the new identify-and-treat program was not only ineffective in meeting its stated aims but that it actually had negative effects, for example on children’s reading comprehension. The point made by Artiles and his colleagues is that not only are these shiny new instruments wrong-headed, they unthinkingly mimic the methodology of past decades (Thomas and Loxley, 2022) and, like those mimicked methods, are unproductive and damaging.

The Back to the Future phenomenon (morphing into the Groundhog Day phenomenon) arises partly because the field of inclusive education did not emerge de novo in response to egalitarian, desegregative concerns rooted in social justice. Rather, it emerged out of special education (Baglieri et al., 2011; Richardson and Powell, 2011). This positionality has had consequences for the development of the field, for certain strong expectations and beliefs reside in the precepts and processes of remedial and special education. While our recent concerns have been desegregative, the parent field of special education has a long history of segregation, and in that history, we can see a habit – or, perhaps more accurately, an instinct – principally to identify and ‘treat’ difference and disability, with the potential of partial or complete removal and exclusion from mainstream schooling system if the ‘treatments’ fail.

Research

If Balu, Artiles and others (see Thomas and Loxley, 2022) have revealed the many reiterations of the thinking behind failed pedagogic models in special education, similar revelations have recently been made about the thinking behind that ‘What Works’ methodology. That methodology was inspired by the ‘big data’ enthusiasts of research methodology who have been so influential
in guiding the research enterprise in education in general and in special education in particular in recent years (see Thomas, 2016, 2021 for discussion). The experimental methods used in this methodology, including randomised controlled trials (RCTs), have been shown, as evaluation evidence increasingly emerges, to be equally wrong-headed and ineffective (see Biesta, 2007; Malouf and Taymans, 2016; Herrington and Maynard, 2019; Lortie-Forgues and Inglis, 2019; Joyce and Cartwright, 2020; Thomas, 2021), continually pointing us in the wrong direction in our understandings of failure at school (see Cavendish et al., 2020).

It’s mildly ironic that ‘what works’ is the term used for interventions that invariably ‘do not work’ and ‘will not work’. Such supposed solutions ignore the fact that education systems are, in Biesta’s (2020) terms, open, semiotic and recursive, and, as such, one thing does not straightforwardly cause another. We need, as Florian (2014), Nind (2017), Parsons (2021) and others have argued, new kinds of research – research that respects local differences and incorporates local actors, whether these be teachers, parents or students themselves.

As Johnston (1985) argued in his classic paper about reading failure, the dominant approach in reading research – an experimental and reductionist approach – has consistently lent itself to the deficit and neurological explanations for failure at school and leads to an inappropriate analysis of that failure. Johnston argued that research designs such as case studies, involving examination of goals, motives, and personal situations should play a much more prominent role in research into failure at school. We need case study and action research – not ‘big data’ research. We need research that is geared to specific issues and respects and draws from particular ways of learning in particular places and particular cultures. In the jargon, we need ‘co-constructed’ research – research that assimilates and uses the intelligence of the teacher.

**Old habits die hard**

The circularity of the process of identify-and-treat that occurs in RTI and other ‘special’ procedures over many decades is mirrored in the experiences of one of the authors of this article (GT). Over nearly five decades, I have witnessed numerous ‘new starts’ initiated by ambitious politicians, based on multiple ‘consultation exercises’ which proved, in my experience, and the words of ‘Windmills of your mind’, to continually take us ‘on an ever-spinning reel’. Beginning my career as an educational
psychologist in 1976 (just a little after ‘Windmills of your mind’ was released), I was part of a wave of newly trained psychologists introducing new assessment procedures for special education across the UK. These were called the SE (for Special Education) procedures. There were, in what was vaunted as a revolutionary restructuring of assessment, to be four stages: the first by the school, the second by a medic, the third by an educational psychologist, and the fourth by an administrator.

The system was revised in the 1980s to introduce ‘statementing’ procedures, which essentially replicated the SE procedures, but with the welcome addition of a supposedly legally enforceable element to any recommendation: the ‘statement’. Another revision occurred in 2014 after the enactment of the Children and Families Act (see Legislation.gov.uk, 2014). Within the strictures of the Act, children assessed to have complex needs were to be issued with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) which would entitle them, notionally, to a personal budget. If a family felt that their child was receiving insufficient support, they could take their local authority to a Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal to appeal the authority’s decisions.

My experience of these multiply revised (but, in reality, little-changing) procedures is of a succession of processes and practices which continually reproduce the old wine of exclusionary practice in new bottles. While there have been welcome developments in some of the new procedures (such as the extension of protections to young people up to the age of 25), the EHCP procedures essentially replicate the SE and statementing procedures of the 1970s and 1980s.

And the vaunted parent advocacy and appeals systems introduced in the revisions launched in the 1980s and the 2000s proved to be as inadequate as the appeals procedures that had preceded them. My experience in the 1990s as a volunteer working for the parent and child advocacy charity IPSEA (Independent Provider of Special Education Advice) in supporting parents challenging local authority decisions was of parents’ Sisyphean struggles as appeals panels might notionally support them, only to have their directives suffocated by the administration bureaucracy of exclusion-orientated local authorities (LAs). (In fact, there are reasons LAs are exclusion-orientated: they are not given enough money by the central government, as the National Audit Office [2019, 2021] makes clear, to make inclusion happen.) Those authorities would provide nominal compliance with a tribunal directive for inclusion, but would ultimately conclude with a sentiment broadly along the lines of: ‘Sorry, we’ve tried, but it can’t be done: it’s special school or nothing’.
The continuing stress, frustration and powerlessness about such constructed failure can be seen both in social media posts from parents (e.g. Roanna Âû SEND National Crisis, 2019) and in parents’ comments generally (see, for example, Cullen and Lindsay, 2019). It may also explain an increase latterly in parents demanding special school placements for their children: they demand places in special schools because special schools are where the resources are concentrated. The National Audit Office (2019, p. 33) attributes the increase in special education requests directly to:

funding pressures leading to mainstream schools having less capacity to provide tailored support for pupils with SEND; and … the focus of the school accountability system on attainment and progress measures … making mainstream schools less inclined to be inclusive.

Authorities’ flouting of the spirit of inclusion was enabled and facilitated by the clause repeated in national legislation from the 1980s to the present day which said, in essence, ‘Yes, inclusion is a good thing but if it can’t be done then carry on as normal’. So, while the Children and Families Act, 2014, obliged local authorities to educate children in mainstream schools where possible, it contained the famous corollary in Section 33, subsection 2(b) that …

(2) … the local authority must secure that the plan provides for the child or young person to be educated in a maintained nursery school, mainstream school or mainstream post-16 institution unless that is incompatible with—

…

(b) the provision of efficient education for others.

So, education should happen in the mainstream unless this was incompatible with ‘the provision of efficient education for others’. Subsection 2(b) here is almost identical to the ‘Get out of jail free card’ contained in the 1981 Education Act, which stated that the local authority had the duty under section 2(2) to secure that the child ‘is educated in an ordinary school’, provided that section 2(2) is compatible with section 2(3)(c), namely:

‘…

(b) the provision of efficient education for the children with whom he [sic] will be educated;
(c) the efficient use of resources.’
It was, and is, always possible to show that ‘efficient education’ is being compromised by the presence of some children. As long as these ‘get out of jail free’ clauses continue to be reproduced in future legislation, little progress can be made toward inclusion in a political environment that encourages competition amongst schools … and therein the marginalisation or exclusion of too many children and young people.

It seems that with almost every vaunted advance in processes and procedures to promote inclusion there is a replication of the ‘Back to the Future’ phenomenon recognised by Artiles et al. This happens across the board: in research, in pedagogy and in administrative and legal procedures, each reinforcing the other with the ultimate effect of impeding change and moving us back to square one: Groundhog Day.

Away from filmic allusions, in more academic terms Richardson et al. (2017, p. 187) talk of the ‘continuity’ – of thought and practice – governing the ways we have of dealing with issues such as difficulty at school. They talk of ‘… the routine continuity whereby past circumstances and events structured the present.’ There are resilient habits of thought and practice that act as an undertow, always pulling us back to familiar solutions. One can see the truth of this in the ‘fixes’ of special education. There is a reason for the enduring popularity of such fixes and the system that they support. Now, as 50 or 100 years ago, such fixes and their procedural accompaniments are the unique selling point of exceptional education, and they continue to form the substrate out of which new special ‘remedies’ and special pedagogies (such as RTI) and special schools emerge.

These special remedies are often linked with special syndromes. A continuing resort to deficit thinking has spawned what we have called ‘syndroming’ (Thomas and Loxley, 2022), wherein new forms of difference and deficit are firmed-up in the public mind and crystallised in the professional consciousness, creating new pressures for special treatment. The pressures for this have come both from professional/commercial interests (psychopharmaceuticals, publishers, private research organisations, and so on) and from parents, who may, in desperation, see a syndrome label as the only route to additional resources.

To continue to proffer programmatic initiatives – involving ascertainment, intervention and solution – is inappropriate. Such programmatic initiative, following the contours of much twentieth-century thinking about exceptionality, views inclusion as being about things to be put right, either in individual or school-related terms. As a strategy for tackling failure at school, it has been repeatedly unsuccessful.
More segregation? Again?

The deficit-based explanations of failure to thrive at school have characterised much of the discourse of exceptionality in the 20th century and well into the 21st, and we have reflected on the sterility of the approaches that have emerged from such unidimensional explanations (see Thomas and Loxley, 2022). We see the difficulties which many children face at school to be complex, multilayered and intersectional and have little to do with the dispositional issues once at the centre of special educators’ deliberations.

Those atavistic predilections to identify, fix, segregate and/or exclude may obscure, discourage and edge out more creative, inclusive solutions to the serious problems some children face at school. Given the history of segregation to ‘meet the needs’ of many children, the special school has seemed the natural, and in many ways too easy, resort for school authorities when difficulties emerge for youngsters at school. Despite their cost in times of dwindling real resources, such schools offer immediate relief to local authority officers charged with the legal duty of providing education for all children, given the serious disruption caused by some youngsters in today’s performance-obsessed education climate. The very existence of these schools seems to validate the process of segregation, and their survival through several decades of what Oliver (2013) has called ‘chatter’ about inclusion, confirms his point that ‘The hegemony of special education has barely been challenged’ (p. 1,025).

It has not been seriously challenged because the basic infrastructure of separation remains – in fact, that infrastructure is thriving – and, while it remains, it stands to reason to the administrative mind that it is natural and valid to use it. There has been hardly a dent in the numbers of special school placements during the several-decades period of Oliver’s ‘chatter’ about inclusion, and the increasing numbers attending not just an authority’s special school establishment but also a private special school sector is bound to inhibit creativity about how to change things. Table 1 shows the National Audit Office’s (NAO) (2019) statistics for placements in types of schools, including special schools and private special schools, between 2014 and 2018. It appears under the NAO’s headline ‘The number of pupils attending special schools has increased sharply since 2014’.

We wanted to get a snapshot of the position specifically on the point about private special school placement in these statistics since the increase in private special
school placements was flagged by the NAO for particular attention. So, we submitted a Freedom of Information request to Birmingham City Council (BCC), the largest local authority in Europe, asking BCC about the council’s spending on private special school placements. BCC’s response, while not necessarily representative of national trends, offers a useful vignette in the use of these schools and the procedural reckonings that may lie behind their use.

BCC’s full and helpful answer told us that for the year 2015–2016 (the earliest for which records are evidently kept), 368 children were sent to such placements, while for 2019–2020, the figure was 420, an increase of 14% – slightly less than the increase nationally as recorded by the NAO. In 2019–2020, the spending by the authority on those 420 pupils’ school fees was £15.5 million – an average of nearly £37,000 per pupil, with the most expensive special school placements costing over £100,000 per pupil per year. This is while national per-pupil funding for the same period was set at around £5,000 per year for secondary school students and £3,750 for those in primary schools (National Audit Office, 2021).

The increased use of public funds in this way is difficult to rationalise or defend in systems that purport to support inclusive solutions to difficulties at school. As the National Audit Office, 2019, p. 8) noted, ‘The main reason why local authorities have overspent their high-needs budgets is that more pupils are attending special schools.’ It proceeded to note that ‘Between January 2014 and January 2018, the number of pupils in special schools and alternative provision rose by 20.2% … Spending on independent special schools increased sharply – by 32.4% in real terms between 2013–2014 and 2017–2018.’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Pupils with an EHC plan in mainstream education</th>
<th>Pupils in state special schools</th>
<th>Pupils in state alternative provision</th>
<th>Pupils in independent special schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>120,530</td>
<td>97,395</td>
<td>12,895</td>
<td>15,870</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>120,070</td>
<td>101,250</td>
<td>13,585</td>
<td>16,520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>116,185</td>
<td>105,365</td>
<td>15,015</td>
<td>17,345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>116,255</td>
<td>109,855</td>
<td>15,670</td>
<td>17,820</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>119,815</td>
<td>115,315</td>
<td>16,730</td>
<td>19,610</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change between 2014 and 2018</td>
<td>−0.6%</td>
<td>+18.4%</td>
<td>+29.7%</td>
<td>+23.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While one can acknowledge that the resources needed to educate some of the most troubled and/or disabled young people are likely to be substantial, one also has to recognise that these are very large sums of money to be spending on a particular solution (ie special school placement) to their difficulties at school. We have to ask whether the expenditure on a private special school placement many times as much as on an ‘ordinary’ school placement could not be used more imaginatively on some kind of alternative inclusive solution. An authority could, for example, for the cost of the most expensive pupil placement, £107,000 per year in the case of our example here, provide several full-time teaching assistants (the average salary at the time of writing £17,364 per year) to support a child in the mainstream, all dedicated solely to the inclusive education of one child.

Indeed, one of the recommendations of the National Audit Office, 2019, p. 12) was that …

The Department [of Education] should review the incentives in the funding arrangements and the accountability system, and make changes that encourage and support mainstream schools to be more inclusive in terms of admitting, retaining and meeting the needs of pupils with SEND, whether they have EHC plans or require other support.

But creativity, originality, imagination and vision are likely to be in short supply as long as the simple solution of separation exists. For as long as it does exist, it will always be a case of ‘Groundhog Day’ as far as inclusion is concerned.

Intersections

If we could distil one theme from the literature of the last 50 years (literature, that is, on inclusion and special education) – it would surely be that there are no simple definitions of the concept of inclusion – an idea that draws from and is driven by diverse fields of interest with different principles, epistemologies and aims. And the idea of disability, particularly where the ‘disability’ refers to difficulties in learning, is itself plural and disputed. There is recognition now that there are no simple contributory factors leading to the problems that young people or adults may experience in schools and colleges. Gone are the days we imagined problems to be emerging from some singular cause (usually thought to be organic
in origin), or some simple combination of causes (such as … child’s organic problem + school’s poorly attuned pastoral system). As our picture of what happens in educational failure becomes more detailed and more clearly coloured we begin to see less in the way of special ‘needs’ (though some youngsters clearly do need something extra in the way of resources), and more in the way of altered kinds of education for all.

Gradually, and against much resistance, the plurality of disadvantaging factors and situations facing children and young people is making itself understood. The inevitable intersection of multiple factors in producing disadvantage is recognised more widely now, though it has taken one hundred years for thinking to move forward comprehensively.

One of the lessons that have emerged from these changing ideas about children’s difficulties at school is that there is no clearly defined population for whom special provision should cater, even though assessment procedures with all their supposed precision had implied (and still imply) that those who are identified have discrete ‘within-person’ problems. The reason that within-person deficits have been found from assessment procedures, of course, is because people expect to find them. If one defines an issue and then sets up an instrument to identify the defined issue around its defined parameters, one is certain to find evidence of its defined existence. It’s a variety of social psychologists’ phenomenon of ‘motivated reasoning’ (reasoning, in other words, in the service of some preconception) described by Kunda (1990).

Children fall behind at school for a host of reasons. Reid and Valle (2004) have discussed how, rather than being the product of dysfunction, learning ‘disabilities’ are in fact constructed out of the expectations and understandings that dominate education discourse. Trent and Artiles (2019) have extended these understandings to today’s position in the US. Their analyses reveal that it is minority populations of various kinds who were (and still are) identified as having learning difficulties or behaviour difficulties and who were (and are) disproportionately selected for special provision: Tomlinson (1981/2018), Artiles and Trent (1994), Artiles (1998), Patton (1998), Ferri and Connor (2005, p. 454), Smith and Kozleski (2005), Raffo et al. (2007) and Connor et al. (2019), amongst many others, all tell essentially the same story. The evidence shows that notions of specialness – of learning difficulty, or, worse, learning disability – are constructed as much as anything out of the disadvantage created by situational status.
The focus is now on the intersections of a range of personal and cultural characteristics in creating the difficulties so many children and young people at school experience. An intersectional perspective encourages practitioners and scholars to look at the ways in which issues interact and difficulties are created, not only through ability and physical or sensory impairment but also, through gender, ethnicity, class, culture, income level, care status, and other factors (see Schuelka et al., 2019).

**The future?**

What lessons can be learned from the lack of progress to inclusion – from the Groundhog Day phenomenon – and how should we proceed?

*Abandon simplistic thinking about failure*

The allure of putative fix-it solutions seems to be almost hypnotic. There is hope, however, that an intersectional understanding of difficulty at school is now taking root. Such an understanding recognises that failure at school is usually less to do with ‘disorder’ or ‘disability’ and more to do with context, culture and community in the extraordinary circumstances that school environments present to many children and young people.

*Cultivate new models of research inquiry*

Teachers should feel comfortable interrogating and critiquing the de-contextualised prescriptions that emerge from ‘What Works’ research. Indeed, cultivating the confidence to make such a critique should surely be one of the principal aims of professional education.

Reid and Valle (2005) make the point that basic forms of knowledge – personal, tacit knowledge – that teachers possess must be reinstated over those that trace their lineage to the kinds of scientistic thinking exemplified in the philosophy of ‘What Works’. (Others, such as Robinson (2017), and Hart et al. (2013) have made similar points.) Teachers do not need the top-down advice coming from ‘What Works’ enthusiasts, Reid and Valle imply. Rather, they need to feel secure in using the tools of critical inquiry – ‘observation, conferencing, and interviewing; generating anecdotal records; taking and analyzing field notes; constructing sociograms, analyzing student work and portfolios.’
Linked with this, researchers can work to develop models of research in looking at inclusion that respects the idiosyncrasies of particular situations and cultures, simultaneously eschewing the sterile ‘helicopter research’ that imposes ‘What Works’ solutions. Researchers and teachers can co-construct research that helps to address particular issues and problems in the classroom.

**Reflect on the point of education**

Biesta (2007, p. 1) argues that we must ‘… keep in view education as a thoroughly moral and political practice that requires continuous democratic contestation and deliberation.’ We can reflect, as Biesta (2020) recommends, on the point of education. We can move away from words like ‘effective’ and ‘efficient’ with regard to education (as Slee et al., 1998, argued some time ago), and substitute for them words such as ‘worthwhile’ and ‘meaningful’. Biesta suggests that ‘effectiveness’ is never an educational good in itself, only becoming meaningful in relation to views about the purpose(s) of education. And ‘efficient’ education, so beloved of legislators looking for get-out clauses to the high financial costs of inclusion, should perhaps be expunged from our vocabulary entirely.

**Fight inequality**

Teachers, researchers and academics can challenge local and national policy that acts to exaggerate the difference. Rarely is concerted action taken against local or national legislatures to challenge unjust or inappropriate measures, instituted by politicians on populist platforms such as ‘improving standards.’ Teachers may feel powerless in these arenas but DeMoss (2003, p. 61), Sailor (2015) and Kopanke (2020) review evidence which – in the USA, at least – shows that such action can help to decrease disparities, whether or not plaintiffs directly succeed in their claims. DeMoss notes: ‘States seem to respond to the pressures that litigation places on them to take a closer look at the ways they fund education.’

**Coda**

At the end of Groundhog Day, there’s a transformation when the hero falls in love. Love conquers all. He goes to bed and wakes up the next morning to a different tune on the radio. It’s February 3rd. Life has moved on.
How can inclusive education move on? Certainly, love will not be enough. As we have noted, many of the problems in keeping us in Groundhog Day are structural, created by a political system that has little real interest in change. But progress depends on more than changes in politics and policy: the field needs to go well beyond inclusive education’s historical preoccupations and grasp the insights that come from intersectional understandings of failure and unhappiness at school. It needs to stop seeking new syndromes ‘explaining’ failure and to argue powerfully against the use of such syndromes to rationalise the difficulties students experience with life at school. It needs to go beyond failed models of inquiry that cement in place age-old diagnosis-and-treat pedagogy. It needs, in short, to trust in the intelligence of the teacher.

REFERENCES


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