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## Is a sociology of special and inclusive education possible?

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This article discusses the expansion of education systems that now, following international declarations, are expected to offer an “Education for All” to children, young people and adults. Since in these declarations special education and inclusive education are conjoined, sociological questions can be asked as to what sort of social relationships and conflicts are involved in this expansion of a sub-system that underpins mass education. The article uses recent research asking school and college heads, teachers and administrators, how they defined and treated the young people and what future they envisaged for them, given that an ideology of human capital dominates government thinking and policy.

**Keywords:** special; inclusive; human capital; class; race

In 2013 the editor of the *British Journal of Sociology* wrote in his first editorial that “Crisis is our discipline’s default position. The question ‘what is sociology’ is in principle never resolved” (Slater 2013, 1) Nearly 40 years previously. John Rex, who played a significant part in developing sociology as a subject in the 1960s and 1970s, had predicted a similar dismal future for the discipline if Thomas Kuhn’s notion of scientific paradigm shifts were taken to justify a Kuhnian pluralism, where dogmas and cults, ideological wars and flights back to empiricism (“count them, do the surveys and give us the facts”) all passed for intellectual social inquiry (Rex 1978). In the early 1980s it did seem possible to introduce some serious enquiry, using critical sociological perspectives, into debates about special education; notably by asking what sort of social structures and social relationships occur when a mass education system is expanding, and with a sub-system known as “special education” developing and expanding. It was certainly possible to question what sort of conflicts between interest groups involved in this part of the system were apparent and what beliefs and ideologies were used to justify the situation of the “special”. Even at that time it was obvious that the major players in special education were medical, and psychological (both still imbued with strands of eugenic thinking) administrative (how many are there?) and prescriptive educational (what do we do with them?). Professional and practitioner beliefs were based on well-worn “theories” of disadvantage and deficit within individuals, families, social and racial groups. Critical histories of these developments were few, and there was an absence of social, political and economic perspectives. Practitioners and parents, were in particular, being asked to accept unproblematically clinical, psychological and pedagogical judgements that were actually very debatable (Tomlinson [1982] 2012).

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Since then it is undoubtedly the case that worldwide, education systems have been developing, and expanding. In many countries higher level education was initially for elite groups, basic education for some and exclusion from education for many. But increasingly countries have accepted the premise that education should incorporate all social groups. By the end of the twentieth century concern for groups excluded from regular or mainstream education, especially those regarded as having special educational needs (SEN), disabilities or difficulties in learning had become a world-wide issue. In 1990 at Jomtien in Thailand, in 1994 at Salamanca, Spain, and in 2000 in Dakar, Senegal, there was global affirmation for an “Education for All” children, young people and adults (UNESCO 1990, 1994, 2000). In Salamanca 300 participants representing 92 governments, and 25 international organizations met “to consider fundamental policy shifts required to promote the approach of inclusive education, namely, enabling schools to serve all children, particularly those with special educational needs” (UNESCO 1994, Preface). Inclusive education and special education were thus inevitably conjoined.

The structural expansion of the education system to take account of the consequences of inclusive/special education, the competitive conflict between interest groups claiming monopolies of control of the expansion, and the end result of these conflicts, are all areas of legitimate sociological study (see Archer 1982, 2012). But education systems and their parts do not develop unless there is some declared end, – economic, religious, humanitarian or other – and participants with vested interests will compete over means and ends. In much of the world, ideologies of human capital are the dominant explanation for expansion. Countries, it is claimed, need “world class” education systems which will boost national economies and allow for successful competition in the global economy and all must be in this competition (Tomlinson 2013). Educational success in the twenty-first century is increasingly measured by global test results, organised by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD),<sup>1</sup> and much blame is heaped upon those who do not achieve to desired levels in tests. “Tails” of low attainers and disaffected students are held to impede the march to world class economic performance, although evidence on this count has always been sparse. Rather, it is the case that advanced economies are more likely to employ many young people, including those with learning difficulties, in low-wage, low-skill jobs that were still deemed necessary for the economy (Holmes and Mayhew 2010). In addition education systems were polarising young people in ways that do not necessarily benefit economies.

While only part of a project to apply sociological perspectives to the expansion of special/inclusive education and its consequences, this article deals with the question of how young people regarded as lower achievers or having special needs are currently defined, what sort of programmes are in place or suggested for them, and what are the likely destinations of the young people. The article draws on and elaborates a small-scale study carried out in 2010–2012 in five countries, discussing with school and college principals, teachers, and administrators – how they defined the young people, what courses or programmes were envisaged for them and what was their likely future.<sup>2</sup> It was apparent during the study that “theories” of human capital and social control were dominant in the beliefs of the participants. Understandably, they too – as governments, especially in England, had impressed upon them, believed that all young people should acquire some kind of a qualification or skill that would increase their human capital offerings in the market place, and control any unruly or disruptive social behaviour.

### Historical definitions

Historically who was defined as a lower attainer or having special needs depended on what constituted adequate attainments, which varied at different times, and between different countries. In countries where there is minimal education and no provision for those with disabilities, the concept of lower attainer does not apply, although disabled people can be cruelly treated (Tomlinson and Osman Ahmed Abdi 2003). In highly developed mass systems imbued with human capital and knowledge economy beliefs, low attainment is seen as a serious problem. All lower attaining young people, whether acquiring SEN labels or not, are required to orient themselves to a future of qualifications and work.

In feudal or slave societies the majority of work was performed by those with no education or a minimum of skill training – class, caste and race decided who these groups were. In post-industrial, post-colonial societies, social class and race have continued to be markers in deciding who should receive a minimal or inferior education and thus attain less in terms of currently acceptable qualifications. Historical definitions, especially in Britain and the United States were based on beliefs in the biological and cultural inferiority of lower social classes and racial groups. Social Darwinist and eugenic beliefs legitimised the social condemnation of a degenerate social class, with poor (and Black) women especially targeted as likely to produce lower attainers, delinquents or unemployables.

Counting numbers of potential lower attainers, with or without SEN or disability labels, has always been problematic. In the 1890s in England Standard Zero classes were set up for children not achieving required levels in literacy and numeracy, in addition to an expansion of special schools. In 1984 Education Minister Keith Joseph set up a (short-lived) Lower Attaining Pupils Programme, at that time some 40% did not obtain any school-leaving certificate, and in 2007 a study for the Rowntree Foundation defined lower achievers as those not obtaining current acceptable GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) passes and “likely to be badly prepared in the job market and inadequately prepared for participation in society” and who might become unemployed or criminal (Cassen and Kingdon 2007, x). Although England has never had a coherent vocational education sector, from the 1980s lower level vocational courses were developed in schools and colleges, some of them acquiring parity with academic courses. By 2011 that was all to change (Wolf 2011) and reforms to the exam system ensured that many lower attainers would be unable to acquire the required GCSE examination passes. The changes provide an example of the way qualifications can be altered in order to exclude numbers of students from what is currently defined as high or even adequate attainment. There was less focus on what these lower attaining young people would actually be studying or training.

Although it is schools serving poor, working-class and special needs students which are unlikely to achieve higher academic levels, the situation for governments has been compounded by the neo-liberal creation of competitive markets between schools and students. A proliferation of demands for special education services has come from middle-class parents with children who find learning in competitive situations difficult. An expansion of claims for dyslexia, autism, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) came in particular from parents. Teachers were more likely to claim more children had a variety of conduct disorders. In England by 2011 the government was concerned at the cost of special education support and

decided to abolish “perverse incentives to over identify children as having SEN” (DfE 2011, 9). Support for schools was cut, with only children with an Education, Health and Care Plan due to receive mandatory services, many of which were to be privatised.

In the United States historical definitions were similar. Compulsory attendance laws in the nineteenth century brought a variety of unwelcome children into the public school system. Those to be included were mainly the poor, the foreign born and immigrants. Eventually truants, delinquents, the blind, deaf, mentally deficient and feeble-minded were all candidates for exclusion into special schools or classes (Lazerson 1983), and as in England, were regarded as a “surplus” population in the labour market and more likely to be in need of social control. Although beliefs in the biological and cultural inferiority of lower social class and racial groups persisted in both countries, the United States continues to be strongly influenced by beliefs that some students are “less educable” and a large literature indicates that minorities, especially African-Americans, are more likely to be excluded from higher quality education (Blanchett 2008). The catch-all category of “learning disability” is now a crucial part of the education systems in all states, and includes large numbers of Black children.

### **Current definitions**

Official Acts, codes and guidance in England continue to be remarkably coy about defining who the individuals and groups discussed actually are. A 1996 report for the government actually noted that “An LEA [local education authority] can and should make its definition of SEN to suit its own particular circumstances” (Coopers and Lybrand 1996). The definitions offered in the July 2014 Code of Practice from the Departments of Education and Health, appear to be the familiar tautological ones – “A child or young person has SEN if they have a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her” and some may have “a physical or mental impairment” who may or may not “have SEN” (DfE/DoH 2014, 15).

The main thrust of policy is to reduce cost if possible, although the paradox here is that the more young people are included in highly competitive mainstream schooling who cannot perform at required higher levels or become disaffected, the more special education services are required, via the expansion of a “SEN industry” (Tomlinson 2012). But while governments of all political persuasions, influenced by economic, professional and parental vested interests, have acquiesced in the development of this industry, they are concerned that lower attainers and those with any sort of disability or difficulty should not become part of a surplus labour group and thus a cost to welfare benefits.

As part of the research project into the education of lower attainers, a number of people (77) who were in a position to define and work with the young people were asked for their definitions of “low attainer/special”. Participants in five countries took part (England, the United States, Germany, Malta, Finland). Below are the definitions offered by school headteachers, Principals of Further Education Colleges and administrators in England, and School Principals, teachers, administrators, and staff in post-18 Community Colleges in the United States. Definitions offered by school Principals and vocational college staff in Germany are also included here, to contrast the political systems in Germany which are more oriented towards a

social-democratic model, rather than the “Anglo-Saxon” market liberalism of the United Kingdom and the United States.

### **Definitions of lower attainers and the special (England 2012)**

- Students not achieving five A\*–C in GCSE at 16
- Students unable to achieve in a purely academic curriculum
- Students who would achieve in a more vocational curriculum
- Students who exhibit behaviour problems in school/class
- Students with a Statement of special need or disability, or who self declare at college
- Students whose parents press for a “diagnosis” of SEN
- Students from poorer homes

### **Definitions of lower attainers and the special (United States – New York and Los Angeles 2012)**

- Students who cannot attain a regular high school diploma
- Students who cannot achieve in standardised tests
- Students who may not be able to access regular post-18 college courses
- Students assessed as within current categories of SEN
- Students especially assessed as learning disabled
- Students who exhibit behaviour problems
- Students at risk of dropping out of schooling
- Students whose parents press for a “diagnosis” preferably medical or therapeutic
- Students from disadvantaged homes, especially minority homes

### **Definitions of lower attainers and the special (Germany 2012)**

- Students who leave the Hauptschule without a certificate
- Students who leave special schools without a certificate
- Students on transitional courses in vocational college
- Students unsuitable for the dual-system of apprenticeships
- Migrant and minority young people, especially with poor German language skills.
- Students from poor and disadvantaged homes
- Those unable to find work due to labour market deficiencies.

### **Inclusion as elaboration**

In England there is certainly much evidence that a structural elaboration of the education system is taking place not only in terms of an expanding diversity of schools, colleges, private, charitable and business provision but also within educational institutions. Elaboration is more than simply expansion. It involves large changes in

parts of the system. Asking the system to incorporate large numbers of young people to 18 who until relatively recently would have been regarded as educable only up to 14, with some regarded as “ineducable” until 1970, requires considerable change in funding, curriculum, qualifications and expanded and trained personnel. It has also required change in social attitudes, driven by changing ideologies. School and college staff and local administrators accept that lower attainers and those previously excluded or offered only a minimal education should now be included in terms of courses and programmes, resources and personnel. Segregated special schooling has diminished, although some parents and professionals still defend segregation. A centralised agenda (from the Department of Education via an Education Funding Agency, for adult resources from a Skills Funding Agency, and curriculum inspection from Ofsted) requires all courses to be credentialed and lead on to higher education or vocational training, although the school curriculum is to be directed towards “academic” subjects. Lower level vocational courses in colleges are to lead on to progression to further courses or into employment and include work experience. Apprenticeships remain a source of confusion with governments appearing to lack an understanding of what an apprenticeship entails. Participants in the study, with variations depending on school, college and local area, described numbers of lower attainer/special needs as around 25–30% of the young people they dealt with and commented that many of these would in the past have not been included in their institutions. Some schools (not included in this research) were keen to pass on their lower attainers or disruptive students at 14 and 16 to further education colleges. Common to all participants was an understanding that the majority of low attaining students came from lower socio-economic backgrounds, with more minority students in some areas, and usually from low-paid working homes or non-working households, especially in areas where employment was scarce or non-existent.

Schools and colleges were taking seriously the task of “including” all young people and socialising lower attainers into acceptable norms of social behaviour and preparation for lower level work. This included training in skills of self-presentation, time-keeping and obedience, all skills valued by employers. The agenda in schools and colleges was much concerned with social control. In schools “Time out” rooms, Pupil Referral Units, and forms of alternative education were part of an inclusion agenda, as preferable to permissible straight exclusions. Colleges worked hard to keep students attending courses and many students responded better to a college environment than school. Inclusion meant an expansion of claims for extra resources from an expanded number of professionals – medical, psychological, therapeutic and ancillary professionals who have all expanded their areas of expertise. The inclusion into educational institutions of many of those who would previously have been excluded comes at a price. While urging all young people to be independent, be employed (even in low-paid jobs on zero-hour contracts) many of those with low attainments or disabilities are least likely to be able to “live their own lives” and need help and resources to prevent them as adults falling into the socially excluded poor, unemployed, adult disabled or homeless, which now are part of a society disintegrating in terms of social cohesion and social integration (Archer 2003; Dorling 2015).

### **Comparative elaborations**

Although education systems differ between countries in terms of their histories, values and practices there are many similarities in how the United States and England



deal with their lower attainers. A major difference is that while the English system is now heavily centralised, in the United States a Federal government sets an agenda within which 50 states function with educational control delegated to states, local school districts and school boards. Both countries are devoted to neo-liberal policies in education and the economy, with a competitive ethos between schools and individuals, marked by constant exhortation to raise “standards” overall. As in England class and race are markers in who receives superior or inferior education and as the labour market polarised more into high-skill and low-skill jobs, African-American, Hispanic and Asian young people were more likely to be in low-skill jobs or unemployed (Tomlinson 2013, 72). Government, pressured by the global competitiveness and human capital agendas, and also by the “Education for All” declarations, conceded that all young people needed more education, and educating lower attainers of all descriptions has become big business both for Federal and State governments and for private interests. While “learning disability” in the 1980s was primarily a category for White students, now all groups are included in this and other special education categories. As in England, middle-class parents demand special education services and resources, and are more likely to move to litigation if demands are not met. The expansion of the SEN industry has become an important palliative for schools and parents and provided much employment for a range of professionals. The participants in the study considered that between 20–25% of young people fell into lower attaining/special categories, and were concerned to keep students from dropping out of education altogether. A stronger individualist work ethic and a minimal welfare system in the United States, encouraged the education and training of young people for lower level Community College courses or employment at lower levels. It had become something of a joke that many young people were prepared for the five Fs – low-paid low-wage jobs: Food (fast food, cafes, restaurant work), Filth (cleaning streets, hotels, offices), Folding (laundry work), Fetching (messenger work), Filing (low level office work) (see Tomlinson 2013, 78). In neither England nor the United States is there evidence that middle-class parents are enthusiastic for their children to take vocational courses or manual jobs.

Germany, with the largest economy in Europe, has long credited its economic success to high levels of skills in the workforce, trained in a dual-system of apprenticeships with students spending time in education and training and in which all industrial and commercial sectors participate. With a decentralised system in which 16 states (Länder) function under the wider jurisdiction of a Federal state the German education system remains selective in most states from age 10/11 although some Länder now include comprehensive schools. The Gymnasium, intended for higher level schooling, and with still only 11% of working-class children attending, the Realschule offering a technical education, and the Hauptschule providing a basic education leading on to vocational training remain the main forms of schooling. A major difference with England and the United States is the system of part-time work and part-time schooling which prepares a majority of young people post-16 for an occupation, and the respect given to “Beruf”, meaning the job and its preparation, which includes preparing young people for citizenship. Participants in the study were less likely to give a number to the possible low attainers but noted that lower ability young people are likely to be educated in the Hauptschule, and to then move to transitional vocational courses in colleges attempting to prepare them for apprenticeships or employment. These transitional courses illustrate a major elaboration of the German vocational system, which is partly a response to a shortage of employers

willing to take on apprentices. A segregated special school sector takes around 6% of young people (the term *Kruppelschulen* – Cripples School – was only changed in 1964 to physically disabled), and it is the category of learning disability which includes larger numbers of low socio-economic, minority and migrant children. A major difference between the two “Anglo-Saxon” model countries and the social democratic country is that those working with the young people in Germany are more likely to make links between a shrinking labour market, low wages and the whole economy, rather than blaming young people and their families as deficient.

### **Some conclusions**

As noted, this article constitutes only a part of what will eventually be a sociological study of the structural elaboration and expansion of education systems to take account of a world-wide adoption of an inclusion agenda, which notionally embraces all young people, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. It described a small-scale study asking those who actually organise, teach, train and prepare the young people in schools and colleges, how they go about defining and preparing them for what is now an extremely uncertain global future. This was intended to illustrate how schools and colleges have gone about engaging with an “inclusion” agenda promulgated by world governments, and the resulting elaboration and expansion of the education systems. In a comparison between various countries it was apparent that all participants had embraced the global ideology of economic competitiveness between countries which necessitate the preparation of all young people, whatever their capabilities or disabilities for some kind of work. They also, in varying degrees, embraced the notion of human capital by which the young people are expected to constantly improve their qualification and skill levels to benefit themselves and the economy. This ideology is now no longer plausible in terms of changing global economic and social contexts (Lauder 2015). Nevertheless, the aim in the schools and colleges is to follow government requirements to credential all young people and urge their constant progression to more courses and skill acquisition, and also to train them in social acquiescence and acceptance of their likely futures. England, unlike Germany and to a lesser extent the United States, has no plan to educate the young people in political understandings or democratic citizenship understandings. It will be a theme in this study of special/inclusive education from sociological perspectives to ask what is the likely future of these weaker social groups who will depend more heavily on a public education system, now expanded to some extent to take account of their presence, and on a welfare state that is currently in a process of diminution.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### **Notes**

1. The OECD was founded in 1961 to improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world. It has, as one commentator described it, become a club led by the world’s wealthiest nations, with no democratic mandate from individual countries or the United Nations. Through development and control of international tests, notably the PISA tests, it influences governments globally in the aims and reforms of their education systems within a neo-liberal ideology (Meyer and Benavot 2013).

2. The research was funded via a grant from the Leverhulme Trust and carried out by Sally Tomlinson. The grant allowed visits to be made in three English counties, New York and Los Angeles in the United States, North Rhine Westphalia in Germany, the island of Malta, and Helsinki in Finland. Some 77 participants were interviewed in their schools or colleges, and observations of students made (see Tomlinson 2013). There are around 250 Further Education colleges in England, mainly taking in students at 16, Community Colleges in the United States take students from 18/19 on two or four year courses. In Germany the BerufsKollegs take students from 16 to 18 years old.

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