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## A School under Scrutiny: A Personal Account of the Impact of Inclusion on a Small Primary School in England

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**Abstract.** This paper presents a personal account of a teacher who has responsibility for the coordination of pupils with special educational needs. In this paper she has been referred to as Sally. Sally teaches in a school in England with a significantly high proportion of pupils with special educational needs. The account demonstrates how current measures of school effectiveness in England have disadvantaged a small school which has an outstanding local reputation for inclusion. This has led to increased levels of surveillance for the teachers who have chosen to work in this school, whilst other local schools enjoy the benefits of having good reputations. The paper raises questions about whether inclusion is too much of a risk for schools given that they operate within a climate of performativity. Additionally, it raises questions about whether current measures of school effectiveness are fair on those schools with more diverse populations.

**Keywords:** Inclusion; Special Educational Needs; Resourced Provision; Primary Education

### **Introduction**

In recent years England has subscribed to the principles of the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) which emphasised the importance of increasing participation and educational achievement for all groups of learners who have been marginalised. However, at the same time recent governments in England have also emphasised the need for schools to drive up standards of educational attainment in order to ensure that England is able to compete against other countries within a global economy (Ainscow, Booth and Dyson, 2006; DFE, 2010). Whilst it cannot be denied that the principle of equality of opportunity for all is laudable, educational policies in England have essentially focused on the need to accelerate pupils' attainment in mathematics and literacy. More recently, policies have emphasised the need to eradicate the culture of low expectations for pupils with special educational needs (DFE, 2011) and curriculum frameworks have emphasised the importance of these learners demonstrating good progress in line with nationally expected progress indicators (DFE, 2013). Whilst pupils with special educational needs can and do make progress in line

with national expectations, current policies create significant tensions for those learners with special educational needs who might never be capable of demonstrating achievement in the dominant sense (Goodley, 2007). Additionally, education in England has been marketised and a culture of competition pervades. School effectiveness is evaluated by inspectors on the basis of pupils' achievements in reading, writing and mathematics. Thus, low attaining students become unattractive to schools (Ainscow, Booth and Dyson, 2006) as schools compete against one another to achieve the best results. Parents have been positioned both as stakeholders and consumers and the publication of examination results in the form of league tables enables them to choose highly performing schools above those schools in which performance is marked.

As Ball (2003) states 'performativity is a technology, a culture, a mode of regulation' (p.216). He argues that it renders old ways of thinking redundant as teachers focus on maximising student performance above the needs of their learners. School performance is managed through inspection processes, teacher appraisal and target setting. Within the performative discourse teachers are unlikely to invest time into supporting pupils who are unlikely to achieve in the dominant sense (Ball, 2003) and choosing to invest time and resources into these pupils is a dangerous move given that measurable returns are unlikely. Whilst this does not seem fair or inclusive schools and teachers have no option but to fight for their survival within such an aggressive educational context. For those schools with a significant proportion of learners with diverse needs the challenges they face are significant in terms of the overall effect on school performance indicators.

The tensions that are evident as schools attempt to respond to the standards agenda at the same time as becoming more inclusive is a well-established theme in the academic literature (Thomas and Loxley, 2007; Audit Commission, 2002). There is evidence to suggest that schools with higher proportions of pupils with special educational needs perform less well than those schools with less diverse student populations (Lunt and Norwich, 1999; Farrell, Dyson, Polat, Hutcheson and Gallanaugh, 2007). There is a risk that some schools will become 'sink' schools under the discourse of performativity as other schools actively seek ways to exclude those learners who threaten the stability of their performance indicators. This paper presents an account of one such school and articulates the effects of this on the school and the teachers who have chosen to work there. In presenting a single account this is not a study which seeks to generalise. However, this account does illuminate some of the significant costs of inclusion to schools within the current discourse of performativity.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Foucault's text, *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1991) presents a conceptual framework which has commonly been applied to analyse the experiences of pupils with special educational needs (Allan, 1996; 2008). Using the surveillance 'tools' of hierarchical surveillance, normalising judgements and the examination (Foucault, 1991) it is possible to build up an argument about the marginalisation of pupils with special educational needs within the education system.

Foucault (1978) emphasised how circulatory power permeates institutions such as schools, resulting in bodies which are manipulated, disciplined and docile (Foucault, 1991). For Foucault, hierarchical observation is embedded within all institutions, resulting in individuals never being able to escape the effects of the disciplinary gaze (Thomas and Loxley, 2007). It is an effective tool of surveillance because it is 'absolutely discreet, for it functions permanently and largely in silence' (Foucault, 1977; 177). Pupils with special educational needs and disabilities frequently become objects of scrutiny to a greater extent than their non-disabled peers. They are often more closely supervised in the classroom and on the playground (Allan, 1996) and their progress is reviewed often more frequently and more publicly than the progress of their peers. Additionally they may receive additional monitoring visits and assessments from multi-agency workers which place them under increased surveillance.

Schools and medical professionals employ what Foucault referred to as 'normalising judgements' (Foucault, 1977) as way of measuring the extent of deviance. Thus, distances from the norm are identified to justify processes such as remediation and correction. These processes serve to promote standardisation and homogeneity (Allan, 2008). In relation to pupils with special educational needs norms are used to determine whether or not pupils qualify for a label of 'special educational needs'. However, norms are social constructs and are often manipulated to serve political purposes. In England mechanisms such as individual education plans, remediation and intervention and individual support are then employed to eradicate difference. Education policies continue to emphasise the need to 'close the gaps' between pupils with and without special educational needs (DFE, 2010; 2011) under the banner of equality of opportunity. However, such policies are aimed at eradicating diversity and promoting homogeneity in order for education to serve market purposes.

Masschelein and Simons (2005) have emphasised how inclusive schooling continues to fail students as a result of neoliberal policies which continue to emphasise the responsibilities that individuals to society. All individuals are constructed as able, productive and skilled and this is problematic for those learners who may need long-term support (Goodley, 2007). The idea that the standardised norms are applicable to all pupils results in the marginalisation of those learners who 'in spite of all this coaching and extra support, are not able to catch up...' (Lloyd, 2008). This results in these learners being failed by an education system that has not met their needs.

Foucault's final element of surveillance was the examination. According to Allan (2008) the examination...introduces individuality in order to fix and capture and makes each individual a 'case' (p.87). This enables individuals to be described in particular kinds of ways and makes it possible to make comparisons between individuals. For pupils with special educational needs this mechanism of surveillance is evident through formal assessment processes which seek to make diagnoses. Special needs professionals carry out a multitude of assessments which result in categories being assigned to individuals. These categorisations

can be empowering (Glazzard, 2010) but they can equally marginalise those who own the labels which are assigned. Pupils with special educational needs are subjected to more frequent assessments than their non-disabled peers and this can result in them becoming objects of scrutiny. According to Allan:

These mechanisms of surveillance create subjects who are known and marked in particular kinds of ways and who are constrained to carry the knowledge and marks ... the child with special needs, the disaffected, and even the included child can easily be understood as having been constructed through a whole hierarchy of power and knowledge, with needs identified through a complex process of assessment which is aimed at distinguishing the abnormal from the normal; and perpetually kept under surveillance through a whole network of supervision.

(Allan, 2008: 87)

The Code of Practice for Special Educational Needs (DFES, 2001) has introduced processes which result in perpetual forms of surveillance for pupils with special educational needs. The special needs system creates an 'othering' effect on those learners who fall outside of the limits of normality. The focus of current education policy in England serves the purpose of eradicating difference through increasing surveillance of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities. Educational policy in England fails to interrogate the norms which are being inculcated. Instead, there remains an assumption that the norms are advantageous to all (Lloyd, 2008) in order to serve the economic needs of society (Goodley, 2007). This results in pupils with special educational needs being placed under increased forms of surveillance which perpetuates a sense of failure and isolates them from their peers. Policy fails to recognise that different notions of what constitutes 'success' need to be applied to different groups of learners. Unless education policy is radically transformed in this way, as inclusion necessitates, then schooling will always lead to exclusion (Slee, 2001).

## **Methodology**

This study adopts a life history approach. Despite its popularity at the beginning of the twentieth century, the approach languished under modernism because it consistently failed to gain credibility as an objective approach to research. However, the 'narrative turn' (Denzin, 1997) in the latter part of the twentieth century demonstrated that the approach had gained in popularity. According to Lewis:

Quite possibly, it is the principal way of understanding the lived world. Story is central to human understanding- it makes live livable, because without a story, there is no identity, no self, no other.

(Lewis, 2011: 505)

The life history approach values subjective data as a credible form of knowledge. It is rooted in an epistemological position which gives credence to people's own unique experiences and interpretations. Advocates of the approach (for example Goodson and Sikes, 2001) exploit its potential to illuminate the effects of the wider social, cultural and political discourses on the lives and experiences of

individuals. Lives are not lived in isolation. They are shaped by the prevailing policy discourses which influence practice. The life history approach seeks to analyse the effects of these discourses on people's unique experiences and more specifically, in the case of this account, the effects of performativity discourses on a school which prides itself on being inclusive.

Sally's account, presented below, is her own written documentary account of her experiences of working in an inclusive school under a regime of performativity.

### **Sally's account**

Over the last thirty six years I have enjoyed the responsibility of teaching hundreds of children in all age groups of the primary phase of education. In that time my own beliefs, values and attitudes have been shaped. I consider myself to be a reflective practitioner who is also responsive to current needs and expectations. Education is an ever evolving profession and I am privileged to have had an active role in developing, not only my own professional values, skills, knowledge and beliefs, but also influencing those of colleagues. Teaching has always been a challenge, a challenge that has excited and motivated me enormously throughout my entire career.

My commitment to my chosen career could not be stronger and yet in recent years my devotion to the profession is also sadly tainted by the fact that my colleagues and I are charged with an almost impossible task. We work in a small primary school in Yorkshire. There are currently 126 pupils on roll and the school hosts a Resourced Provision for ten children with interaction and communication needs. The majority of these children fall within the autistic spectrum. Working with these children can be both challenging and extremely rewarding. We pride ourselves on our very inclusive practices and above all else the ability of all of our children to both accept and understand difference. So why should our attitudes and those of the wonderful children we educate place us in what is currently an unenviable position of close scrutiny? Many parents of children who find education more challenging initially seek acceptance for their child and it is in our school that many have found this. Our reputation for being supportive of these children has resulted in many families placing their children with special educational needs into our care. These children have varying needs and many of them are currently enjoying their education in our mainstream classes. To date 48% of our children have a status of special educational needs.

Every single one of them is welcome in the school and every single member of staff works tirelessly to make adaptations to their practices to ensure that these children are included in all aspects of school life. The school is a wonderful place to work but the challenges in doing so cannot be overstated. During the last four years the spotlight has firmly shone on our school data and the ensuing pressures have been felt by all who work there on a daily basis. As teachers we do not deny our responsibility to ensure that every child makes progress. Systems have been developed to ensure that children's immediate needs are identified and addressed and indeed progress for many children has been accelerated. Those without special educational needs now make better than expected progress and we are proud of their success. Our data, however, is the

key judgement about our work and it is a bleak picture because often our pupils do not make progress or attain in line with national expectations.

Decisions about whether or not to admit children into the Resourced Provision are made by the local authority. . Having gained a place in the provision children should be included in main stream education for 80% of the school week. The expectations appear to be so simple; the reality is far more complex. 50% of these children have very little or no language. This results in them frequently being unable to access much of the curriculum in main stream classrooms. Children who cannot speak are greatly disadvantaged under current measures of progress and attainment because this impacts negatively on their skills in reading and writing. It is the narrow measure of progress that results in this school fighting to stay out of special measures. Data for the children in the Resourced Provision is included in the overall data of the school. Two years ago a very small cohort of 13 year 6 children left the school. Of those 13 children 9 had a status of special educational needs and 3 of those children were on the autistic spectrum. Each child carried almost 8% of the data. The test results were undeniably poor that year. Autistic children frequently lack creativity in their writing and a deep understanding of the texts they have read. Each child had been offered much additional support. Quite simply it made very little difference. The beam of the spotlight shone brightly in our direction. The visit from Ofsted was not far behind and we awaited our fate. The inspection was not, in reality, the destructive outcome we had anticipated. Much that was deemed good was recognised and the inspector dug deep and wide and far beyond our data. The result was that the school was judged to be satisfactory. Ultimately all that was good was recognised but the data was the driving force in the final judgment. The local authority had, for over 2 years, deemed us to be a failing school. The word satisfactory was sadly music to our ears. The celebrations lasted for a full 24 hours before the spotlight returned and once again we worked under the threat, from the local authority, of failure.

The above has led me to frequently reflect upon the circumstances in which we, as a school, find ourselves. The school is situated in an area of severe social deprivation and unemployment is high. Few parents have accessed further education. Over many years the school has educated a high percentage of children with special educational needs and the percentage is rapidly rising. This can be attributed to several different factors. The success of the Resourced Provision was widely documented. Children who had been unable to fully access their education in other main stream schools were able to do so whilst also receiving specialist part time education in the provision. Our reputation grew and over a number of years parents with children with special educational needs moved their children to our main stream classes. Many children came to us because their placements in other schools had failed and relationships had broken down. We enthusiastically overcame barriers to inclusion. Additionally some children were placed in the Resourced Provision but on occasions such placements were questionable. They did however settle well in the school and frequently moved from the provision to mainstream classrooms. As the standards agenda took hold there was however a new group of children who

joined us. They were the children that other local schools preferred not to educate. Countless times we have listened to distraught parents who felt that their child was not welcome in other local schools. In fact on many occasions other schools have recommended us as being highly experienced in educating children with special educational needs. With spare places and a willingness to educate every child we have been left with no alternative but to add these children to our roll. Many come from disadvantaged backgrounds and their parents have poor basic skills and are either unable or unwilling to work with us to support their children. Local schools that have offloaded the problem are meeting current national expectations for progress and attainment. Data confirms that they have very few children with special educational needs on roll. I question their commitment to education for all. We find ourselves in a vicious circle. Our data are low, Ofsted deem us to be satisfactory and most local good and outstanding schools are full. Parents who care see only a judgement of satisfactory and quickly ensure that they secure a place at one of the 'better' schools. We take what is left. What is left are wonderful children, many of them with troubled home lives, few with nursery experience and consequently very low levels of attainment on entry to full time education. Their needs are frequently emotional needs and, for us, addressing these is of paramount importance. I spend many hours in special needs review meetings and running multi-agency meetings as well as communicating with social services and many other outside agencies. These meetings, without doubt, are of huge benefit to our children. It ensures that their lives are safe and school offers them the stability they crave and need. In the current climate education is measured by such limiting factors. Attainment and progress in reading, writing and mathematics is the only measure of a school. Education is far broader than this. It is in this broader context that as a school we enjoy so much success. Our children clearly understand and accept difference; their emotional needs are met and addressed with sensitivity, care and concern. Each and every child understands and accepts difference and with each and every child success is celebrated in its many broad and varying forms.

Our children are happy and due to significant special educational needs some make progress at their own rate and in their own time. They are human beings and as such progress is not necessarily consistent. There may be rapid progress which slows and then builds again. For some children their specialist needs result in progress slowing for longer periods of time before it gradually builds again. In the current climate these children impact negatively on the measures of our success as a school. As a school we are fighting for our very survival. During the last school inspection all teaching was judged to be good; however because of low levels of progress the overall judgement could be no better than satisfactory. It has been and continues to be a long fought battle. The staff has been placed under intense scrutiny for over four years. They have been observed and their every movement is monitored relentlessly. Over half of the teachers in the school have left, disillusioned and tired of the endless need to justify themselves. As a near failing school we cannot deny that the local authority has offered us extensive support. Time and again head teachers from strong schools have worked alongside us only to disappear and be replaced as they have failed



to make a positive impact. Each one has identified the need for change. Again and again we have followed their lead. Changes have replaced changes and as a group the staff has been left both exhausted and confused. Our final 'chance' came two terms ago when an executive Head Teacher was appointed to support the school's Head Teacher. Her commitment to us is undeniable. She possesses a drive and passion that is second to none and is a true inspiration. So why is she succeeding where others have failed? Our data is poor. She agrees. Our children are a challenge in the current climate. She agrees. We must improve progress and attainment. She agrees. Slowly but surely the picture is improving. I attribute this to the very realistic and positive approach of the Executive Head Teacher. Her message has, not surprisingly, changed very little. There is in fact only one difference in her approach. Our weaknesses are identified but additionally she has also identified our strengths and celebrated them with us. In four long years this is the first time that any positive aspects of the school have been identified. The impact on staff morale is understandably positive. We have never denied the need for the school to move forward and we have never been complacent about the need for change. Until now progress has been slow. Teachers are not dissimilar to the children they teach. We also work hard but hard work does not always equate to rapid progress. As teachers we praise our children's efforts, identify their strengths and identify and support them in overcoming their difficulties. We deserve and respond positively to exactly the same approach. No one would ever present a child with a diet of negative comments. We know that in a very short space of time the child would simply lose confidence and develop a sense of failure. Some would give up altogether. This has been the scenario for teaching staff in our school. We have been excessively scrutinised and our failings have been identified whilst any strengths have been totally ignored. The results have been that half of the staff have become exhausted and disillusioned and have finally left their posts. Even teachers who are highly committed to their chosen vocation can and do eventually become disillusioned. Most people respond well to advice. It is eternal pessimism that can eventually grind them down. Our enthusiasm is renewed, our passion to succeed is stronger than ever and our thanks go to one person who identified not only our weaknesses but also took the time to identify and celebrate our strengths.

### **Discussion**

It is possible to analyse Sally's account with reference to Foucault's conceptual framework. The school she works in has demonstrated a commitment to inclusion through its admissions policies whilst other schools locally have excluded those pupils who transgress the limits of normality. As Ball (2003) puts it 'the ethics of competition and performance are very different from the older ethics of professional judgement and co-operation' (p.218). It has been argued that as schools compete to produce quantified outputs that count, they are unlikely to "invest" in work with children with special needs where the margins for improved performance are limited' (Ball, 2003: 223). Education policies in England have, for the last two decades, linked school effectiveness to quantifiable outputs. In short, effective schools get good results. The performativity discourse intensified during New Labour's period of governance.

The current coalition government has aggressively promoted this discourse through the introduction of a more rigorous school inspection framework which takes greater account of pupils' achievements in relation to national norms. Additionally, the introduction of a more rigorous system of teacher performance management in schools has made it easier for school leaders to dismiss those teachers who are deemed to be under-performing on the basis of their results. This is coupled with the introduction of new Teacher Standards (DFE, 2012) which place a sharper focus on pupil progress and outcomes. This results in significant challenges for those teachers who educate pupils who are unable to demonstrate achievement in this dominant sense.

This aggressive educational context makes it possible for some schools to thrive and others to sink, irrespective of teacher quality. Whilst some schools fail to value some aspects of diversity, for example, poor pupil behaviour, other schools like the one in which Sally works admit such pupils, work with them and keep them. Whether this is right or wrong is largely dependent upon one's personal values. Not all diversity is good, especially when it impacts negatively on other pupils. Some schools therefore demonstrate greater or lesser commitments to inclusion depending on the values their leaders subscribe to. Although it is easy to argue against inclusion on the basis of its effects on other learners, segregating and therefore marginalising some pupils does not resonate with a socially just education system.

### **Normalising judgements**

Normalising judgements are employed to measure distances from the norm. For Sally, these judgements are made against nationally expected rates of pupil progress and attainment and these apply to all pupils. The pupils in her school have consistently demonstrated progress and attainment which is lower than that expected nationally and consequently this has resulted in increased surveillance from the local authority. Additional intervention from executive head teachers and local authority personnel to bring the school and its teachers up to the required standard has failed because rates of pupil progress and attainment have not accelerated sufficiently in line with national expectations. Attempts to promote standardisation and homogeneity have exacerbated the sense of failure experienced by Sally and her colleagues in the school.

School inspections in England now evaluate the quality of teaching by its impact on pupil progress. Put simply, teaching can only be judged good or outstanding, and consequently teachers can only be good or outstanding, if their pupils make progress over time which is deemed to be at least good. On the surface this sounds fair and equitable but given that progress is measured on the basis of socially constructed norms, it seems reasonable to argue that some pupils will find it more difficult to demonstrate good progress than others. Whilst arguably some pupils with special educational needs do make good progress, a significant proportion of them do not. This is because the progress indicators that they are expected to demonstrate are often, for them, unachievable (Lloyd, 2008). Current education policy in England emphasises the necessity for all pupils to make the same rate of progress, irrespective of their starting points. In this

respect, all pupils are expected to demonstrate good progress even if they do not attain at the same level, including those with special educational needs and disabilities. Although 'closing the gap' policies can undeniably have a positive impact on learners from disadvantaged communities or pupils on free-school meals, not all pupils are able to make progress which is consistent with national expectations. This is problematic for those teachers, like Sally, who choose to work in mainstream schools which include pupils with severe and profound learning disabilities. For Sally, caring for pupils' holistic needs is important but Ball (2003) reminds us that caring 'has no place in the hard world of performativity' (p.222) where the only thing that counts is the results that pupils achieve. Performativity forces teachers to be 'reprofessionalized' (Seddon, 1997) as their previous values become redundant (Ball, 2003). However, in Sally's account it is evident that she has a clear rationale for her practice which is not solely based upon improving measurable quantified outputs. Sally is keen to demonstrate the non-quantifiable outputs that make her school effective, such as the school's commitment to inclusion. This is despite the current educational discourses that have led to her school being inappropriately viewed as a failing school.

### **Hierarchical observation**

It is clear from the account that hierarchical observation has been employed in Sally's school to a greater extent than in other local schools. Additional monitoring visits from the local authority advisors and the channelling in of additional human resources in the form of executive head teachers from other schools has resulted in increased forms of surveillance. This is due to low pupil progress and attainment data as a result of the high proportion of pupils with special educational needs in the school. It is pertinent that several executive Head Teachers have failed to accelerate pupil progress and attainment in the school, thus signalling that the problems are not due to weak leadership. Local schools which have actively promoted the exclusion of these pupils have been largely free of monitoring by the local authority as attention has been directed towards Sally's school. Cole (2005) points out that inclusion is a risky business. She argues that inclusion can be a potential risk for schools especially when performance indicators are to be the overriding concern. Increased forms of hierarchical observation have effectively pathologised this school and the teachers who have chosen to work in it. Cole (2005) argues that 'we need to acknowledge the 'risks' and believe that they are worth taking' (p.342). However, Sally's account demonstrates that this is questionable given the extent of surveillance which has been implemented and the potential risks associated with failing an inspection.

### **The examination**

The examination operates in the form of school inspections and local authority monitoring inspections. In relation to Sally's school judgements have been applied which have resulted in the stigmatisation of the school and the teachers who work within it. Negative categorisations have not been assigned to other local schools with less diverse populations. These negative judgements can impute a sense of 'othering' which marginalises all those who work in the school

and its pupils. In some cases labelling can be beneficial if it challenges schools and their leadership teams to improve. However, in Sally's account it is evident that the labelling has been detrimental because it has resulted in the school developing an increasing reputation for being good at inclusion but poor at raising standards.

## Conclusion

This paper has applied Foucault's conceptual framework of surveillance to analyse the experiences of one teacher working in an inclusive school. Rather than using the framework to analyse the experiences of pupils with special educational needs this paper has drawn on the framework to analyse Sally's experiences of working in an inclusive school. Through applying the framework in this way it is possible to see how Sally's school and the teachers within it have become objects of perpetual surveillance. It would appear that the technologies of hierarchical observation are employed to serve the function of creating standardisation and homogeneity. Current education policy in England seeks to eradicate differences between schools because their effectiveness is measured in the same way. However, all schools operate in various different contexts and inclusive schools which have pupils with significantly diverse needs should not be measured in the same way as schools with significantly less diverse student populations. Whilst this paper does not wish to promote the idea that national performance indicators are irrelevant to inclusive schools, I do wish to make a case for other non-quantifiable outputs to be taken into consideration when evaluating school effectiveness. Education outputs are not solely about results. Inclusive educators like Sally seek to promote inclusive values amongst their students. If we want to create a better, fairer and more inclusive society then surely it is important to take into account these 'softer' outputs when evaluating the effectiveness of inclusive schools. "Value added" can be measured in different ways and teachers like Sally should not be penalised for choosing to work in inclusive schools. As long as this continues to be the case then inclusion for many schools may simply be a risk not worth taking.

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