

FUTURE SECONDARY SCHOOLS FOR DIVERSITY: WHERE ARE WE NOW, AND WHERE COULD WE BE?

A “futures thinking” approach to planning for diversity and inclusion, informed by an investigation of the current over-representation of secondary aged students in special schools in England.

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Abstract

In 2011, 65% of the 76,900 pupils aged between 5 and 16 in special schools in England were of secondary age. When this population is broken down further, a constant rise in pupil numbers is seen; from just under 3,500 pupils at age 5, to more than 10,000 at age 15, with a large leap in numbers between the ages 10 and 11. This thesis views these patterns as demonstrations of disproportionality and as indications that inclusion in mainstream secondary schools is not being achieved.

The thesis fills a gap in the literature exemplified by the paucity of studies on this phenomenon. It is distinctive in not only exploring a problem and then suggesting ways of overcoming it, it also tests these suggestions. The thesis is in two parts, the first is a standard empirical enquiry, using a survey methodology, the second uses futures studies methodologies and evaluation techniques to create and develop a vignette of a future school that successfully includes those children currently placed in special schools.

A critical realist perspective is adopted, acknowledging that explanations are contingent and influenced by personal experience and bias (at the level of researcher and participants). Hence a range of stakeholder views are sought, along with the involvement of groups of practitioners and experts in the refinement of a vignette of a future school. The thesis employs a mixed methods approach, in order to base findings on as many sources as possible. It also involves a futures thinking aspect, in the design of a preferable, transforming, normative image of a future education system.

In part one explanations about why the phenomenon of over-representation occur are sought through a literature review, then a questionnaire of key stakeholders (those involved in school placement decisions). Factors that are commented on most frequently are school level factors and within child factors. These findings point to limitations of current models used to understand disability and special educational needs, the thesis posits that an extended multi-dimensional model is needed, and suggests a number of existing models that could be developed.

In part two a vignette of a future school is created by considering how problems and issues raised in part one of the study could be circumvented. This vignette is evaluated by experts who have experiential and theoretical knowledge of the field of special educational needs and inclusion. The evaluation contributes to the further refinement of the vignette.

This thesis highlights the unexplored phenomenon of secondary over-representation in special schools in England and presents an in-depth analysis of the reasons that stakeholders give to explain this over-representation. Uniquely, this analysis is then translated into an imaginary design of a possible future inclusive school, the evaluation of which in turn highlights some of the persistent issues about the purposes and design of schools in a diverse society.

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