

## **Intellectual masturbation: a rejoinder to Söder and Booth**

**MIKE OLIVER**

*(This is the penultimate draft of an article that appeared in the European Journal of Special Education 7 (1) 20 -28)*

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper provides a critique of the debate between Tony Booth and Marten Söder. It suggests that their argument is outdated and irrelevant and locked into old views of integration. A new view of integration is then advanced, based upon the experience of disability and the views of disabled people.

---

Reading the argument between Marten Söder (1989, 1991) and Tony Booth (1991) left me feeling that it was all rather irrelevant and outdated. As far as irrelevance is concerned, it is only people with abilities as Finkelstein (1990) has begun to call them, who could spend so much time arguing whether labelling theory tends to deny the reality of disability. As far as being outdated, throughout the 1980s disabled people have carried out their own social analysis and have moved beyond sterile discussions of whether the experience of disability really is 'real' or whether it is socially constructed. Before making my own rejoinder to a debate which could be described as nothing more than intellectual masturbation, I need to make my own position clear. As a disabled person and academic, I am in favour of academic debates about the nature of disability; what concerns me about this one is that it is yet one more example of people with abilities attempting to speak authoritatively about us.

### **A CRITIQUE**

Intellectual masturbation may seem a harsh way to describe a legitimate academic argument but it is precisely because we regard such activities as legitimate that they need to be confronted polemically. What we had in their discussion were two academics with abilities, discussing the relevance of a theory developed by other people with abilities in the context of studies of groups who were deviant but not disabled, and all this debate took place, divorced from any reference to direct experiences of disability. Now that may be scientific, but I doubt if it is very useful in understanding the real nature of disability, or indeed, integration in modern society.

Apart from the paucity of references to the work of disabled writers and studies which attempt to take the experience of disability seriously, both

Booth and Söder constantly refer to disabled people as people with disabilities. This is a linguistic attempt to deny the reality of disability - disabled people are people first who just happen to have a disability -and one which disabled people have rejected. We know that we do not just happen to have a disability or that we are people first; our disabilities are essential parts of self, to be affirmed and celebrated, not denied or relegated to an appendage; and as such, we demand to be called disabled people.

This denial is not merely linguistic but also a denial of our recent history and our struggles with governments and agencies such as the World Health Organization in the international context and the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys in Britain, as well as professionals and academics who will insist on speaking for us. In 1981 disabled people in Britain formed the British Council of Organizations of Disabled People and, to unite us throughout the world, Disabled Peoples International' was formed; not the British Council of Organizations of People with Disabilities nor People with Disabilities International. Disabled people had chosen what they wanted to be called in the teeth of opposition from all kinds of vested interests and to keep calling us people with disabilities is to deny the reality of our experiences and the recent history of our struggles (Oliver 1990a).

Their argument is also outdated in that it appears to be locked into a social constructionist mode of thought, fashionable in sociology 20 years ago but no longer. True, Booth does provide a critique of the relativism underpinning Söder's social constructionist approach but what does he put in its place? A set of competing beliefs about the principles of comprehensive education and equality of value. Both protagonists appear to reduce ideology to sets of competing beliefs and it would perhaps be kinder to characterize their argument as a debate between competing personal ideologies rather than intellectual masturbation.

However to reduce the issue of ideology to one of competing sets of individual beliefs is a pity too, for after a late start it is certainly true that since the early 1980s sociologists have played a significant role in exposing the humanitarian ideology underpinning the segregation of children with special needs and exposing the various interests concerned (Tomlinson, 1982; Ford *et al.*, 1982; Oliver, 1985). However, sociologists have been less successful in examining and exposing the theory and practice of integration except for a questioning of the romanticism of the integration movement (Barton and Tomlinson, 1984) and an articulation of its moral and political basis (Booth, 1988).

In confining their debate to ideology, both fail to take account of the fact that disability is not socially constructed, it is socially created.

The essential difference between a social constructionist and a social creationist view of disability centres on where the 'problem' is actually located. Both have begun to move away from the core ideology of individualism. The social constructionist view sees the problem as being located within the minds of able-bodied people, whether individually (prejudice) or collectively, through the manifestation of hostile social attitudes and the enactment of social policies based upon a tragic view of disability. The social creationist view, however, sees the problem as located within the institutionalized practices of society. (Oliver 1990b, 82-3)

The net result of this is that both Söder and Booth end up denying the essential nature of disability and this existence of disablism throughout society. Disablism like sexism and racism, exists not in the heads of individuals or groups, or even society as a whole, but in the institutionalized practices of sexist, racist and disablist societies. The way to deal with this is to change what people do, not what people think, which is why disabled people throughout the world are struggling to get their basic human rights enshrined in law with varying degrees of success and using a variety of different tactics ranging from polemical confrontation through to direct action.

A final comment about the nature of the Söder-Booth debate concerns the way in which its concern for what people think rather than what people do leads them, while acknowledging the existence of disability as oppression, to focus on a narrow range of issues like whether labelling theorists are pro- or anti-integration or whether labelling theory is science or not. If disability is socially created as oppression, and I believe that it is, then such arguments are both sterile and futile. If you do not have the right to decide when you will get up or go to bed, or to be educated alongside your peers, then such narrow arguments are themselves oppressive. They smack of Nero fiddling while Rome was burning.

However, by looking at the attempts of disabled people (sociologists among them) to develop an understanding of the political and social contexts in which they live, a much more fruitful and productive debate can begin. The issue of integration, both into society and into the education system, has been in the forefront of these attempts to develop such an understanding. However, integration, as a concept, has been taken over by politicians, policy makers, professionals and academics, and hence we have seen the emergence of two views of integration: what I shall call 'old~ and 'new' views of integration. It should be obvious from table 1 that it is the new views of integration that are emerging from disabled people themselves.

In polarizing these old and new views~ I 'am not suggesting that they represent a dichotomy, but rather a continuum of which I am presenting the

poles. Precisely where Booth and Söder fit into the continuum is for them and others to decide. My own position (I hope, obviously) is squarely located within the new and emerging views of integration as my commentary will demonstrate.

**Table 1: The two views of integration**

<b>Old views</b>		<b>New views</b>	
1	State	1	Process
2	Non-problematic	2	Problematic
3	Professional and administrative approaches	3	Politics
4	Changes in school organization	4	Changes in school ethos
5	Teachers acquire skills	5	Teachers acquire commitment
6	Curriculum delivery must change	6	Curriculum content must change
7	Legal rights to integration	7	Moral and political rights to integration
8	Acceptance and tolerance of children with SEN	8	Valuation and celebration of children with SEN
9	Normality	9	Difference
10	Integration can be delivered	10	Integration must be struggle for

## A NEW VIEW OF INTEGRATION

### A State or Process

Almost since the beginning of discussions about the nature of integration it has been clear that integration is a complex and multifaceted concept and not simply a matter of changing the place to which children were sent. Warnock (1978) distinguished between functional, locational and social integration and subsequent studies (Hegarty *et al.*, 1982) argued that integration was not a new form of provision but a 'process geared to meeting a wider range of pupil needs'. Fish (ILEA, 1985) took this further and affirmed a commitment to the process of integration and spelled out in considerable detail the consequences of this view for the whole education system and not just those limited parts that integration has previously been thought to reach.

While I do not disagree with any of this, my concern is that integration as process has taken on the language of rhetoric; to paraphrase Cohen (1985), while the language has changed, the same groups of professionals are doing the same kinds of things to the same groups of children as they were before integration was ever mentioned. The rhetoric of integration has given rise to a new kind of educational discourse of which the changing labels of both professionals and children is a part. To put the matter bluntly, children with special educational needs still get an inferior education to everyone else, and although the rhetoric of integration as process may serve to obscure or mystify this fact, the reality remains.

Hence

Such simplified forms of discourse are essentially fraudulent. They misrepresent and thereby underestimate the seriousness of the issues involved and the degree of struggle required for the necessary changes to be realised. Thus they are, in and of themselves, part of the disabling process. (Barton and Corbett, 1990)

### Problematic or Non-problematic

It is my contention, therefore, that the educational literature on integration sees the whole issue as non-problematic; integration has become received educational wisdom. Further, we know what integration is; we know that people want it and that we are all committed to it, so let us go ahead and do it. This old view of integration has almost become the new educational orthodoxy; integration has become re-ified. It has become an end in itself, not a means to an end.

It is important to emphasize that I am not claiming that the struggle for integration is over except in an ideological sense. There is almost universal agreement that integration is a good thing given the right level of resources, the appropriate training of teachers and so on. The point that I am making is that the success of integration at an ideological level has made it almost impossible for it to be examined critically. Further, while sociology played an important role in the critique of segregation, it has not, as yet, provided a similar critique of integration.

By failing to be critical, sociology can never ask the right kind of questions of integration. Most importantly, how can integration be achieved in an unequal society? What are the consequences of integrating children into an education system which reflects and reinforces these inequalities? On the other hand, if integration is only the means to an end, what is that political change does not just occur in parliament or town halls, it can occur in schools too and on the streets as the disability movement is beginning to demonstrate in its campaigns for accessible transport or non-disablist media imagery.

#### Changes in School Organization or Ethos

The old views of integration suggest that schools must change in order to accommodate children with special needs (Dessent, 1987). The kinds of changes necessary relate to the establishment of special needs departments (Jones and Southgate, 1989), the provision of support services both internal and external to the school (Davies and Davies, 1989), the development of whole school policies (Ramasut, 1989) and the implementation of education authority wide integration policies (Moore and Morrison, 1988). These organizational changes need to be planned in advance and properly resourced with a clear vision of the aims and objectives necessary to achieve integration.

Again, these things are undoubtedly necessary but, in themselves, they are not enough. There must also be changes in the ethos of the school which must mean that the school becomes a welcoming environment for children with special needs; that there is no questioning of their rights to be there and that organizational changes are part of an acceptance and understanding of the fact that the purpose of schools is to educate *all* children, not merely those who meet an increasingly narrowing band of selection criteria (ILEA, 1985).

#### Teachers Acquire Skills or Commitment

As far as teachers are concerned, it is usually assumed that teachers need to acquire extra knowledge and different skills in order to facilitate the process of integration. Changes in teacher education at both initial and in-

service levels have tended to reinforce this (Sayer and Jones, 1985). The problem is, of course, beyond the additions in knowledge and skills that any professional working in a new area would be expected to provide, it is hard to specify what this new knowledge or these new skills might be.

Hence the arguments advanced against integration until teachers have been properly trained can be seen as rationalizations to preserve the status quo, rather than genuine concerns about the inabilities of teachers to cope with a whole range of new demands. In my view, teaching is teaching, regardless of the range or needs of pupils, and an essential pre-requisite of integration in the new sense of the word is the acquisition of a commitment on the part of all teachers to work with all children, whether they have special needs or not. Only when teachers acquire this commitment can integration truly be achieved.

### Curriculum Change -Content or Delivery

In terms of the curriculum, old views of integration suggest that it is delivery that must change. The Education Act (1988) and the introduction and implementation of a national curriculum have not done very much to change that. Underpinning this is the intention that children with special needs shall have access to exactly the same curriculum as everyone else and that curriculum delivery must change in order to ensure this access. Only in certain circumstances or under certain conditions will the national curriculum be disallowed.

The problem with this is that nowhere in the national curriculum is the issue of disability considered for all children, whether they have special needs or not. Despite controversy, it is generally acknowledged that curriculum materials have, up to now, been sexist or racist in their content. With one notable exception (Mason and Reiser, 1990), there has been no acknowledgement that disablism actually exists, let alone admit the fact that the curriculum is full of disablism material from assessment procedures through children's fiction and onto assumptions about normal child development. Nothing short of the removal of all disablism curriculum materials will suffice if the new vision of integration, as we are coming to understand it, is ever to be achieved.

### Normality or Difference

The old view of integration is underpinned by a notion of 'normality' and preaches the acceptance and tolerance of children with special needs. People, teachers and children, need to be encouraged and sometimes educated to this acceptance and tolerance of those who deviate from normality. Hence disability awareness training becomes a major

mechanism for this education and the aim of a whole variety of policies and programmes in many different spheres, is to promote this public education.

The new view of integration challenges the very notion of normality in education (Oliver, 1989) and in society generally (Abberley, 1989) and argues that it does not exist. Normality is a construct imposed on a reality where there is only difference. Disability equality training, pioneered, developed and run by disabled people themselves (Campbell and Gillespie-Sells, 1991) is becoming the major means for ensuring that integration based upon difference becomes a politically achievable reality.

### Acceptance and Tolerance or Valuation and Celebration

The old view of integration suggests that those who are different have to be accepted and tolerated for, after all, they themselves have come to accept and tolerate their difference; so why should not everyone else? This view is underpinned by personal tragedy theory in terms of disability and deficit theory in educational terms. Tragedies and deficits are unfortunate change happenings and these 'poor individuals' should not be made to suffer further through rejection and stigmatization; hence they should be accepted and tolerated.

The new view of integration is underpinned by an entirely different philosophy, which might be called 'the politics of personal identity' (Sutherland, 1981). This demands -and has the confidence to demand it through a growing collective identity -that difference not be merely tolerated and accepted but that it is positively valued and celebrated. Further, in making these demands, it is not just a matter of providing a legal framework but backing that framework with moral fervour and political will to ensure its enforcement (Barnes, 1991).

### Legal or Moral and Political Rights to Integration

The thorny issue of rights is one that has bedeviled attempts at integration, not just in the narrow sphere of education nor only in Great Britain. In Britain legislation, at least since 1944, has endorsed the principle and philosophy of integration but has insisted that it could only take place where practical and reasonable, where it did not interfere with the education of other children or where it was commensurate with existing resources. Such let out clauses, for that is what they are, have meant that integration has not taken place.

What is needed, according to the new view of integration, is a moral commitment to the integration of all children into a single education system as part of a wider commitment to the integration of all disabled people into society. Translating this moral commitment into political rights is something

that can only be achieved by supporting disabled people and the parents of children with special needs as they struggle to empower themselves. Support for these struggles may stem from a moral commitment but it must be properly resourced struggles in terms of both money and other services.

### Integration -Delivery or Struggle

Where Booth was certainly right, was in his claim that

...many of those who espouse integration in theory show little commitment to it in practice.

But commitment in practice requires more than just arguments over ideas.

Integration is not a thing that' can be delivered by politicians, policy makers or educators, but a process of struggle that has to be joined. (Oliver, 1989)

The struggle has already begun; do labelling theorists, social constructionists, pro-integrationists and anyone else wish to join that struggle? A start can be made by not talking over our heads about issues that are irrelevant to our needs and by allowing us the dignity of deciding what we want to be called.

### **CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

Charging Söder and Booth with intellectual masturbation may seem somewhat harsh but as I have attempted to show, the focus of their debate was very narrow and unlikely to have any effect on the fact that hundreds of thousands of disabled children throughout the world have their fundamental rights denied to them by segregated educational provision and segregative educational practices. The issue of integration is not one to be argued over by academics with abilities, it is part of the terrain over which ideological struggles are being fought by disabled people in order to free themselves from the chains of oppression. As I pointed out in the very same issue of the journal as their debate appeared

Hence segregation too is a political issue. The lessons of history through the segregation of black people in the United States and current struggles to end segregation in South Africa have shown this to be so. To write as if segregation in schools or from public transport systems or from public spaces or inter-personal interactions in our society is somehow different, is to de-politicise the whole issue. (Oliver, 1991)

If this is true of segregation, and I believe that it is, then it is equally true of integration and the Booth-Söder debate, in de-politicising the issue of integration, does seem to me to be little more than intellectual masturbation.

## REFERENCES

- ABBERLEY, P. (1989). 'Disabled people, normality and social work'. In: Barton, L. (Ed) *Disability and Dependency*. Sussex: Falmer Press.
- BARNES, C. (1991). *Institutional Discrimination and Disabled People; A Case for Legislation*. London: BCOOP.
- BARTON, L. and CORBETT, J. (1990). Transition to adult life; rhetoric or reality. paper presented at the International Conference on Integration, Stockholm, Sweden.
- BARTON, L. and TOMLINSON, S. (1984). *Special Education and Social Interests*. London: Harper Row.
- BOOTH, T. (1988). 'Challenging conceptions of integration'. In: Barton, L. (Ed) *The Politics of Special Educational Needs*. Sussex: Falmer Press.
- BOOTH, T. (1991). 'Integration, disability and commitment: a response to Marten Söder', *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, Vol 6 (1) 1-16.
- CAMPBELL, J. and GILLESPIE-SELLS, C. (1991). *Disability Equality Training Trainers Guide*. London: CCETSW.
- COHEN, S. (1985). *Visions of Social Control*
- DAVIES, J. and DAVIES, P. (1989). *A Teacher's Guide to Support Services*. Windsor: NFER-NELSON.
- DESSENT, T. (1987). *Making the Ordinary School Special*. Sussex: Falmer Press.
- FINKELSTEIN, V. (1990). Personal Communication
- THE FISH REPORT (1985). *Educational Opportunities for All?* London: ILEA.
- FORD, J. *et al.* (1982). *Special Education and Social Control*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- HEGARTY, S. *et al.* (1982). *Integration in Action*. Windsor: NFER-NELSON.
- JONES, N. and SOUTHGATE, T. (Eds) (1989). *The Management of Special Needs in Ordinary Schools*. London: Routledge.
- MASON, M. and REISER, R. (1990). *Disability Equality in the Classroom; A Human Rights Issue*. London: ILEA.
- MOORE, J. and MORRISON, M. (1988). *Someone Else's Problem*. Sussex: Falmer Press.
- OUVER, M. (1985). 'The integration-segregation debate; some sociological considerations', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol 6, No 1.
- OLIVER, M. (1988). 'The Social and Political Context of Education Policy'. In: Barton, L. (Ed)

- OLIVER, M. (1989). 'Conductive education; if it wasn't so sad it would be funny', *Disability, Handicap and Society*, Vol 4 No 2.
- OLIVER, M. (1990a). 'Politics and language; the need for a new understanding', *Int. Rehab. Review* Vol XL No 3, April 1990.
- OLIVER, M. (1990b). *The Politics of Disablement*. Basingstoke: MacMillans.
- OLIVER, M. (1991). 'Reappraising special needs education; a review', *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, Vol 6 (1), 75.
- RAMASUT, A. (1989). *Whole School Approaches to Special Needs*. Sussex: Falmer Press.
- SODER, M. (1989). 'Disability as a social construct: the labelling approach revisited', *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, Vol 4 (2), 117-129.
- SODER, M. (1991). 'Theory, ideology and research: a response to Tony Booth', *European Journal of Special needs Education*, Vol 6 (1), 17-23.
- SUTHERLAND, A. (1981). *Disabled We Stand*. London: Souvenir Press.
- TOMLINSON, S. (1982). *A Sociology of Special Education*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- SAYER, J. and JONES, N. (Eds) (1985). *Teacher Training and Special Educational needs*. London: Croom Helm.
- THE WARNOCK REPORT (1978). 'Special Educational Needs'. London: HMSO.