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Author: Jordan, Rita Powell, Stuart

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Abstract

This article discusses the impact of integrated schooling on one young man. It highlights the possibility that education reform may lead to more segregation of pupils who have disabilities. The article argues that education should not be at the expense of 'care' and that people with disability are entitled to an education that meets their own needs. **Keyword: Education**

Stop the Reforms, Calvin Wants to Get Off

RITA JORDAN & STUART POWELL

*School of Humanities and Education, Hatfield Polytechnic, Wall Hall Campus,
Aldenham, Hertfordshire WD2 8AT, United Kingdom*

Calvin¹ has profound and multiple learning difficulties and until 1971 would have been regarded as 'ineducable'. But in our enlightened times this has all changed. The 1981 Act brought him under the all-embracing label of 'special educational needs', and since the 1986 Act he has become entitled to a 'curriculum for all'. What has this meant for Calvin? At the pre-school stage he could sit unaided, he was beginning to feed himself, and there was a realistic hope that he might walk. His parents worked hard on a programme of self-care skills training; Calvin was never shut away and always took as full a part in family life as possible. Over the years, however, Calvin's condition has gradually deteriorated. He is now 19 years old. He cannot crawl or walk, though he can roll around enough to need rails on his bed. He is doubly incontinent. He needs a specially designed chair if he is to sit up, and even then he becomes stiff and sore unless his position is changed frequently. He can't talk or use gesture, though he can make noises to show distress or pleasure. He is prone to epileptic fits which can only be partially controlled by drugs. Calvin can follow movement with his eyes but can't look behind him, nor focus systematically. Because he cannot swallow, food and liquids necessary are fed to him through a tube passing up his nose. Because he cannot cough, his phlegm has to be shifted by pummelling and tipping. He likes routines with familiar people, and any changes are likely to cause signs of distress and possibly fits. He can smile, but now only seems to do this when, for example, someone strokes his cheek. He can close his fist around an object placed in his hand but he can't grasp it long enough to manipulate it.

Up until the start of this year Calvin attended a Local Education Authority school for pupils with severe learning difficulties. This school, along with many others, has been swept along by the tide of educational reform. It has had to take on the ideological baggage of the National Curriculum, which has meant endorsing notions of age appropriate teaching, and the full integration of pupils such as Calvin. The special care unit that Calvin used to attend was disbanded and he joined his chronological peers in the leavers' class. There was no 'special care' teacher here, although classes with pupils who have difficulties like Calvin's were given extra welfare or teacher support. Calvin's curriculum had previously been concerned with his physical needs and included things like music therapy, which gave him the kind of pleasurable stimulation that he could respond to. The current notions of educational reform meant that he became entitled to participate in a 'broad and balanced' curriculum of domestic skills, science, mathematics, technology, English, health education and citizenship. To benefit from these opportunities Calvin was moved from his familiar teacher and familiar environment, to a teacher and assistants who did not know him well, and an environment where the pace of curriculum delivery (and the problems of continual change resulting from the introduction of the National Curriculum) left little time for anybody to learn about his needs. In his new regime Calvin attended shopping and cooking lessons, although he couldn't taste the food let alone help prepare it. He attended sex education videos and discussions, although he himself was not, and never has been, sexually active nor, as far as can be judged, sexually aware. His entitlement to this rich and full curriculum meant there was no time to give him the physiotherapy he needed to keep his joints flexible or to help him get rid of his phlegm, so he often arrived home fitting, with his chest rattling and his joints rigid. He was often distressed.

Over the past 20 years educationists have been intent on giving all children access to education. An educational dogma has developed which discredits the 'labelling' of children. Normalisation has become the watchword, and integration at any cost the means to achieve it. This tide of opinion and practice has reached a high water mark with the arrival of the National Curriculum—heralded as 'an entitlement for all'.

¹ The name Calvin is fictitious and has been used to preserve anonymity. However, the story is real; details were checked for accuracy by Calvin's parents, to whom the authors are grateful for permission to use the case history and for commenting on a draft of this article.

As Canute found before us, it's awkward to stand and resist the tide, yet it seems that this one is running out of beach. What do concepts like 'normalisation' and 'age appropriateness' mean, not for the organisers and givers of education, but for the receivers, for pupils like Calvin? Surely, as people differ then so must the concept of their education differ. Those who deny this in the name of equal entitlement to education are blindly following dogma in the name of principle, and in cases like that of Calvin they are guilty of doing real harm to exceptional pupils.

Let's consider Calvin's story. If we presume for a moment that Calvin's teachers were working on the idea that he was entitled to share a full, functional, age appropriate curriculum with his peers, and that this was a relevant notion, then was it being achieved? The fullness of a curriculum doesn't relate to what teachers intend but to what is being received by pupils. The fact that Calvin was sitting in front of a sex education video doesn't mean that he was making sense of the experience. When we use the term 'functional' about a curriculum we need to ask for whom it is to be functional. In Special Education 'functional' usually means preparation for independent living, which in a leavers' class usually means life skills. But were the aims of that leavers' class functional for Calvin? Clearly, he is not going to achieve independence in terms of life skills such as cooking and shopping, and he is not going to have a sexual relationship. It seems more likely that Calvin's functional needs have something to do with freedom from physical discomfort. What we really need to do is to make the curriculum 'person-appropriate' rather than 'age-appropriate', a fundamental point which has been conveniently ignored by those intent on planning a centralised curriculum applicable to all pupils. Of course we need to remember that Calvin is 19 years old regardless of his developmental level, but we also need to take into account his stage of development.

Calvin's special care class had been disbanded in favour of integration with peer groups within the special school. The word 'integration' is a favourite with the new educationist, yet it is a word that has been abused as readily as it has been used by those who employ terminology without troubling themselves with real meanings and implications. In the case of Calvin it is clear that there was no *real* process of integrating him into the main part of the special school. What actually happened was that Calvin was placed where his needs were having to be subsumed under the more general needs of the class; there was no broadening of the curriculum of the class to meet his needs. This kind of 'integration by location' is probably more to do with narrowing of resources than widening of opportunities.

Calvin is one individual affected by the Education Reform Act. His story serves to illustrate the kinds of problem that are facing a large number of our exceptional pupils at the present time. So, what can we learn about the general situation from this one case? Current thinking suggests that the future quality of a pupil's life will be enhanced by the acquisition of 'useful' skills and knowledge. The *raison d'être* of education is that it is a preparation for life; it is no longer seen to be of value in itself. This lack of vision pervades the whole of our education system from the nursery class to the university, and is inculcated in student teachers by the way in which they themselves are being 'trained' - the only important things being the practical skills they will use when they stand in front of the class. This kind of thinking assumes that quality of life is a concept that can be commonly defined for everybody. We cannot be sure of what counts as quality for someone like Calvin, but a minimum assumption might be that he should be physically comfortable and experience love and care. Calvin needs to develop ways of getting across his needs to his carers, and some way of making and indicating choices. Surely it's more important for Calvin to learn to get pleasure from the company of others and to respond to the kinds of stimulation that he can make sense of, than that he endure technology lessons where he can never participate meaningfully. Teachers of pupils like Calvin must have the power to make decisions about what is meaningful and therefore appropriate for their pupils, rather than being placed in a position where they have to follow nationally accepted guidelines, often against their better judgement.

We share the fear of many that the Education Reform Act may lead to more segregation of pupils with special needs and the exclusion of many from the National Curriculum. But we don't think that, because of this fear, we should advocate education at the expense of care. Education should never be contrasted with care; certainly we want Calvin's teachers to do more than simply 'care' for him, but this does not mean that in educating him they should cease to care for him. Care should be at the core of education. Indeed for Calvin it may dominate his curriculum, but this does not mean that he is no longer being educated. Calvin's entitlement to education means little if we interpret it as entitlement to what passes for education for the majority. What he is entitled to is an education that accords with his own needs; these needs are exceptional and therefore exceptional measures are necessary to meet them.

'A curriculum for all' is a fine sounding sentiment and would be a reasonable one if we lived in a world in which all individuals could benefit from such a thing. But Calvin's story shows us that the sentiment is hollow, and that in planning a curriculum for any pupil we should always give priority to care and concern for the quality of the individual's life now as well as in the future, and the right of that individual to have his/her own best interests recognised and respected regardless of predetermined, common curricular experiences and goals. Do we really want educational aims that exclude care for anyone? It is time we stood against the tide of unthinking dogma which is being passed off as 'reform'. The National Curriculum seems to be about careless education, and if that is so, then it isn't just pupils like Calvin who are missing out—we all are.