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Educational Policy in the UK: An Interview with Artist/Activist Jessica Starns

Pernille Fraser, *Ought* Visual Arts Editor

Some years ago, I came across a project by Jessica Starns, then a post-graduate student at Brighton University, U.K. Jessica's knowledge about neurodivergence and education left an impression on me. Since then, Jessica has continued inclusive practice work in and around the arts, education, curation, and facilitation. Jessica also founded the charity @DyspraxicMe and in 2018 was named to the *Shaw Trust Power 100*, a list of the most influential disabled people in the U.K..

One of Jessica's most recent work is a short documentary film commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Education—Handicapped Children—Act 1970 in the United Kingdom. This anniversary, and the ongoing education of neurodivergent and disabled learners in the U.K., was the chief subject of my recent interview with Jessica, which occurred over email and in person. Our resulting conversation, below, also draws on the The Alliance for Inclusive Education site, or Allfie, which features a timeline of educational policy, legislation, and teaching practices aimed at neurodivergent and disabled learners in the U.K. This interview has been edited and organized for readability.

Pernille: Do you think the Educational Act, as it currently stands, supports neurodivergent learners?

Jessica: 1981 was the last major act, and then we also have The Disability Discrimination Act of 1995. But the experience of neurodivergent and disabled learners today is very different from young people in 1981. In 1978, the Warnock report was delivered by Mary Warnock, who spent 10 years traveling the country talking to parents and teachers. Mary Warnock was an important woman in terms of the history of education. It was major research. The report was drawn up when disabled children did not have as many rights. We need another report like that. An updated report. A thorough report.

Pernille: How has the Educational Act of 1981 progressed since then?

Jessica: [quoting from U.K. Government News]: “[The Education Act of 2011] appears to be an addition—and focuses on details such as ‘Roots out poor behavior and underperformance.’”

Pernille: Does [the 2011 Education Act] define bad behavior? Who gets to define bad behavior?

Jessica: It sounds terrifying. The act is looking at how to make schools feel safer—that is, “behavior.”

Pernille: It’s interesting that there is not much focus on teachers’ behavior. All the onus is placed on the learners. I have an interest in educational care ethics, or duty of care. Two helpful resources for teachers are The Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (2001) and the Society for Education and Training (SET): Code of Practice (see references at the conclusion of this interview). The latter is aimed at educators teaching 16-plus provision in Further Education establishments in the U.K. It would be interesting to see if newer theories such as “Monotropism” by the late Dinah Murray or “The Double Empathy Problem” by Damien Milton affect educators’ teaching practices.

Jessica: The 2011 Act includes some details about “giving preference to academies and free schools.” I wonder what happened to the free schools? There are also virtual schools for young people in care, which possibly offer a very similar learning experience to the pandemic experience. The Special Educational Needs Disability Reform of 2014 introduced the Education Health Care Plans (EHCP). These plans have been useful and continue to be much needed, but the overall promises the bill covered have not been successful.

Pernille: What other changes would you like to see in educational policy?

Jessica: The word “Special” in Special Educational Needs to be looked at. It is more about adjustments now. “Special” separates.

Pernille: Agreed. Many have been saying this for a long time now. The term is very embedded in educational terminology and process, but it is 2021, and we understand much more now. “Special” feels such an old term now. The fact is we all have educational needs.

Jessica: I find educational history interesting. I would like to find out more about early educational policies and Eugenics links. An example being educational psychologist and eugenicist, Cyril Burt, who was one of the people involved in creating the 11-plus exam [a secondary admission test used in parts of the U.K.]. Burt's research was around how we inherit intelligence. His research is now known to be fake. The 11-plus is based on eugenics and involved the Mental Deficiency Act in 1913. The test is used to segregate children based on their IQs and to remove "feeble-minded" children to live in a "colony," the term that was used. What we would say is an asylum.

Pernille: The 11-plus is still used today in the U.K.

Jessica: We also need more embedded training of educators. Correct training means understanding different needs. Understanding, as an example, that dyslexia is not just about reading and writing. Understanding that fidgeting can help you think and is not necessarily a distraction if you are ADHD. Not fidgeting is more of a distraction. A learner can spend a whole lesson trying to concentrate on sitting still instead of learning anything.

Pernille: The LEANS project based at Edinburgh University is an ally-led research project (with autistic input) that is creating appropriate educational training courses for primary school educators. So, there is a better understanding of neurodivergency at actual classroom level. [quoting from LEANS]:

Working together with educators, community members and schools, the LEANS project is developing a free classroom activity pack for mainstream primary students and their teachers to learn about neurodiversity, or brain-based differences in how we learn, think, and experience the world. We will evaluate this pack in schools in 2021, to see how well it works at teaching neurodiversity concepts in real classrooms. The final pack will be available for free, forever, for everyone.

I visited LEANS and its researchers, in Edinburgh, for my own research purposes in at the end of 2019. But we also need more like LEANS at all levels of education. It is important that training is created and delivered by and for neurodivergent people.

Pernille: Last year, there was a certain amount of excitement regarding additional funding. Could you outline what this funding is for? And do you think this funding has been well placed?

Jessica: Segregated schools have been created more recently than we like to think using this funding. Two of these schools will solely be for children who have been or are at risk of being excluded from mainstream education. The question should be why authorities, schools, and educators are not engaging and changing practices in mainstream schools instead of building two segregated schools—just because the schools want to exclude them? Is it just a new type of pupil referral unit? Some pupils will require specialist medical knowledge that mainstream schools don't currently have the training, buildings, resources for, but, SEND (Special Education Needs and Disabilities) education should be less segregated. Why is there no or less integration with the mainstream?

Pernille: It's interesting that you mentioned this. It feels like it is being sneaked in. Integration is a much-needed, healthier approach for numerous learners, not just neurodivergent and/or disabled learners. I think it would bring more freedom to many learners. On this note, Olivia Blake, Labor MP recently questioned Boris Johnson, the Prime Minister on the 15th September 2015 in respect of Special Education Needs funding review. This is their interchange:

Olivia Blake, MP: Mr. Speaker, across the country, there are children who haven't gone back to school because their schools say they can't meet their needs. Do the continued delays to the Government's SEND review mean that the government has abandoned these children? And will the Prime Minister listen to the concerns of the parents and young people and make sure their voices are heard in this review?

Boris Johnson, Prime Minister: . . . But when this government came in, a key part of the 14 billion pounds extra that we put into education was to invest in special education needs to allow local areas to build more SEND schools, where they were necessary, and putting in another 780 million pounds in extra SEND education for our kids. If there's a particular shortfall in a particular school, particular area that she wishes to raise, then please write me about it.

Later, Olivia Blake expressed her disappointment with Boris Johnson's response on her Twitter account: "The Prime Minister failed to give me any answer on improving inclusion and listening young people and carers in the review" (September 15, 2021).

Schools and local authority funding has been cut and cut in the last decades, which in turn has had significant impact on learning services for neurodivergent and/or disabled learners. The NAHT (National Association of Head Teachers) recently stated that "97% of school leaders said SEND funding was insufficient," and "95% said top up funding for pupils with EHC plans is insufficient."

Jessica: I would also like to know what research has been done around the effect of having these separate schools named on learners' CVs in the local environment? Is there stigma associated with them? And per qualifications –do neurodivergent disabled learners have the same access to the same number and spread of qualifications? Are they excluded from certain exams?

Jessica reminds me of an important piece of educational history recently documented in the 2020 BBC documentary *Subnormal: A British Scandal*. The documentary charts, with first-hand accounts, how West Indian children at much higher levels than their White or Asian peers were labeled 'Subnormal' and placed in ESN schools (Educationally Subnormal schools), sometimes due to nothing more than slight cultural dialect differences.

Jessica: In 1971, Bernard Coard wrote *How the West Indian Child Is Made Educationally Subnormal in the British School System: The Scandal of the Black Child in Schools in Britain*. It took an exceptionally tenacious groups of parents, educators, psychologists, and publishers to come together and get this book published. It was often sold at the door directly to parents. Fortunately, is in print now, and points to a buried piece of educational history, ignored and maligned by the educational institutions and organizations at the time.

The artist and film director Steve McQueen highlighted the issue in an episode of his highly regarded anthology television series *Small Axe* (2020) His "Education" episode focuses on Kingsley Smith, a 12-year-old second generation West Indian school boy, and his experience of 1970s education. In

one scene, Kingsley appears to be unable to read fluently. Kingsley's teacher explodes at him after Kingsley desperately tries to read out loud in class: "You blockhead Kingsley! Page two, second paragraph down!" As Kingsley attempts to read, his classmates snigger in the background. His tutor then deliberately picks another student, Samantha, to read immaculately straight after Kingsley.

The echoes of self-consciousness and exposed vulnerability is something I personally feel acutely. As a neurodivergent person this is painful to watch because of the familiarity. The tension is a deliberate and accurate piece of how "other" is created both in dialect but also in learning difference—the contrast of supposed worst and best. Kingsley is eventually moved from mainstream school to a "special" school, which supposedly will support him more. But the school (and I use that term loosely) turns out to be anything but supportive. One of the reasons learners like Kingsley were removed was the test papers were not taking into account different dialects for example; a learner calling a "tap" a "pipe" and therefore failing the test and being classed as "educationally subnormal."

Pernille: We have all collectively shared the experience of living through the pandemic, but people have experienced it very differently. From a neurodivergent perspective, how do you think it may have benefited neurodivergent learners?

Jessica: I feel I have achieved more in the pandemic than I have done for a long time. Some will have thrived others will have needed support.

Pernille: Environment really matters, doesn't it? Both in education and work. The pandemic has really shown that people now want flexible working.

Jessica: There was also a SEND report Ofsted published in May 2021 about pandemic provision which looked at a small qualitative study of 21 pupils. It noted that teachers found it hard during pandemic. To quote from the report: "Although recent reports by Ofsted and others have highlighted some strengths in the special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) system, there are also significant weaknesses. These include gaps in external provision and training, lack of coordination between services, lack of accountability, and weak co-production."

Pernille: Are there any current practices that you would like to see changed?

Jessica: Off-rolling! I can't believe this is done. Under-performing learners are taken off the exam registers before exams so schools can maintain their pass rates. I am always skeptical if I see a 90% pass rate figure.

Pernille: Spikey profiles aren't really understood, are they? The term "spikey profiles" is a shorthand term to explain that students can excel in certain specific areas but not necessarily across all topics. This is perfectly normal, but there is an over-emphasis in our meritocracy-based cultures that learners need to perform consistently across all topics. This in turn leads to false ideals of perfection, the perfect learner, the perfect output. It casts a long shadow throughout education and our working lives. This is why it is important to not use functional labels. Those who are perceived as high functioning don't get the accommodations they need, and those who are perceived as low functioning are infantilized and patronized.

Jessica: Another concern I have is learners passing level 3 Maths/English. If they don't pass, learners can't move on with their life. It is damaging if a young person can't move on. You are just making them hate learning. It's an Ableist view of what is important. Then you have learners indirectly excluding themselves. Some from routine structure, some not. Not everyone works in the same way.

Pernille: I continue to wonder if we should move away from conventional grading altogether. My main concerns are around both formative and summative validation systems and the subjectivity, therefore biases within them. We all learn differently and have different learning needs. Who sets the narrative? Who has been trained in neurodivergent approaches to set assessments? Where is the parity? And especially, now things are changing so much. Are our validation systems reflective of the needs of learners and society? Can we move society away from their dependence on grading?

Jessica: Regarding marking and grading, I am also concerned about the potential negative bias that might have crept in during in the pandemic for neurodivergent and/or disabled learners. In the U.K., the grading system went from exams, a mix of course work and grades to teachers' grades, and while this worked for some it also meant that learners lost a certain amount

of anonymity during the exam process. And if a learner didn't have a good working relationship with their teacher or was seen as troublesome, this may have been reflected in their grades. We may also get fewer neurodivergent teachers coming through . . .

Pernille: I think there may actually be more neurodivergent teachers coming through, or at least that's the impression I've got, but that may be because my research often leads me to seek neurodivergent educators out intentionally.

I would also add the need to research biased negative binary language, such as deficit language. It leads to so much othering in education and sits hand in hand with ableism. I look at this lot in respect of higher education but have witnessed it at all levels of education, more recently than I wish to remember. I have concerns with the way the word "struggle" is over used and misused within both education and the arts. Is it the subject the learner "struggles" with or the educator? Communication is a two-way street.

Concluding Thoughts and Questions

Our discussion meandered and could have continued, as we found examples of progress and expansion in this educational anniversary year. We close this conversation with a brief list of our needs and a set of lingering questions:

- We need another Mary Warnock to carry out a thorough nationwide review.
- We need embedded training for ALL educators which should be delivered by neurodivergent and/or disabled educators throughout all levels of education.
- We need grading system(s) and evaluation system(s) assessed as fit for purpose for the next generation of neurodivergent and disabled learners.
- We need to stop using the term Special Educational Needs.
- What would an ideal educational provision look and feel like?
- What should be changed and in what areas of education?
- In 2021, why does our education system still exclude?

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