

Inclusion, Disabled Learners: Barriers and Possibilities

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In this paper I will attempt to briefly explore the question of disability and the nature of inclusive education. It is important to think about this issue from an historical perspective in terms of how we view disability. In seeking to prioritise this concern, it provides an opportunity for raising serious questions about the nature of the society in which we live and the kind of society we desire and hope for. Also, how we define 'disability' is crucial because it will influence both our expectations and the ways we interact with disabled people. In seeking to identify key aspects of this perspective, priority will be given to the voices of disabled people in terms of their understandings, interests and experiences.

Central to this perspective is the recognition that disabled people have and continue to be excluded and discriminated against in varying degrees of significance in our society. The nature of exclusion and discrimination is complex and varied, including for example, being treated- as- less than human; being viewed as objects of charity; being seen as in need of protection and control; being excluded from the work force; living on or below the poverty line; being unable to experience the entitlements of citizenship resulting in a lack of real participation in social encounters and decisions over issues affecting their lives; being voiceless and thus seen as passive recipients of actions and intentions by those constituted as experts.

This form of critique has its origins in what has become known as the social model of disability, which has been developed by disabled people and their organisations in the struggle for social justice, equity and independent living. This perspective has been instrumental in critiquing individualised, personal tragedy perspectives of disability in which personal loss and abnormalities are given a particular significance. As one disabled woman contends Degener (1995):

Perceiving disability as a condition similar to illness and exclusively as a functional limitation means that disability is considered as an individual rather than a social problem, and that solutions are sought for in the individual sphere, through therapy and technical or personal support. Thus, neither the society nor the environment have to be changed (p13).

A crucial aspect of the oppression of disabled people historically has been the power of official language in the form of categories or classifications. These have changed over time, and recognising this, Ryan and Thomas 1980 forcefully remind us that these definitions:

...have always been conceived by others, never are they the expression of a group of people finding their own identity, their own history (p13).

Whilst these authors were writing specifically about people classified as 'mentally handicapped', the issue of disabilist language and the negative assumptions underpinning it, is still a perennial and serious issue today.

It is vitally important that we do not underestimate the grave seriousness with which these issues and barriers are viewed by disabled people. It is an unadaptive, unfriendly, hostile set of material conditions and social relations that cumulatively contribute to the marginalisation, disempowerment and exclusion of disabled people. Thus, good intentions, charity and ad-hoc responses or interventions are inadequate and inappropriate to effectively address the profundity and stubbornness of the discriminatory factors involved. A very important disabled activist in this country, Rachel Hurst (1996) powerfully reminds us of this:

For disabled people in particular, the interaction between our right to individual freedom and choice and control over our own lives and our right to non-discrimination and inclusion measures is crucial. Our exclusion has been so systematic and rigorous that there is a need for fundamental changes to society in order to support our inclusion (no page numbers).

This is the context in which the struggles for change is taking place. It is a struggle for citizenship, human rights and the necessity of a non-discriminatory, inclusive society.

Inclusive Education

All educational issues and conceptions are contentious. That is, they are open to a range of possible meanings and purposes and need to be struggled over. They represent tensions between different interested parties over meanings and applications. This is particularly true of inclusive education in that different parties can use the same language but mean, and are interested in, very different concerns and outcomes. Thus, how we define inclusive education, the policies and practices that arise from such a perspective is of fundamental importance.

In order for education to contribute to the development of more inclusive relations and conditions, it requires a creative, supportive partnership between governments, schools, parents and the community. Sadly and unacceptably, Whitty (2002) maintains, governments too often set unrealistic goals, criticise schools for the problems of society and demand more and more targets with less and less support. This form of divisive context leads Whitty to argue that:

Society needs to be clearer about what schools cannot be expected to do and what support they need (p124).

And I would argue, where this is realized it must be translated into effective implementation strategies, in contrast to a culture of 'shame and blame' of schools and teachers. Schools cannot meet the challenges of inclusive education alone. A dynamic, creative partnership with

other agencies is absolutely necessary.

In a seminar which I organized under the auspices of the European Union in Brussels, researchers from several European societies met to identify and discuss possible research agendas in relation to the theme of 'Inclusion and Education'. Several points of agreement were established including:

If we are serious about the pursuit of inclusive societies, then we need a zero-tolerance to all forms of discrimination and exclusion.

Understanding exclusion is an essential task in the pursuit of inclusive thinking and relationships.

That 'exclusion' does not have a single dimension but is multi-faceted. Thus, it is more than concerns about attitudes and resources.

What research evidence confirms is the fundamental importance of recognizing that the grounds for the pursuit of inclusive thinking and practice are based on the informed conviction that something is wrong and offensive about the current situation in education and society. Nor are these minor temporary blemishes. They are fundamental forms of discrimination and exclusion which need urgent, serious intervention and challenge. Thus, inclusion is more than mere questions of access or improving channels of communication. Also, an adequate understanding cannot be satisfied with an analysis that focuses exclusively on the school or the individual child and thus views education in a social vacuum.

In modern society with the concern for healthy living, various warnings are being articulated about the dangers of excess on the one hand and the need for more appropriate diets and physical activities on the other. I think with regard to inclusive education, we now need to alert people to various misunderstandings and misrepresentations that are being expressed in popular and academic outlets. A series of such warnings would include for example:

Beware of advocates of inclusion who maintain that inclusive education is merely about placement or a question of resources. It is about equity, social justice and citizenship. The fundamental issue is whether there is the political will to realise an inclusive reality.

Beware of advocates of inclusion who emphasise its exciting and developmental aspects without recognising the disturbing and difficult process involved. Changing conditions, perspectives, priorities and intentions is a very demanding task.

Beware of advocates of inclusion who emphasise the importance of the individual child without seeking to connect such concerns to wider socio-economic and political concerns.

Beware of advocates of inclusion who depict the issue of inclusion merely in terms of the placement of disabled children into a mainstream unchanged system of provision and practice. It is fundamentally about the maximum participation of all pupils.

Beware of advocates of inclusion who depict the task as something teachers and schools can do alone. It needs to involve, for example, parents, the community in new and effective relationships.

Finally, beware of advocates who claim inclusive education is an end in itself. It is a means to an end that of an inclusive society. In this struggle there are no slick, quick, blueprints or answers.

The question of inclusivity and the degree and extent of the struggles involved need to be understood as a political issue. It is political in that it is about who is in and who is out and gives priority to the major political questions of who gets what, how, when, why and with what consequences? It is political in that it seeks to critically engage with all forms of inequalities, discriminations and oppression. It is also political in that it is concerned with the nature of decision-making and the prioritisation of particular values, intentions, the allocation of scarce resources and the consequent opportunities in terms of the quality of life dimensions. It is political in that it raises the fundamentally important question of inclusion into what? However, it is also crucial that the question of inclusivity, the nature of the issues involved, their degree of seriousness, the forms of struggles and strategies for change all need to be understood contextually. This includes taking into consideration the history, politics, socio-economic and cultural, dimensions of a given society.

Teachers Teaching and Learning

So, what role has education to play in contributing to the development of a safe, non-discriminatory, non-oppressive world? Teachers from this perspective need to be concerned with the political functions of education and to ask such serious questions as Hargreaves (1982) raised in his book *Challenge to the Comprehensive School*:

What kind of society do we want?

How is education to help us realize that society? (p92).

This type of thinking also encourages a range of related questions including:

What are schools for?

What do we expect schools to achieve?

What do pupils need to learn?

In what sorts of institutional / organisational contexts should this learning take place?

What do teachers need to enable them to teach from inclusive values and intentions?

How do schools effectively relate to their local communities and the wider society?

Inclusive Education and Legislation

The question of how to prevent discrimination and exclusion does raise the issue of the nature and function of legislation in this process of development. Whilst legislation is not sufficient in itself to produce inclusion, it is a necessary factor in the process of change. Recent developments have foregrounded the position of legislation in relation to disability equality in England, Wales and Scotland. The Duty to promote Disability Equality and to provide Disability Equality Schemes became a major outcome of the Disability Discrimination Amendment Act 2005, and became binding on all public bodies including education, by December 2007. The Disability Equality Duty requires all educational establishments to ensure that disabled pupils are not treated less favourably than their non-disabled peers; they must promote positive attitudes to all disabled pupils in all areas of the curriculum; ensure the elimination of disabledist bullying and harassment; promote equality for disabled pupils, parents, staff and members of the community and ensure disabled pupils, parents and staff play a full part in the public life of the school. Guidance can be obtained, for example, from the Disability Research Commissions Website – www.dotheduty.org as well as a training resource DVD entitled 'Implementing the Disability Discrimination Act in Schools and Early Years Settings' from the Department for Education and Skills. Coupled with these developments has been the signature of the United Kingdom in August 2006 on the Agreement of the United Nations Convention for the rights of people with disabilities involving 118 countries. Article 24 of this Agreement seeks to ensure an inclusive education system at all levels for disabled learners and that they should not be excluded from participation in the general educational system of provision and practice.

The extent to which these developments will result in effective transformative change and its maintenance as yet to be determined. Disabled people's organisations and their allies are already campaigning for further changes to the legislation and in particular to strengthen its human rights basis. Nevertheless, these developments do provide an important step forward in the struggle for

the realisation of inclusive conditions, relations and experiences, in all education institutions, including higher education.

Conclusion

In seeking to become more inclusive in thinking and daily practices, participants will be involved in a critical learning process which includes the following sets of concerns:

Learning to understand the difference between schooling and education and in relation to post school and higher education the difference between training and education.

Learning to understand the importance of a human rights approach to the education of all pupils.

Learning to recognise the serious and perennial task of identifying and challenging all the varied forms of exclusion and discrimination – a zero-tolerance to such factors.

Learning to understand and experience the fundamental importance and difference between hearing and listening in daily interactions with others.

Developing more flexible and imaginative ways of teaching.

Learning the centrality of networking and developing more supportive cultures in which to work and live.

Finally, learning to establish exciting and creative relationships with for example, pupils and parents.

We also need to seriously and continually work at clarifying our understanding about the **purpose** of our teaching. How far do we view our teaching as contributing to the realisation of our hope? Within the field of education there is a history of approaches that have viewed teachers as change-agents and teaching as life-changing and world shaping (Bascia & Hargreaves 2000). These perspectives have been influenced by a deep commitment to the realisation of democratic values and practices in which a fundamental transformation of, for example, the purposes, processes and outcomes of education have been of central significance.

Recognising the necessity of developing good and effective legislation, which supports the removal of all forms of exclusion and discrimination within education and society generally, is

crucial in the struggle for more inclusive conditions and relations. Often such objectives are seen as desirable but not enforceable. Get-out clauses within the legislation create barriers to effective implementation, like where inclusive education is encouraged 'providing the education of other children is not affected'. Both the specific nature of legislation and the degree to which it is enforceable are of paramount significance. Understanding children's **entitlements** under law and our responsibilities to meet these requirements within schools is an urgent task which needs to be part of a carefully supported, monitored and evaluated, staff development policy and practice. The extent to which all staff have an informed knowledge and understanding of the latest legislation and its impact on daily practice is thus an issue of perennial importance.

One of the most stark exclusionary factors covering a whole group for whom policy-making is allegedly for and who it is assumed will benefit from it, is that of the position and role of pupils. Pupils who know more about schools and teaching than many other people, are never seriously consulted over new policy initiatives and their implementation. An inclusive approach to education will challenge this situation and prioritise the issue concerning the contribution pupils can make to the struggle for Inclusive Education. They have been called by a former Secretary of State for Education in England 'co-partners', (DFEE 1997), but the difference between laudable rhetoric and actual practice is often shameful. Pupils should be viewed as a rich resource that future developments within schools must engage with in a serious and respectful way. How far is this a significant feature of the relationships and practices between teachers and pupils is of fundamental, perennial importance.

Finally, the position of teacher education in relation to the development of inclusive thinking, relations and practices on the part of student teachers is of fundamental importance. The question of teacher education, the curriculum and teaching assumptions and priorities have been highlighted in the experiences of several societies (Booth et al 2003) raised in a collection of papers some of the significant questions needing to be explored included:

To what extent does the curriculum of teacher education encourage the development of inclusion?

What preparation and support do teachers need to implement inclusion?

How are barriers to learning and participation overcome in teacher education?

These and other questions are explored within the contexts of several societies.

Change is thus a challenging and difficult process and requires persistent hard work in order for it to be achieved and maintained. What is essential in this process is to understand what schools and teachers cannot do alone in the struggle for inclusion. It must be in creative relationships with other interested parties including pupils, parents and the community.

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