

Inclusive Education, Teachers and the Politics of Possibility.

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Introduction

At the outset of this paper it is important to note that I have not always believed in what I am now going to advocate today. I have experienced a disturbing process of learning and re-education in which my existing assumptions, values and practices have been critically questioned and progressively changed. I am still a learner struggling to become more inclusive in my thinking and actions. Another aspect of my biography which has influenced my interest in issues of inclusion and equality, has been my experience of schooling. School was a difficult time for me and I was a school failure leaving school without a single qualification. I also have vivid memories of the damaging impact in my life of derogatory labels, such as ‘thick’, ‘stupid’, and ‘disobedient’.

In this paper I will seek to briefly examine the meaning and importance of inclusive education, the position and responsibilities of teachers in relation to the barriers to inclusion and the challenges of becoming more inclusive, and finally, the nature and possibilities for change both individually and institutionally. In support of my analysis I will draw on insights from cross-cultural research as well as the perspectives of disabled people. My

intention is not to provide tips for teachers or unquestioned competences. It is rather to raise questions, provide insights and hopefully to provoke further individual and collective thinking and discussions on these fundamentally important issues.

Inclusive Education

In seeking to understand the nature of inclusive education, it is important to recognise two key features relating to educational issues. Firstly, all educational issues are complex and not amenable to quick, slick answers or responses. For example, the relationship between society, the economy, educational policy and practice is real and influential. However, understanding the relationship between these factors requires grappling, struggling with conceptual, economic, political factors and ideas. Schools, educational provision, must not be viewed in a vacuum or insulated from wider socio-economic concerns and interests. The second issue is that educational issues are contentious and involve the struggles between different interest groups over meanings, interpretations and actions. Thus, the question of the nature of the curriculum, forms of assessment, the position of examinations and

the relationship between the home and the school, are all examples of contentious issues.

So, a questioning reflective approach is a necessary and integral feature of an inclusive attitude to life. The question of how we define 'inclusive education' has become increasingly important because of the way in which the language of inclusion has been colonised by various advocates who represent different interpretations and practices. Thus, inclusive education is not an uncontroversial concept. So, let me illustrate this by raising the following questions. What do you think about when the question of inclusive education is raised? Do you think it is primarily about the position and experience of specifically categorised groups of disabled pupils? Is it about the question of special schooling and the future of special schools? Do they have a role to play in the pursuit of inclusive practice? Is it about the significance of particular forms of behaviour in terms of barriers to inclusion and the inevitability of alternative forms of provision for such pupils? Do you think of inclusive education in terms of its relationship to social inclusion? What these questions indicate is that the issue of how we understand inclusive education is complex and contentious.

In an important review of the question of the definition of inclusive education, (EPPI. 2002) the following proposition is maintained:

Firstly, inclusive education is about responding simultaneously to students who differ from each other in important ways some of which pose particular challenges to the school Secondly, it is not just about maintaining the presence of students in school but also about maximising their participation. Finally, inclusion is a process which can be shaped by school-level action (p7).

Whilst I recognise the importance of such a position I want to argue, that inclusive education is not an end in itself but a means to an end. It is about contributing to the realisation of an inclusive society with the demand for a rights approach as a central component of policy making. Thus, the question of inclusion is fundamentally about questions of human rights, equity, social justice and the struggle for a non-discriminatory society. Education from a rights approach is not a privilege for a select few, nor a matter of charity. No child is viewed as ineducable. All children are entitled to quality education. A human rights approach to education entails issues of access, fair treatment with

regard to learning, and fair access to the outcomes of education (Unterhalter, 2006). The question of rights is derived from the qualification of being human. However, recognizing the formal equality of citizenship rights does not necessarily lead to quality of respect, opportunities and resources. Too often there is a gulf between laudable rhetoric and practice. A commitment to human rights in education demands for example, the highest form of expectations on the part of all teachers with regard to the learning and well-being of pupils. It is the common-good of all pupils that is at the heart of inclusive educational policy and practice. This perspective is based on a positive view of difference in which pupil diversity is viewed as a resource. Priority is given to the pursuit of change with a strong emphasis on the importance of learning to live with one another and recognize our common humanity. Inclusive education is not about containment, assimilation or accommodation. It is not about placing pupils in unchanged, under-resourced and unplanned circumstances. It is about the well-being of all learners and providing a culture and practice in which all barriers to participation can be identified and ultimately removed (Booth et al 2000).

What research evidence raises 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.

An example of the demands and scope for change involving a critique of existing policies and practices can be seen in the following powerful statement from a Report from the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit (2004) in England:

Disabled people should be at the heart of how relevant public services are designed and delivered.

Services for disabled people should be personalized to reflect the range of needs for

individual disabled people.

Service providers should be held to account by disabled people wherever possible. Disabled people should also be involved in the design and planning of services – but should maintain the ability to provide strong critical challenge.

Disabled people should have increased choice regarding the services and benefits they receive, with specific support available to achieve informed choice (p25).

These significant demands for change are based on an informed and critical understanding of existing discriminatory features of policy and practice relating, in this instance, to disabled people.

An interest in inclusive thinking and education encourages crucial questions that need to be explored and seriously debated by all the parties involved. These include for example:

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?

This must also involve addressing the crucial question of: What do teachers need to enable them to recognize the importance of inclusive thinking and to teach from inclusive values and intentions?

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.

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 disabilist 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.

Teachers and Inclusive Education

Teaching is a most important, exciting and demanding task, and being involved in the education of the next generation of citizens is both a serious and challenging responsibility. Several propositions can be identified with regard to the nature of teaching. Teaching is fundamentally a social act. As such it involves extensive emotional engagement, effective interpersonal skills, a deep commitment to the pupils being taught and the establishment and maintenance of constructive working relationships. Teaching involves the development of heightened forms of self awareness and critical reflection. It is about examining our intentions and overall effectiveness. Part of this approach involves the recognition that as teachers, we are always learners. Teaching inevitably involves power-relations. Thus, teacher expectations and decisions can be enabling and positive as well as disabling and disenfranchising. Given the diversity of pupil perspectives and backgrounds, this is an extremely important factor. Hargreaves (1997) maintains, that we need to get to the heart of what good teaching is, and he contends:

Good teaching is not just a matter of being efficient, developing competence, mastering technique and possessing the right kind of knowledge. Good teaching also involves emotional work. It is infused with pleasure, passion, creativity, challenge and joy (p12).

It is this emotional labour which can often make teachers vulnerable, making their tasks complicated and challenging.

Teachers increasingly face new demands arising from the combination of several significant factors. These include: a bewildering array of competing and contradictory policy developments and the demands for their implementation; student diversity of expectations and entitlements; class sizes; decreasing availability of resources; declining student motivation in the face of decreasing job opportunities and what is perceived to be an irrelevant curriculum; the decline of teacher status both in relation to the Government and the public generally. Within this general context, teachers face increasingly difficult and contradictory pressures. For example, they are expected to contribute to the task of economic regeneration, to develop appropriate forms of thinking and behaviour that will be relevant for the work place and to undertake these tasks in a context of

serious financial restraint.

Too often inclusive education in terms of its nature and challenge is presented in either romantic and idealised forms, or abstract and decontextualised ways, in which the real material conditions and relations are excluded from consideration. The development of inclusive cultures and practices take place within, and are structured by, contextual factors of an internal, institutional and an external societal source. It is essential to recognise this situation when considering the position and function of teachers in the process of their struggle for inclusive values, priorities and practices. Teachers from this perspective need to be concerned with the political functions of education and ask such serious questions as Hargreaves (1982) raised when exploring the challenges to the comprehensive school. These include: What kind of society do we want? How is education to help us realize that society? (p92) Teaching that is viewed as a process of possibility that challenges the taken-for-granted nature of daily practices and relations in which prejudice and discrimination often thrive, is what bell-hooks (1994) provocatively calls, 'teaching to transgress'. It 'is education as the practice of freedom' (p207).

In a three year study involving researches from the University of Manchester, Newcastle and Canterbury University College, 25 schools (primary and secondary) and their respective LEAs agreed to participate in the investigation. One of the main interests in the project was ‘The nature of the barriers to participation experienced by pupils’ (Ainscow et.al 2003). The researches viewed inclusion as fundamentally concerned with the practical application of the values of equity, community, participation, entitlement, respect for diversity and sustainability.

A particular interest of the research was the challenge of how schools can develop inclusivity whilst simultaneously having to mediate conflicting and contradictory pressures of a local, national and international policy form. The research demonstrated that barriers to inclusion needed to be understood through a dynamic model of interactions between the values which teachers attempted to pursue, their work context and their understandings of their pupils and of their pedagogical task. One of the main findings of their research was that these:

barriers arise when teachers’ understandings simplify the complexity of the situation in which

they practice and, particularly, of the students they teach.

They argue, that their evidence suggests that these initial teacher understandings fail to adequately grasp the human complexity of the pupils involved. Such misunderstandings informed such practices as:

inappropriately low demands on students, teaching which focuses on what children do badly whilst ignoring what they do well.

One of the significant contributory influences on these perspectives, the researchers contend, is the standards agenda and the centrality of educational achievement. The internalisation of these values and intentions results, according to the researchers, in a narrow conception of ability and attainment on the part of teachers.

Teaching Assistants

In the modern classroom, teaching and learning is not merely about working with pupils. It is also about establishing and

maintaining constructive working relationships with other adults, including teaching assistants. Nor is this easily achieved and it does raise the question of what 'working with others' means and to what extent do such relationships involve conflict and counter-productive processes and outcomes. Whilst it can be claimed that the role of the teaching assistant has changed over time, research has demonstrated that there are important differences between schools over the nature of job descriptions and actual practices. Several reasons for these have been identified including: confused aims, no clear career structure, lack of planned training and poor channels of communication (Vincett et.al. 2005).

Thus the position and role of teaching assistants raises some complex and contentious issues. For example, to what extent is the teaching assistant concerned with specially categorised pupils in comparison to pupils generally? Mansaray (2006) argues, that where the TA concentrates their attention on 'less-able' children, there is a danger of reinforcing the peer group label of 'dumb'. This has an impact on some children's perceptions of adult support as stigmatising. In order to counteract this possibility, some teaching assistants are also

used to support pupils generally and to take more responsibility for teaching tasks under the supervision of a teacher (HMI, 2002). However, this is not without some difficulties in terms of tensions over the low pay of teaching assistants in comparison to teachers, the lack of training for specific tasks and the overall danger of exploitation (Vincett et.al 2005).

Part of the task of engaging with such serious issues is to understand how decisions are made in classroom interactions between teaching assistants and teachers, over the distinctive and complementary nature of their roles. This involves developing clear job specifications, which will then be the subject of careful monitoring and evaluation. Making each feel valued members of staff, enabling them and teachers together to undertake staff development that will contribute to their relationship being constructively developed, are all urgent factors needing serious and continual attention.

In seeking to pursue particular policies involving extensive changes to existing practices, it is vitally important that Governments recognize the centrality of the role of teachers in this process. Whilst Hargreaves and Goodson (1995) maintained

over a decade ago: “it is time for teachers to be the included vanguard of reform, and not be made its marginalized victims” (p15), it is still applicable today. Thus we seriously need to address several significant questions: What do we expect of teachers? How should they be educated? What sorts of working conditions and relations will enable teachers to be more effective in their work?

The extent to which we value teachers will be reflected in the degree to which we seek to both genuinely understand their task and importantly to endeavour to provide the necessary forms of support. This is not to claim that teachers are beyond criticism, or do not need to be accountable, nor are we advocating the return to a past golden age. Rather, in highlighting the centrality of teachers work in the pursuit of change, we are maintaining that a disaffected, demoralised teaching force will be counter-productive in the struggle for the realisation of inclusive conditions, relations and practices. Teaching is a dignified task, and **all children** will benefit from a work culture which is supportive and satisfying to the teachers involved.

Conclusion

In this paper I have briefly outlined some of the key assumptions, understandings and questions relating to the issue of inclusive education. In the Conclusion I will briefly identify some of the important consequences of the analysis for the educationalists and other interested parties involved in the struggle for more inclusive conditions, relations and practices.

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.

Learning to understand the importance of a humanrights 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. One of the great supporters of this approach Freire (1998) when

reflecting on his book *Pedagogy of Hope* maintained, that it was ‘written in rage and love, without which there is no hope’ (p10). Hope involves an informed critical recognition of discrimination and a belief that the possibilities of change are not foreclosed. Sadly, in much of the vocabulary and approaches currently available on teaching, this perspective is patently absent. Thus, developing an approach to our teaching which is underpinned by hope is an urgent, necessary, difficult and exciting task. This is not about a Utopian vision for the future. Educated hope allows people to recognise that a different future is possible. This will be an informed, historical and as Grace (1994) maintains, a complex rather than simple hope.

This serious, passionate, optimistic view of practical action and relationships is in direct opposition to fatalistic pessimism, in which events are seen as inevitable, natural and there is a feeling of impotence and inability to change and of being without hope. For disabled people, for example, and I want to argue for all of us concerned with the pursuit for inclusion, this hope is about transformative change as disabled scholars Oliver and Barnes (1998) maintain, when reflecting on their perspective about the future society:

It will be a very different world from the one in which we now live. It will be a world that is truly democratic.....we all need a world where impairment is valued and celebrated and all disabling barriers are eradicated. Such a world will be inclusionary for all (p102).

What is it that inspires and motivates our commitment to teaching and all the learners involved?

Secondly, we need to create a culture of encouragement of support for teachers, one in which self-critical engagement will be an essential feature of professional development. This will involve teachers and other support workers being given the time, opportunity to learn the value and challenge of talking to one another over issues of professional significance. Talking is important – The form of talking being advocated is increasingly focused, developmental, a means of clarifying issues, raising questions, sharing ideas, insights, concerns and recognizing points of difference. Difference from this approach is real but also based on respect for each other. This is a demanding process and it is not easily achieved, nor is there a blue-print of how to undertake this task. Talking with one another and not at each other, is thus crucially important. It must not be viewed as

an optional extra or a task for a select few. It is an imperative for all of us in that it ultimately concerns the welfare of all people. It is a learning experience in which there is no room for arrogance in that we are all learners and given the seriousness of the issues, there is no room for complacency. It will demand time, commitment and a resilience that is not easily undermined. If changes are to take place that will enable a more robust and inclusive model of participation to emerge, it will require engaging with the task of how to interrupt the current assumptions and beliefs on which teachers' work is based. So, within inclusive cultures the re-examination of conceptions and understandings with regard to such issues as: 'success'; 'failure'; 'ability'; 'learning'; 'achievement'; and 'appropriate teaching styles' are of immense importance. The taken-for-granted nature of teacher thinking and practice needs to be continually explored within a collegial process of interaction. This includes recognizing that meeting the entitlements and challenges of all pupils is a whole school responsibility.

In a book entitled 'Bad Mouthing' Corbett (2002) highlights the patronizing sentimentality and individuality of negative views of

difference which the language of special needs supports. In recognizing the unacceptable nature of such language, the authors of *The Index For Inclusion*, a document produced and distributed to all schools in England and Wales (Booth et al 2000) replaced the term 'special educational needs' with that of 'barriers to learning and participation'. This is more than a mere semantic issue because from a socio-political perspective as long as there is a form of language that depicts individuals as 'not normal' and thus 'special' exclusionary forms of provision and practice will continue to exist. It is also a reminder that inclusive education is not a sub branch of special education and is critical of the exclusionary factors that such a system of provision supports.

Thirdly, the recognition of 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.

Fourthly, 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 including:

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.

In this brief paper I have tried to outline some of the key issues, ideas and questions relating to the importance of inclusive education and to the culture of teaching and schools. This is not a topic that can be reduced to quick, slick responses, but encourages the recognition of the difficult and continual struggles that becoming more inclusive entails. Both the barriers and the possibilities for inclusive conditions, relations and outcomes have been briefly highlighted and discussed. 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 parents and the community.

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