Inclusive Education: 
and the Politics of Possibility

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Introduction

In this brief paper, I will seek to identify and discuss some of the complex, contentious conceptions and understandings, currently available on the meaning and purpose of inclusive education.

The question of inclusive education is often depicted in deceptively and seductively uncritical terms. For example, in a UNICEF (2012) Positional Paper, it is boldly stated that:

Inclusive Education is not a marginal issue but is central to the advancement of high quality education for all learners and the development of more inclusive societies. (P8)

However, on closer scrutiny, the implications of such a perspective for teaching, learning and the daily experiences of all learners, is complex and characterised by several fundamental critical issues. An inclusive approach provides the opportunity for the development of a serious and critical understanding of the nature of learning. In an important and research-based study entitled: Creating Learning Without Limits, Swann, M. et.al (2012) contend that, their perspective is based on
particular thought-through ‘unshakable convictions’ including:

...,that human potential is not predictable, that children’s futures are unknowable, that education has the power to enhance the lives of all. (P1)

These innovatory and imaginative convictions stand in stark contrast to dominant official views of government and policy directives, that are based on assumptions concerning fixed-ability learning. This market-led approach emphasises standardisation, competition, targets and gives priority to predictable outcomes. The form of discourse supporting this view of learning and the role of teacher, is part of the deep-rooted orthodoxy that proponents of inclusive education need to challenge and change. (Slee 2012)

The paper will seek to identify and challenge the range of assumptions, conceptions and practices that are part of the perspectives that opponents of inclusion continue to support and propagate. These are part of the barriers to inclusive thinking, values and practices and in order to encourage an appreciation of the seriousness of these factors, the paper will develop a series of warnings
concerning the dangers of such representations and questionable conceptions. One outcome of this process will be the development of an alternative, informed, political view of inclusive education. Part of this development will be a consideration of the position and role of teachers in relation to a politics of possibility, in the struggle for change.

By focussing on the politics of possibility, an emphasis will be given to the struggles for change, in terms of alternative ideas, understandings, relationships and practices. It will seek to highlight some of the varied, serious, stubborn barriers to change at an individual and societal level. Most importantly, it will encourage a recognition of the extent of the changes that still need to be achieved.

Whilst consideration will be particularly focussed on education, the question of inclusion will be placed in a wider socio-economic context.
Inclusive Education

The question of inclusive education is increasingly being viewed by many governments as a topic of importance, which involves the critical questioning of policy, provision, practice and outcomes of education. Whilst these developments are supported by laudable claims and increasing amounts of documentary material, there remains very serious issues concerning the current situation. These include: Firstly, the multiple interpretations that are now available with regard to what constitutes 'inclusive education'. How we define inclusive education is thus extremely important because of the way in which such language has been colonised by various advocates, whose perspectives are informed by different understandings over the scope, intentions and necessity of such approaches. Some writers like Allan (2008) now contend that:

Instead of inclusion being a source of debate among researchers and scholars, it has become a curious, highly emotive and irrational space of confrontation (p 12).

Thus, the concept is a slippery one in that it can mean all things to all people and has become an empty and
vacuous concept. The range of interpretations are a source of bewilderment, frustration and confusion amongst many practitioners, parents and other interested parties. Secondly, the policy context in which inclusive education is situated, and needs to be understood, is one of competing and contradictory policy developments. All policies are not of equal value, and priority is often given to those relating to standards and achievements, which also involve differential financial support. A constant dilemma faces practitioners, which relates to the disjunction which often exists between policy intentions and what actually happens in practice. Finally, we are now witnessing a backlash against inclusive thinking and practices with support coming from government, academics, representatives of residential segregated provision, teacher union representatives, parents and the tabloid press. Various arguments are being presented in support of these criticisms against full inclusion, including: those who argue, for the importance of a continuum of provision in which special education is essential; those who call for ‘reasonable inclusion’ in contrast to what is described as ‘full inclusion’; those who highlight the lack of expertise and resources within mainstream schools, resulting in idealised and unrealisable perspectives. Finally, those who give priority to the pursuit of excellence
and high academic standards based on the centrality of competition and selection. A key figure supporting the criticism of inclusive education is Mary Warnock. The contentious nature of the question of inclusive education is reinforced in a publication by Baroness Warnock (2005) in which the author provides a retrospective overview of particular aspects of the development of the Warnock Report (1978) and what she now believes are some of the damaging impacts of the outcome of the Report. This includes the position and function of statementing. In this publication Warnock (2005) offers several unsubstantiated claims and assertions including: “There is increasing evidence that the ideal of inclusion… is not working” (p35). That inclusion “can be carried too far” and it involves “a simplistic ideal” (p14). Apart from her failure to seriously discuss the extensive contributions made by disabled people and their allies for over two decades, in support of inclusive thinking and practice, at times the tone of her writing is patronising, in that whilst she maintains advocates of inclusion have gone too far in their struggles for change, she contends that their efforts “springs from hearts in the right place: a commitment to equal opportunities”. ( p 40)
The different understandings of ‘inclusive education;’ are part of a range of challenging questions including:
Inclusion for whom, into what and for what purpose?
(Armstrong, F. (2010)

**A Series of Warnings**

In modern society with the concern for healthy living, various warnings are being articulated about the dangers of excess, for example, with regard to drinking and smoking. I think with regard to inclusive education, we now need to alert people to various misunderstandings, misrepresentations and trivialisations that are being expressed in popular and academic outlets. A series of such warnings would include for example:

Beware of advocates of inclusion whose discourse is supported by an uncritical use of the language of ‘special needs’. This is more than a semantic issue because as long as there is a form of language that depicts individuals as ‘not normal’ and ‘special’, discriminatory and exclusionary forms of provision and practice will continue to exist and be legitimated.
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 factors.

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.

It is important to emphasise that inclusive education is a serious business. A crucial feature of inclusive education, is that it is a political activity. It is concerned with raising critical questions about the values, purposes and outcomes of education. Inclusion is a ‘Distinctly political, ‘in your face activity’ (Corbett & Slee 2000 p136). The public discourse on education through which we are encouraged to talk, think and evaluate policy and practice including such language as: ‘standards’; ‘performance’; ‘delivery’; ‘league tables’; ‘competition’; ‘efficiency’ and ‘inspection’ has been described by (Fielding & Moss 2011) as “impoverished and impoverishing”. (p17) The form of political, critical analysis based on inclusive thinking, raises such important questions as: In a system-based on inequality, who gets what, how, when and with what consequences? Who is in and who is out? Inclusion for what? Finally, inclusion into what?
The language used to describe the pursuit of inclusive thinking and practice is that of a struggle. It is a hard and persistent battle. The use of such discourse reminds us of the strength and pervasiveness of that which is being challenged. Secondly, it highlights the degree of commitment required by those engaged in such critical efforts for change. Thirdly, it reinforces the social nature of this task and the importance of critical friendships, collective solidarity and active engagement.

Learning to live with one another involving a deeper inclusive understanding of belonging is thus essential to the effective realization of inclusive change. Placing the question of ‘diversity’ within the context of a system of education that is based on selection, competition and a narrow conception of ability, provides us with an indication of the confusion and simplified conceptions that exist with regard to this issue. This recognition of the social and political nature of educational conditions, relations and experiences, is a crucial antidote to inadequate and misleading tendencies with regard to how inclusion is defined and practiced. The complexity, seriousness and urgency of both critiquing assumptions and practices of exclusion on the one hand, and of establishing an alternative set of values,
priorities and vision on the other, provides a basis for resisting both arrogance and complacency. We must not on the one hand, underestimate the nature and degree of the struggles involved, if the necessary changes are to be realised, and on the other hand, recognise the importance of establishing effective working relationships with all those concerned with overcoming exclusion and discrimination.

The Alliance for Inclusive Education (ALLFIE) is currently calling for a long-term plan to secure an inclusive educational system. Tara Flood (2010) the CEO of the Alliance has forcefully captured the essence of their perspective on inclusion in the following statement:

Inclusive education IS a social justice issue because it creates a society that values all equally – not only does it benefit disabled students, but all students, because they learn the strength of diversity and equality, lose their fear of difference and develop empathy for others. It is as much about recognizing our similarities as it is valuing and respecting our differences. Feeling part of our families and our communities from the beginning of our lives, increases our sense of citizenship (p 2).
However, in order for education to contribute to the development of more inclusive conditions and relations, it requires a creative, supportive partnership between governments, schools, parents and the community. Sadly and unacceptably, (Whitty 2002) contends, governments too often set unrealistic goals, criticise schools for the problems of society and demand more targets with less and less support. This 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)

Schools cannot meet the challenges of inclusive education alone. 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 them with the necessary forms of support. We are thus arguing that a disaffected, demoralised teaching force, will be counter-productive in the struggle for the realisation of inclusive conditions, relations and practice.
Policy Teachers and Teaching

A constant dilemma faces teachers, which relates to the complex nature of policy-making and implementation, which is, the disjunction that often exists between policy intentions and what actually happens in practice. Illustrating this, Armstrong (2010) maintains that:

Globalization both creates the conditions and demands for widening participation of disabled children and young people in education internationally, at the same time as shifting the purposes and frameworks of educational systems in ways that are selective and narrow and lead to exclusion and marginalization (p 18).

Hence the complex and contradictory nature of the policy context in which teachers have to teach. A further dilemma concerns the extent to which inclusive policies are supported by human rights legislation.

Teaching is an increasingly complex, changing and challenging task, as can be illustrated from the range of metaphors that have been used to describe and discuss the position and work of teachers. They have been viewed as ‘missionaries’ and seen in terms of their civilising and socialising functions particularly of working
class pupils into the dominant traditions, values and acceptable behaviours befitting such a class. Others have depicted teaching as an ‘art’ and give emphasis to teacher’s professional artistry. Another significant metaphor is ‘teacher as juggler’. This involves a recognition of the multi-faceted nature of the teaching requirement and is connected to viewing teachers as ‘mediators of contradictory expectations’. Finally, teachers have been defined as ‘change agents’, thus giving emphasis to the political, critical and emancipatory aspects of teaching, in terms of making a difference in the lives of pupils and the society in which they work. (Grace 1978; Grace, 1984 Hargreaves 1994; & Fish 1997).

Teachers are not homogeneous and are differentiated by class, gender, race and age. Sweeping generalisations both within a society or across societies need to be resisted, and the influence of the context in terms of how such factors are experienced by particular teachers is thus crucially important. However, I want to suggest that the following propositions provide some creative insights for further discussion and research. Teaching is fundamentally a social act. As such, it involves extensive emotional labour, inter-personal engagements, a strong
commitment to the well-being of pupils and to the establishment and maintenance of effective working relationships. Secondly, teaching involves the development of increasing forms of self-awareness and critical reflection. This involves the recognition that teachers are always learners, thus need to continually examine their beliefs, intentions and effectiveness. Thirdly, teaching inevitably involves power-relations. Thus, teacher interactions and expectations can be enabling and positive as well as disabling and disenfranchising. Finally, from a global perspective, teaching takes place in a world of limited financial and teaching resources, increasing class sizes, workloads and buildings which are often in need of serious repair.

The issues and challenges that increasing numbers of teachers face, are to be understood in relation to the wider, historical, cultural, socio-economic context in which they are placed. Teachers do face new tasks and challenges arising from a combination of significant factors. These include: the increasing diversity of student backgrounds, expectations and needs; the cumulative and rapid range of change initiatives that have to be understood and engaged with; the lack of adequate supports to enable teachers to meet such demands; the
pressures of accountability; the decline of teacher status in government and popular images and the pressures of pupil disaffection and discipline (Furlong, et.al 2000; Slee, 2011).

Discussing the issue of professionalism within the more general context of community regeneration and the learning society, Nixon et.al (1997) argues that a new set of professional codes are needed which will integrate the various relationships and practices that teachers are now involved in. They argue, that an attempt to determine whether teachers are professionals according to certain absolute criteria is now a fruitless teak. For them, the issue of control and power is crucial and a new professionalism is required based on new kinds of relationships between professionals and their publics. This entails the struggle for agreement over fundamental issues, such as, the means and ends of education. They contend that:

Many of the traditional ‘agreements’ – between teachers, between pupils and teachers, and between parents and teachers – have already broken down or in the process of breaking down. Teachers, therefore, are having to become adept at achieving new agreements regarding the
purposes and processes of learning. The need to reach agreement, then, is a defining feature of the emergent professionalism. (1997 p25).

They maintain, that public sector professionals including teachers, are now engaged in a struggle over the meaning of professional authority and the exercise of professional judgement, in the light of increasing community involvement and power-sharing.

The underlying assumption informing this paper is that these new times present challenges to former values, concerns and practices about the nature and purposes of schools and teaching.

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?

We are not claiming that teachers are beyond criticism, or do not need to be accountable, nor are we advocating the return to a past golden age. Teaching is a dignified task, and all children will benefit from a work culture which is supportive and satisfying to the teachers involved.

**Conclusion**

Several researchers including myself, have identified features of the current educational system, which provide significant barriers to the realisation of inclusive thinking and practice. They include: the relentless priority to increase standards of student achievements; the divisive impact of competition between schools, which is supported by the introduction of league tables and increasing differential funding; the demands for greater accountability via narrow targets and serious consequences for students and schools, which are deemed to be failing. (Allan et al 2009; Lavia, & Moore, 2010 & Bangs, et.al 2011) One consequence of such developments is that more pupils are being classified as failing to meet the performance criteria within schools and
are referred to special education professions. According to Tomlinson (2012), special education is increasingly located in mainstream schools, indeed mass education is ‘now underpinned by an expanded and increasingly expensive ‘SEN Industry’’. This involves the work of ‘special educators, behavioural specialists, psychological, medical, therapeutic and other professionals and practitioners’. (p2)

Historical and cross-national research and analyses confirms that the relationship between special and general education is a factor that differs significantly between, as well as within, different societies. Paradoxically, we now have increases in inclusive provision and practice and simultaneously an ever increasing number of children being assessed as having special educational needs. This involves particular human differences such as ability, being highlighted and seen as being in need of special support. This raises some profoundly serious questions such as, What form of schooling do we need to meet this growing challenge? Whose interests are being served by this form of complex development and experience? (Richardson & Powell 2011).
In seeking to pursue particular policies involving extensive changes to existing practices, it is essential that the position of teachers in this process is explored. Sadly, we are still a long way from this approach being realised. 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? This perspective is influenced by a deep commitment to the realisation of democratic values and practices in which a fundamental transformation of the purposes, processes and outcomes of education, are of key 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)

It is important to appreciate that such authors are arguing for a form of thinking that emphasises the interconnectedness of all these issues under consideration.
Final Thoughts

Schools and teachers increasingly face a series of tensions in their work, including for example, as Ozga & Allan (2009) maintain:

Between attempts to satisfy the greater demands of governments and consumers for an improved service, and the drive to reduce expenditure and increase efficiency

and

Between the need by governments to allow enhanced autonomy and their unwillingness and inability to abandon policies which result in low-trust, cultures of targets, performitivity and compliance. (p213)

Teachers have been the subject of intense government directives, expressed through the number, speed and impact of competing policy initiatives. This has contributed to teachers experience of the pressures of work, low-morale and increasing accountability through specific targets connected to teacher performance.
An urgent and necessary task is to develop an alternative conception of teaching and the position of teachers in the struggle for change. We need to resist idealised platitudes and romantic conceptions. It must result in an empowering process which involves active engagement with the development of an anti-discrimination practice and deeper forms of self-reflection, collegial and supportive relationships.

One writer attempting to address some of these issues is bell hooks (1994) who seeks to provide an alternative conception of teaching in universities and colleges via her conception of ‘education as the practice of freedom’. Barriers to change are clearly identified and critiqued through a series of key questions including: why we teach, what we teach, how we teach and the intentions of our teaching? Importantly, she powerfully contends:

We must accept the protracted nature of our struggle and be willing to remain both patient and vigilant. (p33)

Importantly, in terms of the arguments of this paper, is her clear belief that the ultimate aim of this pedagogy is to develop and maintain ways of seeing, talking and thinking
differently. This is what she calls, teaching to transgress and she most forcefully contends:

The classroom with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labour for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond borders, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom. (p207)

This is an expression of a commitment to the establishment and maintenance of inclusive insights and practices. It also provides encouragement for us to further pursue the reality of these factors in our daily lives.

References


