

Inclusive education, democracy and COVID-19

A time to rethink?

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Inclusive education is recognised by the United Nations (UN) as fundamental to upholding Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the right to education. Yet inclusive education appears to remain elusive and diversity continues to create a significant challenge for policymakers and professionals. This paper examines the continuing struggle with diversity within policy and practice and considers how, consequently, special education is strengthened while inclusive education remains hard to reach. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education and inclusion will be explored, with particular regard for the increased disadvantage experienced by those who are already excluded (and which the UN refers to as “double jeopardy”). The paper concludes with some reflections on the possibilities for rethinking inclusion that arise from the current situation.

Keywords: inclusive education, democracy, COVID-19, diversity.

Introduction

The United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4), “to ensure inclusive and equitable education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UN 2020a, p. 1), is an affirmation that “all means all”. Inclusive education, according the UN, is both a necessary means of upholding individuals’ right to education (Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities) and of ensuring the “full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self worth” (UN 2020b) of disabled persons and enabling

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their full participation in society. In spite of this, across the world we are seeing, not inclusive education and an inclusive society, but a situation that Sally Tomlinson (2012) has named “an expanded and expensive Special Educational Needs industry” (Tomlinson 2012, p. 267). This paper will begin by reflecting on how and why diversity and the education of a diverse school population is experienced as so troubling. It will then consider how, within policy, difference becomes valorised and entrenched as problematic and how, meanwhile, special education continues its expansion through a “stealth bureaucracy” (Allan 2015, p. 37). The particular impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education and inclusion, whereby existing gaps are further widened and those already disadvantaged are exposed to “double jeopardy” (UNICEF 2020a), will be considered here. The paper will conclude with some reflections on possibilities for inclusive education, including those arising from the call from the Global Partnership for Education, to rethink education and identify mechanisms to support and enhance accessibility and inclusion. These possibilities require a stronger (re-)orientation to democratic values and human rights and involve engaging children and young people in the *project* of inclusive education; privileging education and pedagogy over pathology, renewing teacher education and troubling difference - as a political activity. They also recognise the enjoinder by UNESCO (2020) that inclusion in education “is not just a result; it is a process”. This paper offers an optimistic commitment to education as a vehicle for change (Säfstrom 2016) and, as such, is in line with John Dewey’s philosophy and with the spirit and ethos of this journal.

Troubles with difference

Educating an increasingly diverse school population appears to be a significant challenge and teachers, policymakers and politicians have all reported struggling to avoid excluding particular groups of children. Diversity, according to the social capital theorist Robert Putnam (2007), produces fear and leads people to disconnect from one another. He contends that diversity is a threat to democracy, citing evidence that in areas of high levels of ethnic diversity, people desist from associating with others and “hunker down - that is, to pull in like a turtle” (Putnam 2007, p. 149). For teachers, especially those at the start of their careers, diversity creates fear and they see themselves as needing to acquire highly specific skills in order to address the perceived deficits among their pupils and manage diversity in their classrooms. Consequently, notes Roger Slee (2011, p. 86), “teachers often feel at

a loss and are personally distressed about the difficulties experienced by disabled children in their classrooms”. This distress, fear, hostility and even guilt (Allan 2008) among teachers is hardly conducive to the creation of an inclusive environment.

A UNESCO analysis (2018) of 49 countries indicated that persons with disabilities are less likely than their peers to ever attend school and that they tend to have fewer years of education than persons without disabilities. They are less likely to complete primary or secondary education and are less likely to possess basic literacy skills. The World Health Organisation (WHO/World Bank 2011) World Report on Disability also painted a bleak picture of young people with disabilities being less likely than their peers to be in school with a more pronounced pattern in poorer countries. This report also noted the higher levels of poverty associated with having limited access to education.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had significant consequences in general, “upending the lives of children and families” (UNICEF 2020b), but its impact on education and inclusion has been particularly far reaching. Furthermore, it has widened the gap between those already disadvantaged, creating what UNICEF (2020a) has referred to as “double jeopardy”, whereby those who have already been left behind become further left behind. According to Save the Children (2017, p. 1), a “toxic mix of poverty and discrimination” results in individuals being “excluded because of who they are: a girl, a refugee, from an ethnic minority or a child with a disability.” This has been exacerbated as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The right to an inclusive education in law and policy

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) entered into force in 2008 with the highest number of signatories on its opening day and currently with 168 states and the EU having ratified the Convention (87% of Member States of the United Nations). Of the thirty Member States that have yet to ratify (which include two from North America), most are moving towards ratification but eleven Member States remain that have neither signed nor ratified. Five of these are African States, two are Asian, one is North American and one is Oceanic.

Sweden was among the first Member States to both sign (in 2007) and ratify (in 2008) the UNCRPD. It was slower, however, to enshrine the Convention in Swedish Law. It ratified the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child in 1990 and incorporated it in Swedish Law in

2020 (Olsson 2020). Prior to this, the Government looked seriously at the extent to which the principle of the child's best interests were taking into account in assessments, decisions and planning where the child was disabled. It concluded that this was, as yet, inadequate. Declaring the aspiration for Sweden to be a "leading nation in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda" (Regeringskansliet 2019), the Swedish Ministry of Health and Social Affairs defended the absence of legislative change on the basis of Swedish law already being in "good compliance" with the UNCRPD. It did, however, revise the Discrimination Act to include discrimination on the grounds of inaccessibility. In the three years to 31 December 2018, 40.5% of the reports received from the Equality Ombudsman were of disability discrimination relating to education.

The UK was almost as swift as Sweden in ratifying the UNCRDP, doing so in 2009, and enshrining it in law in the form of the Equality Act 2010, which includes disability among nine protected characteristics. However, the UK was given a somewhat damning review of compliance from the UNCRDP Committee in 2017, receiving the highest number of recommendations of Member States and being criticized specifically for retrogression in ensuring inclusive education and for failing to address the bullying of disabled children (World of inclusion 2017). The Committee also considered that the current legislation in the UK offered inadequate protection for disabled persons against discrimination and drew attention to a failure to mainstream the rights of women and girls with disabilities into disability and gender equality policies. The UK signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1990 and ratified it in 1991. The UK Government has made substantial use of the UNCRC and has enshrined in law the child's right to education. However, a UK review of the UNCRC (House of Lords/House of Commons Human Rights Joint Committee 2009) noted an absence of a national strategy for including all children with disabilities in mainstream schools, concerns that were reiterated some eight years later by the UN Committee on the UNCRPD.

When it comes to policy, the right to an inclusive education becomes shrouded rather than enshrined. Mu (2015, p. 552) distinguishes between the "supposedness" of policy and the "actualness" at the level of practice and suggests there is often a lack of convergence, particularly in respect of inclusive education. Additionally, a number of pressures from within educational policy more generally make it difficult for teachers to respond to students' diverse needs and to practise inclusively. The first of these concerns what the anthropologist, Marilyn Strathern (2000) calls a tyranny of transparency. The emphasis on proving rather than improving forces, in Stephen Ball's

(2003) words, the fabrication of success. The pressures this creates eat at the teacher's soul and teachers' work is characterised by fear of and obsession with what is demanded by the 'centre'. The cumulative effect of these pressures is that sight is lost of 'what matters' (Ferri, Connor & Gallagher 2011, p. 222). When such an approach is directed towards diversity, the effects are sinister and we see such titles as *Common Sense Methods for Children with Special Educational Needs* (Westwood 2007) and even one volume entitled *Getting the Buggers to Behave* (Cowley 2014), now in its fifth edition. These resources, intended to support teachers, merely make things worse by reinforcing children's deficits. The textbooks – the “big glossies”, as Ellen Brantlinger (2006, p. 45) called them – pathologise and categorise children's difficulties and project a level of confidence and certainty that they can be managed effectively in the classroom. They present particular 'conditions' in a segmented way, without regard for the intersections of disability with class, race, gender, sexuality or any other aspect of diversity. The realities presented in these texts bear little resemblance to the children whom the student teachers encounter and add to their confusion and anxiety about how to respond to individuals. They also place teachers and 'difficult' students in opposition to each other and construct teaching as being about control and management of students by teachers (Vogel 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the capacity within Governments to respond extremely rapidly with often quite significant policy changes. The UK's initial response to the pandemic was to close all schools, but to allow children of key workers and those deemed 'vulnerable' (although not necessarily because of disabilities) to continue to attend school. Extensive government guidance was issued to schools to support their reopening six months after closure, advising carefully planned social distance measures, for example keeping children in year group 'bubbles,' and cleaning regimes (GOV.UK 2020). Thereafter, it was down to schools to modify their behaviour and discipline policies to establish new codes of (socially distanced) behaviour and sanctions for breaches of these codes. Significant differences of approach to reopening across the UK (where education is devolved) drew the attention of opposition politicians seeking to gain political capital from these policy decisions. Whilst the schools were closed significant efforts were directed to supporting children's learning at home. It is impossible to say, at this stage, whether technology-based approaches to learning were any more or less inclusive than classroom teaching but this will be the subject of research in a study entitled *Diversifying Inclusion and Growth: Inspiring Technologies for Accessible Learning (DIGITAL) In the Time of Covid*.

In Sweden, the Government's decision not to close all schools was in line with its approach to the management of the pandemic that has been considered among the 'light handed' in the world (STAT 2020). The Government also took the view that closing schools was not an effective measure for controlling the virus (Government Offices of Sweden 2020). It did, however, move to online teaching in upper secondary schools. There has been little need for any policy changes in Swedish education in response to the pandemic, but scientists have meanwhile bemoaned the fact that Sweden has missed a 'rare opportunity' for studying COVID-19 in schools. The "perfect natural environment" (Vogel 2020) for studying transmission could, scientists say, have provided valuable learning for others, whilst acknowledging that "you can't find what you don't look for" (Vogel 2020).

The 'stealth bureaucracy' of special education

At the same time as the efforts, in earnest, to progress towards inclusive education in policy continue, we can see an expansion of special education. Tomlinson (2012, p. 267) describes this expansion as "irresistible" and as arising from a number of factors. These include the continued need for resourcing on the basis of a diagnosis; more parents seeking such a diagnosis for their child; teachers, under pressure to raise standards, seeking to remove troublesome pupils from their classrooms and an expanding number of professionals and practitioners needing to increase their client base. Tomlinson places the rise of the SEN industry in the context of a global expansion of education generally which generates "paranoia" (Tomlinson 2014, p. 63) among governments in their responses to the international country comparisons of student achievement (PISA). This global expansion also generates anxieties for governments about what to do with those young people who have been included through the expansion but who may not achieve sufficiently to become part of the economic workforce and consequently remain part of the "spectre of uselessness" (Sennett 2006, p. 86).

Special education, operating within a 'stealth bureaucracy' (Allan 2015, p. 37) that nurtures a whole domain of special needs, has been allowed to masquerade as inclusive education, creating an 'collective indifference' towards certain individuals and their parents (Slee 2011, p. 121). Language has been a key element within this stealth bureaucracy, with fundamental shifts taking place that are part of what John Kenneth Galbraith (2004) calls "innocent fraud" (p. 11), the renaming of troublesome concepts with terms which are "benign and

without meaning” (p. 14). Consequently, child deficit explanations continue to dominate accounts of school failure and parents remain positioned as “passive partners” (Tomlinson 2014, p. 132), expected to unquestioningly accept professionals’ decisions. A dangerous cycle continues, whereby children’s failure, which may have its roots in school-generated factors such as alienation, hostility and mistrust (Thomas 2013), allows difference to emerge and to subsequently be validated and exaggerated through existing school structures (Allan 2008, Slee 2011).

The COVID-19 pandemic, whilst devastating, represents an opportunity, as suggested by the Global Partnership for Education, concerned with transforming education in low income countries, to rethink education and identify mechanisms to support and enhance accessibility. This is an important and significant challenge and one which enables us to determine how barriers to participation in education might be removed, to imagine new possibilities for inclusion and to identify new ‘asks’ of government to support teachers and schools in their endeavours. The final part of this paper endeavours to do this.

Conclusion: Inclusive possibilities?

Inclusion is about more than being in the same building; it is about being with others, sharing experiences, building lasting friendships, being recognised for making a valued contribution and being missed when you are not there. Inclusion is not an issue of geography. Yes, we need buildings to be made accessible, but change can happen only if people have accessible minds. We need to realise that it is a fundamental right of all children to be educated together. We all need to realise that today’s children are tomorrow’s future. We need to work together in partnership to secure that future (Allan 2008, p. 41).

This ‘definition’ of inclusion was given by a young person to Members of Parliament in the UK and presents it as both simple and complex. It is simple in that it does not imply highly specialist support. It is complex by being more than a technical matter. I would like to end on an optimistic note and to offer some thoughts about progress towards an inclusive society and to suggest where, in education, we might direct our efforts. First, we might *engage children and young people in the task of creating an inclusive environment* and thereby developing themselves as part of an inclusive society. Children and young people, when asked about inclusive education, have demonstrated both clarity and wisdom

and have appeared to see it as worth striving for (Ainscow & Messiou 2018; Allan et al. 2009; Allan and Persson 2015). They appear to be unfazed by difference and, rather, find exposure to it stimulating, interesting and educative. Engaging children and young people in this way requires explicit undertakings by schools to build social connectedness among the students (Bower, van Kraayenoord & Carroll 2015) and to find room in the curriculum for this, but it seems likely to be a worthwhile investment.

A second focus of attention education might be on education itself and is an invitation to *privilege pedagogy over pathology*, reviving some of the thrill of pedagogy, such that distinguishing and diagnosing children becomes inconsequential. Hannah Arendt (2006, p. 196) reminds us that:

Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token to save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and the young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough . . . not to strike from their hands the chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us.

We might find ways of helping teachers to recover the excitement of students' learning and the surprises which children who are different may bring.

I have underlined the importance of downplaying pathology, according it less presence and power in school. That of course is easier said than done. There may be some merit in embellishing pedagogy, of finding ways to give it more (and greater) presence and power in school. Säfstrom's notion of teaching 'commitment' in preference to hope goes some way towards this and is closer to fulfilling the ambitions of Dewey's philosophy. It is here that we may need the help of governments to communicate greater public recognition of teachers and teaching. This is a departure from the shameful recent past in both Sweden in the UK whereby government ministers (Björklund and Gove) made extremely irreverent remarks about teachers. The remarks cannot be taken back, but governments can do much to generate respect and recognition for teachers and their pedagogical work. Teachers may, in time, start to believe this.

Thirdly, we might move towards a *teacher education that helps student teachers to look forward to diversity in their classroom*. This means enabling beginning teachers to examine the myriad ways in which students present in their classroom, address their own anxieties about this

and consider the resource potential of such diversity. In order to support student teachers in this way, teacher educators need to engage in *active theorizing about inclusive education*, using theory and theories to help us out of the ‘stuck places’, thinking ‘beyond accepted dogmas’ and understanding things differently. As McWhorter (2005, p. xvii) says:

The point here ... is not to feel bad about the injustice or the suffering in the world ... The point is to pull up short before the possibility that what you thought was true might not be, that what you thought was normal or natural might be the product of political struggle, and to start – from just that place – to *think*, which means to question, to critique, to experiment, to wonder, to imagine, to try.

And finally, the practice of *troubling difference – as a political activity* – seems to be a reasonable thing to ask of all of us, in whatever position we occupy. It requires, in particular, that academics seek out the marginalized and disenfranchised other, and to engage in what Julian Critchley (2007) calls a kind of ‘demos-tration’, with the emphasis on the ‘demos’, the people, and in “manifesting the presence of those who do not count” (p. 130). It involves naming and privileging particular voices and identities, described usefully by Jacques Rancière (2008) as a process of making a discourse of that which has formally been a noise and as a process of rupture which renders certain identities visible:

For me a political subject is a subject who employs the competence of the so-called incompetents or the part of those who have no part, and not an additional group to be recognised as part of society. ‘Visible minorities’ means exceeding the system of represented groups, of constituted identities... It’s a rupture that opens out into the recognition of the competence of anyone, not the addition of a unit (Rancière 2008, p. 3).

Critchley argues that the scope for political action has been reduced by the disarticulation of names which are inherently political, such as the *proletariat* or the *peasant*, and we could add to that the *mentally disordered child*. Critchley cites the examples of *indigenous* peoples achieving the status of a force for change in Mexico and Australia and we might envisage mobilized groups of *families with diagnoses* engaging to similar effect. The academic has an important role in mobilising people and discourses; exemplifying – and inviting – critique to encourage parents, professionals and even children to become readers of power; and generating alternative responses. The political tasks that are invoked here are both productive and creative,

involving “setting fire to the unjust state of things instead of burning the things themselves, and restoring life to primary life” (Deleuze & Guattari 1986, p. 108).

The COVID-19 pandemic has, without doubt, had far reaching effects, forcing us to behave differently in the world and requiring schools, and the teachers and students in them, to function in new and unfamiliar ways. Žižek (2020) has suggested, hopefully, that social distancing could have the effect of bringing people closer, strengthening the intensity of the link between them and helping them to appreciate and value others. Similarly, we might hope that the pandemic will precipitate a renewed commitment to inclusive education whereby all really does mean all.

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