

Respecting People Through Inclusion

This is a book of stories. Each one of us has a unique life story, reflecting our family relationships, our social and physical environments, our lives at school and work, our friendships, interests, passions... Our uniqueness is what gives us dignity, self-respect and value in the eyes of ourselves and others. In talking about education we are primarily talking about people, about individuals, about human stories. Every education system reflects the society in which it exists and the individuals it comprises. The system and the philosophy it represents will also feed back into the values of society. The extent to which schools value individual children reflects the extent to which people are valued in society.

My own experience as a student, teacher, parent and researcher tells me that no child ever enters school as a blank sheet of paper. Every child, however young, is informed by a plethora of factors: genetics, family situation, physical environment, social attitudes... so every child entering school has his/her unique story (however short) which influences his/her personality, emotions and ability to adapt. Schools that can embrace these differences are usually happy, creative places, where learning takes place in a spirit of mutual respect and personal and collective achievement. Schools that reject differences and attempt to mold children into uniform shapes, often fail, producing damaged children in a damaged society.

I grew up between England and South Africa, only coming to China as a student in 1980. In the 1970s South Africa, under white minority rule, practiced the policy of apartheid, by which different races (black, white and "coloured") were strictly segregated under different laws and systems. Education was no exception: as a white child I was able to attend a highly privileged school, with good teachers who accepted my visual disability with understanding. Black children, on the other hand, attended schools with poor facilities, large class sizes and often poorly qualified teachers. No school was allowed to accept children of different races, so from an early age children were taught to believe that people with a different skin colour were alien, threatening, unclean and, perhaps, morally inferior.

Thanks to my parents - both ardent opponents of apartheid - I learned from an early age that this sort of discrimination is unacceptable. Later in life I began to think more about the effects of education and apply these ideas to disability. If racial discrimination is unacceptable, why should disability discrimination be any different? Racial discrimination involves the objectivization and subjugation of certain groups and individuals, based on their appearance, ancestry, culture and history. It means that someone born with certain characteristics can never fully escape the social stigma imposed by those who consider their racial identity to be superior. Negative attitudes towards disability are not dissimilar, involving judgments about individuals often based on arbitrary assumptions. Disability might accompany any one of us through life, just as race, family and social environment might accompany us. It's just part of who we are.

This book – written and researched by two authors with profound understandings of both disability and education - explores experiences of inclusive education in eight different settings across the world. Stories from China, Malaysia, Taiwan, Canada, the United Kingdom and United States have been chosen and intimately researched to give

detailed insight into the lives of those experiencing inclusive education, classroom practice, school structure and educational framework. Each of the eight chapters also attempts to describe the history and process which has led to the adoption of inclusive practices, without ignoring the problems and challenges faced along the way. In selecting these stories the authors consciously sought out examples of “best practice” in inclusive education, in the firm belief that inclusion, internationally espoused by the Salamanca Declaration in 1994, should be an ideal for all education systems around the world. However, “many roads lead to Rome”: inclusive education is not a rigid ideology. Creativity and flexibility should inform all its decisions: an acceptance that each child should be helped to find his/her own way to learn and to grow.

In searching for good definitions of inclusive education I came across the following: “Inclusive education means that all students attend and are welcomed by their neighbourhood schools in age-appropriate, regular classes and are supported to learn, contribute and participate in all aspects of the life of the school” (from Inclusion BC, a Canadian NGO).

Many teachers I have spoken to in inclusive schools have emphasised that, in their experience, the greatest beneficiaries of inclusive practices are often nondisabled children. While inclusive education has primarily been developed to create equal opportunities and reduce discrimination against people with disabilities, its guiding philosophy goes well beyond disability. Inclusive classrooms are ones in which each child, disabled or otherwise, is equally valued and given the space and support necessary to maximise his/her potential. Most inclusive classrooms I have visited are creative, happy environments in which teachers, students, classroom assistants and support staff are part of a community focussed on the realisation of each child’s potential. However, such an approach poses serious challenges to more traditional forms of education, raising profound questions about the purpose and direction of education in any society.

This book does not attempt to answer all these questions. Rather it presents a series of in-depth stories with the purpose of informing, enquiring, entertaining and, we hope, enlightening each reader. We trust its publication will make a modest contribution to the discourse around inclusion and educational reform in China.

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