

Resource reviews

THE INCLUSION DELUSION? REFLECTIONS ON DEMOCRACY, ETHOS AND EDUCATION

Review by Maria Barry

Aislinn O'Donnell (ed.) (2015) *The Inclusion Delusion? Reflections on Democracy, Ethos and Education*, Bern: Peter Lang.

On 3 December 1990, Mary Robinson opened her inaugural Presidential address stating that she would be representing 'a new Ireland, open, tolerant and inclusive'. Twenty-five years on, *The Inclusion Delusion?* is a timely reflection on one of these ideals, scratching the surface and delving into the dilemmas and consequences of inclusion policies and programmes within the education system in the Republic of Ireland. As the title suggests, this is a thought provoking collection of essays that problematises the concept of inclusion within education policy and practice, exposing its many paradoxes and contradictions. The views and perspectives represented in the book reflect a broad range of disciplines and areas of educational practice including; philosophy, psychology, science, assessment, teacher education and religious education. It is a considered and critical analysis of a broad range of issues related to inclusion, going so far as to ask fundamental questions regarding the value of inclusion as a desirable response to diversity.

The book is presented in five distinct sections: Dialogue and Dissent; *The Inclusion Delusions?*; Re-framing Inclusion: Alternative Perspectives; From Science to Religion: Neutrality and Blindspots; and finally, Silence, Invisibility and Exclusion. The themes are far reaching, at times cross cutting but, perhaps most of all, challenging. While the overall purpose of the book is to provoke and stimulate a deeper level of conversation related to inclusion, the book also offers the reader: reflections

on how educational policy and practice has progressed in relation to inclusion; an exploration of hot topics such as schools admission policies; and an insight into some of the unintended consequences of inclusion policies on practice. Alternative approaches are also considered. While it is unclear who the intended audience for this book is it will be of interest to those not only involved in inclusion related matters within education but also those who seek to understand how policy realisation can give rise to both intended and unintended consequences.

For the purposes of this review, I will explore each section in brief. I am conscious that such a brief review will not reflect the level of insight and depth revealed in each of these essays. Rather, I hope to identify some of the key areas explored and the common themes amongst them. In Section One: Dialogue and Dissent, Bonfield, Eilis O'Sullivan and Carol O'Sullivan provide the foundations for the book in a sense, offering both a historical and philosophical take on inclusion, reminding us that though currently topical, this not a new educational concept or aspiration. Each author in the next section, *The Inclusion Delusions?*, explores inclusive programmes or approaches, problematising their impact on inclusion. Griffin focuses on the Special Needs Assistant (SNA) programme within schools to highlight some of the more troubling aspects of this classroom-based programme and what it means for inclusion. Supported by a number of studies, Griffin suggests that rather than enhancing inclusion in the classroom, the SNA scheme has been found in some cases to increase dependency and in fact isolate children from their peers. She proposes moving from the idea of integration to inclusion.

Ryan problematises differentiation through previous studies and highlights that as an inclusive approach, it can be practised in very different ways with different outcomes, intended or otherwise. Whilst she suggests differentiation has become one of the ultimate tools for inclusion in the classroom, she explores an alternative approach, the Universal Design for Learning, which focuses more on learning and less on difference. O'Sullivan and Birch highlight challenging behaviours amongst students as a complex

area that is broad in terms of both nature and needs. They recommend as a starting point a whole school approach, rather than singularly focusing on the needs of the individual. Otherwise, they also imply that the resultant is to separate and ‘Other’ rather than achieving inclusion.

Section Three stands apart from the other essays in this book as it goes beyond current policies and practices and offers alternative approaches. Dolan proposes the holistic framework of Education for Sustainability as an approach that is interdisciplinary and inclusive of several aspects of learning. Lyons presents a developmental perspective of emerging adulthood to suggest that we can contribute to an inclusive mindset by supporting student teachers to explore and understand the diversity within their own identity and the identity of others. Finally in this section, Grogan & Ryan propose formative assessment as a means of actively engaging and involving students in their own learning.

The collection returns to areas and issues more traditionally associated with inclusion in Section Four. Here, Science, Religion and Neutrality make somewhat unlikely bedfellows. Liston focuses on stereotypes associated with both science as a subject and scientists themselves as barriers which exclude some from participation in or choosing science as a subject in school. She concludes that it is ultimately societal attitudes that foreclose an interest in science for many. O’Connell reminds us that when it comes to inclusion we are not starting with a blank canvas in the educational arena. Using the backdrop of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism and its recommendations, his essay explores neutrality in education, pluralism, Catholic identity and the concept of the common good.

In the powerfully named final section, Silence, Invisibility and Exclusion, Canny introduces us to the teacher as a case for inclusion. Using an equality framework developed by Baker (2004), Canny explores two key areas for particular analysis here, sexuality and religious orientation. Highlighting structural barriers and feelings of isolation expressed by some teachers regarding their identity, Canny makes a strong case for the need to

consider teachers in the inclusion debate. O'Donnell brings this collection of essays to an end, with a strong response to the book title's question and an invitation to consider other ways of being inclusive and doing inclusion. She critiques concepts of inclusion that reify difference, are based on tolerance or the notion of 'welcoming'. Instead she offers the argument that inclusion needs to start with a recognition of plurality and focus on the concept of participation.

Perhaps part of the inevitable fate of *The Inclusion Delusion?* is that the critical reader left reflect on who has been omitted. While one book cannot be expected to comprehensively include all, I wonder if the cultural diversity of the contributors to the book could have been extended. In addition, I suggest too, that the agency and value of the child's and young person's voice as a contribution to educational thinking and reform should be recognised. This relates not only to their right to actively participate in issues related to their lives (Waldron, 2006) but also their inclusion acknowledges their presence and power (Cook-Sather, 2006). Notwithstanding this, *The Inclusion Delusion?* offers many responses to its opening question, reflecting on how far policies and programmes have come, naming the structural barriers that continue to pervade the area and in highlighting the paradox and peril of embracing a nebulous if noble concept.

References

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