

Socially just and inclusive education

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Abstract

This article presents a personal account of what socially just and inclusive education means to me, an academic in a UK university. I identify the critical elements as being the recognition of the right to claim and the duty to protect the humanity and value of all members of society. Inclusion and social justice are about belonging in the world unfettered by the disablements of poverty, illness and prejudice. They are dependent upon interdependence, community and collaborative enterprise. Here I call upon all students in education to take a stand; to work together to end the marginalisation and exclusion of the poor and the abandoned and to disavow control through privilege. Only together by and for each other can we be free.

Article

Recently the Sheffield Institute of Education, Sheffield, UK, held an event to launch its new home, the Charles Street building¹. This building has enabled education colleagues and students who were scattered across the City Campus to come

¹ Information about and images of the Charles Street building can be found at <https://www.shu.ac.uk/about-us/our-services/facilities-directorate/estates-development-and-sustainability/charles-street-building>.

together in a single space that has been described by the Vice Chancellor² as a Palace of Learning. When I first entered it the building took my breath away. It is state of the art in its design, all round tables, cosy booths for group working, electrical sockets in settees to power your laptop and lecture rooms with chairs that swivel to enable collaboration with peers. The home of the institute is a community space. Through the centre of the building runs Brown Lane, a street that is open to the public. The route was kept for its historical importance to the Cultural Industries Quarter in which the Charles Street Building is located: Sheffield is proud of its artisans. The building was officially launched by Baroness Doreen Lawrence who, since the racist murder of her son Stephen, has been pivotal in the UK for exposing institutional racism. One family's tragedy led to fundamental changes in the practices of a nation's organisations. At the launch I was invited to deliver a short presentation that addressed two of the key drivers for the work of the institute: Social Justice and Inclusive Practice. I was asked to define and explicate what these terms mean to me. This is what I had to say.

Achieving consensus on what is socially just and inclusive education depends in part on first reaching agreement as to what these terms might mean for they are nebulous in nature and slippery. But they are sometimes trapped and dressed up in whatever form suits the particular political goals of the user. So for some Social Justice is all about economic redistribution - a Robin Hood³ taking of assets from the haves to give to the have nots. And Inclusion becomes about lowering the drawbridge to permit into spaces, or at least into some of the space for some of the time, those who we know do not really belong but whom we are obliged by law to accommodate anyway. But for me neither Social Justice nor Inclusion are about money or access to space - rather they are more profound axiological global issues in the sense that they compel us to reflect upon human worth. Social Justice and Inclusion are all about personhood: being acknowledged and valued as a human being. Social Justice and Inclusion are about being enabled to claim your place in the world unfettered by the malefic impediments of poverty, illness and prejudice. Education is not a practice that stands outside of the world. Free Schools⁴, for example, cannot become, to quote Nicky Morgan⁵ (2015), 'the modern engines of social justice', unless the children in those schools feel safe, warm, nourished and believe in a future. Social Justice and Inclusion are as dependent on quality housing, health, social care and access to work or other forms of occupation as they are on education. In 2016 in the UK, the 27th richest country in the world, more than a million people are so poor that they cannot afford 'to eat properly, keep clean or stay warm and dry' (Butler, 2016, n.p.). This includes more than 300,000 children. Rising housing costs and the annihilation of industrial communities in the northern counties

² It is the Vice-Chancellor who effectively leads a British University and has responsibility for its administrative functions.

³ Robin Hood is an English folklore hero who robbed the rich to give to the poor.

⁴ Free schools in the UK are those funded by national rather than local government.

⁵ Nicky Morgan was at that time Education Minister within the UK Conservative Government.

of the UK are delivering devastating consequences for families (Butler, 2016). One in 5 children arrives at school hungry each day (TES, 2016). I do not imagine that they anticipate their aspirations coming to fruition anytime soon or even if life is permitting them any aspirations at all.

The American political activist Van Jones (2016) has said that Alicia Garza in using the hashtag black lives matter changed a nation's conversation. Just as 23 years ago on April 22nd 1993 the savage murder of a young man, Stephen Lawrence, did in the UK. Stephen was just waiting for a bus. Today over 1200 disabled people in the UK die needlessly each year: death by indifference (Barleon, 2013). Once again it has taken the death of a young man, Connor Sparrowhawk, or LB as he is known to many, and the heart ripped out of yet another family to start this conversation: #disabledlivesmattertoo. Political theorist Hannah Arendt (1963) conceptualised our personal failure to acknowledge, critique and decry such atrocities as a banality of evil. The Evil that brings suffering and death to those who are stripped of their humanity, remade as burdens, as drains on our society and tossed aside, is not out there, situated in others but is embedded within us constrained by the gimp masks of uncritical consciousness that smother our righteous screams. And so we stay silenced as our once beautiful Mediterranean sea becomes the graveyard that shames us all. Over 10,000 deaths since 2014 and still counting (Africa News, 2016). For the dispossessed, the thrown away and the forgotten, those whom Zygmunt Bauman (2003) has termed human waste, Social Justice and Inclusion are not about being educated but about desperately seeking to remain human and to stay alive.

Social Justice and Inclusion for me must therefore include the Bhaskarian (2002) notion of co-presence - they are not about autonomy and independence but about community: interdependence, connectedness, unity and working collectively. They are about protection - enabling people to live their lives in the ways that are right for them whatever their gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, class, economic status, age or physicality. Social Justice and Inclusion are about focusing on the shared elements of being human and recognition of and respect for those characteristics that distinguish us. I want graduates from the Sheffield Institute of Education to be able to recognise themselves in the other and to be inspired to new possibilities for their own being. I want our students to approach the world in what Titchkosky (2011) calls a Politics of Wonder, unsettling what we think is known; making the familiar unfamiliar as we rethink and reshape our habitual ways of being. I want our students to revel in debate and discussion, to welcome the challenge of ideas that conflict with their own and to develop a set of skills that enable them to negotiate and accommodate different world views. I want our students to be ethical and informed citizens of the world, critical thinkers who can recognise what is wrong, cry out in condemnation and transform society through their creativity and their commitment to achieving positive change. EF Schumacher (2016), the great economist, in response to the challenge of 'but I am only one person what can I do to

change the world?' would reply 'Everything starts very very small and usually in a very dark place'. In the Sheffield Institute of Education one voice can become a choir whose song of justice will be so beautiful and compelling that it will be impossible to ignore.

As critical thinkers we must ask of any philosophy who stands to benefit from this and who might lose. Educating our young people and learners of all ages and being educated ourselves by them so that in a single project of learning we all become respectful and enlightened citizens of the world who have a belief in a future and the passion to make a difference will be of benefit to everybody without doubt. So in the long term can anyone lose - no. But Paulo Freire (1970) the famed Brazilian educationalist argued that those in power, the ones who benefit from the current system, the oppressors who are thriving on the labour and sacrifice of the oppressed will not recognise their own oppression and so will not realise that in the socially just and inclusive world they too would be free. That a life of value is found within human connection, community and creativity and not in the amassment of things. And so it falls upon the oppressed to lead the oppressor to enlightenment. For those of you who are restless and feel change is a long time coming then I urge you to be still for a moment and listen hard. For to cite Tracy Chapman (1988) revolution sounds like a whisper. A faint melody that vibrates along the unemployment lines, through the cardboard boxes of the homeless, the food banks of the poor, the wards of the assessment and treatment units and the cells of the jails, the makeshift rafts of the sea and the wires of the camps, the classrooms of our schools and the lecture halls of academia. A melody that begets a verse and then a chorus and then a choir. And so that melody becomes a song of love, hope, possibility, unity and joy.

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