

In Conversation with Professor Jonathan Rix

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Professor 'Jonty' Rix holds the chair of Participation and Learning Support at the Open University. Jonty's research interests include policies, practices and language that facilitates inclusion. His work explores diverse perspectives and models that promote thinking about the aim and fundamental purpose of education which is central to his philosophy *'it's not just about changing systems'* (Rix, 2016).

I had the opportunity of spending a couple of very enjoyable hours 'in conversation' with Professor Rix. The aim was to discuss his latest book, 'Must Inclusion be Special?' but our discussion quickly moved into an interesting exploration of his realistic vision for educational change which I endeavour to capture here along with offering some insights into his book.

An extensive researcher and writer, his publications explore policies, practices and language associated with inclusion and special education. However his work often confronts and challenges the use of 'labels', as implied by the title of his latest book! Furthermore, having always been interested in narrative, publishing his first novel in 1994 and in the 80s writing for the theatre, poetry and short stories, his writing style reflects the vision these genres often evoke: that the author's voice should always and clearly be visible.

In some respects his style is a conscious approach given that one of Jonty's main concerns about research is that authors do not always acknowledge their own position in their work. As a teacher and Doctorate supervisor, this is something he encourages in his students as he feels it is important the reader from the outset understands from where the author's ideas are emerging and thus their potential bias. This refreshing style makes 'Must inclusion be special: rethinking educational support within a community of provision', a very readable and accessible book with wide appeal and value to a diverse readership.

Exploring education through the lens of equality and participation and focussing on issues related to learning difficulties, implies it is not a book for theorists looking for a robust new theoretical position. Rather it illuminates the complexity of the field and the underlying challenges. It brings together a wide range of historical and current research that highlights the challenges inherent in dominant educational systems. When articles talk about inclusive practice, there is often a utopian inference and a wistfulness that implies the perceived changes necessary are too great to 'make it work'. Or, a central theme of much research on inclusion is that the challenges can be 'fixed' by doing a particular activity or by adopting a particular kind of practice. However, Jonty takes a different stance. Much of his thinking is drawn from personal experience of the UK educational system as well as extensive research overseas undertaken for his own writing and teaching. He argues *'we have a society and culture that encourages us to focus on the individual, {this} is the dominant way of thinking and our education system does the same'* (Rix, 2016). This then is what drives policy and decision making. *'We say we want to get to a more community way of being but unless you can get to that other place {and, he believes education can help*

us get there(!)} - we are not going to shift away from a 'market' driven way of thinking. We could however through our approach to education achieve more of what we are wanting to achieve' (Rix, 2016).

Divided into two Parts the book follows Jonty's narrative in which the author's autobiographical experiences and story-telling are fused with well researched data that tracks the historical roots of the concepts of 'Inclusion' and 'Special Needs'. The chronology uncovers how society arrived at a model of Special (P:40) entering the debate around the challenges for an educational system that historically and currently premises a vision of life as factual, subject defined, and rooted in labelling and grading ability based on 'correct or incorrect answers'. (Rix, 2016). Moreover, if society acknowledges the default position that 'some people are better than others' (Rix, 2015, (P:164), this has consequences. There is no doubt that some individuals are more gifted, talented, intellectually stronger, brighter, and perhaps even more virtuous in terms of particular personality traits and characteristics. But if this means society then values one life over that of another or that one human being is more superior to another, then this calls into question issues of rights, equality and social justice. Difference means individuals approach life's challenges and in particular 'learning' from different starting points. '*Special is a small world*' (Rix, 2015 p:26) and it links to how individuals are defined if their 'starting point' is seen as lower than what is arguably accepted as the norm.

By beginning with a global historical overview of how society's notion of education has emerged, Jonty sets the foundation for where in the current educational system, these challenges emerge. He asserts there is no commonality of practice or approach to policy in order to address 'difference'; that children are marginalised in all systems and sectors; and that provision often identified as 'special' in terms of time and space in order to bridge difference, is in fact seen as additional to that which is accepted as 'typical' and by default therefore is an add-on. Furthermore if difference is seen as internally emerging from the individual, characteristics, external experiences and the social world in which these occur, should also be recognised as contributing to difference.

Jonty makes the point that despite the lack of commonality, there is a 'common sense' perception, a universality in how education is enacted and understood. This takes place within an unspecified taken for granted set of values. Differences therefore in wealth, gender, ethnicity, location, social biases make for tensions in the system and marginalisation. Bizarrely, in the 1990s legislation led on a Rights Discourse in conflict with the function of education which was in fact neither 'universal or historically significant'. Political & social structures, and the evolving school systems, subsequently lead to 'reinforcing inequality of participation & access' (Rix, 2015, P:5/6).

This philosophical historical context of the principles and evolution of the concept of inclusion is discussed within the context of the writer's own experience. The pocket history provides the reader with a context and a reasoned explanation for how educational systems emerged across cultures and nations leading to the neoliberal compulsory educational system we have today. '*Skills and employment are what those people who control the money and structure of education think are the priorities*' (Rix, 2016).

The narrative style imaginatively and frequently sprinkled with examples to illustrate and explain points, makes for an easy read added to which is the sense of a personal reflection and experience which gives a realism so often lacking in academic publications.

When thinking about the expressions *special* and *inclusion*, it is common place to measure and categorise in terms of 'developmental age/stage theory' and by what is perceived as 'the norm'. Furthermore, it can be 'unsettling' to think of 'norm' as fictitious; that it is a '*man-made grid of intelligibility that attributes value to culturally specific performances and in doing so privileges particular ways of being*' (Rix, P:76). Conversely, without norms there could potentially be chaos and anarchy, so it could be argued a system of measurement is necessary for the greater good. Not least, I propose that if viewed through the lens of social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) for example, it is human nature to seek to evaluate own opinions and abilities against the abilities, opinions and beliefs of others. Interestingly, social comparison theory asserts that whilst it is relatively easy to change opinions and even beliefs in the light of what others think, individuals are unlikely to compare themselves with the

performance or ability of those who are *too* divergent from themselves (Festinger, 1954). In other words I suggest when evaluating ability or performance a sense of status or value is often placed on divergences. The dominant view of divergence or difference then, when seen through the concept of inclusive practice, is that the 'problem' is either '*within the setting or within the child*' (Rix, 2015 p:78) and we create this culture of cause and effect.

A 'banking' notion of UK education still dominates in which an exam at the end of a course is still considered the best way to assess levels of knowledge and understanding. Project work is increasingly being reduced or side-lined. However, Jonty argues that '*learning is not an individual process... it is always about a social interaction so whatever and however one wants to think about it, the reality is that there is some kind of social relationship going on between the person who is developing the knowledge and the context in which they are developing that knowledge*' (Rix, 2016). By its very nature learning is collaborative. It is socially mediated and socially constructed and yet when there are 'divergences' the system will default to the individual. On the other hand, Jonty argues, if '*you said to the learner that actually I am not going to assess you individually, I'm going to assess you and evaluate you collectively within a collaborative process, most learners would get upset*' (Rix, 2016). Notions of fairness, equality of input and effort, creep into the idea of working and being assessed and judged in a collaborative way.

And yet collaborative working are 'buzz' words both in terms of addressing inclusion and in facilitating learning, albeit there is little evidence base for it; studies are often founded on hypothesis without any real investigation into the problems and difficulties that emerge from collaborative working (Rix, 2016). What is more securely researched are the socio cultural approaches to learning in which there is stronger research evidence to suggest it is a good way of working. '*If you can get people working together, working collaboratively you are much more likely to achieve the kind of unified characteristics that they want in a person in the work place*' (Rix, 2016). Inclusion is about collaboration – commitment isn't enough. The default position is facilitation but it doesn't happen by osmosis!.

'If you go to somewhere like India, Indonesia, or a number of African countries and read their policy documents about what education is for and how teachers should be working, it's fantastic that they really want teachers and learners to be engaged and working together. They are way ahead of England because here all we know is one way of working albeit many of our teachers are more aware of what could be done' (Rix, 2016)

So when theorists talk about learning communities, one of the real problems is that it is not a concept that can be 'tagged on'. It needs to be embedded into a way of working and thinking and everyday practice. but there is a real tension here when the focus is on skills and the economy. Nevertheless, '*if you do make a shift to a more collaborative approach this can have a profound impact on pedagogy because you the learner and the learners knowledge, priorities and ways of working, come to the fore in a much stronger position that changes the power balance between teacher and student. You make a shift to a more collaborative approach*' (Rix, 2016).

There are multiply pathways to inclusion and they all feed into each other and overlap - in his book Jonty explores the '*individual*', the '*collective*' and the '*social*' and the pedagogical challenges this entails. He challenges the traditional as well as the more innovative and concludes that we have an education system where '*.. we think we know the answers when we don't; but it doesn't matter that we don't because it is our relationship with the questions that makes life meaningful*' (Rix, 2015 p:164).

Must Inclusion be Special? Is now tweeting with cartoons @jontyrix