

An analysis of the cultural representation of disability in school textbooks in Iran and England.

Abstract

The paper details the findings of a study which focused on the analysis of the cultural representation of disability in school textbooks in Iran and England. The paper argues that whilst inclusive education could facilitate the incorporating of disabled pupils into mainstream schools, there needs to be deeper examination as to how this transition should take place **for children aged 3-13**. The paper suggests that in such examinations school textbooks might be of significance in familiarizing non-disabled pupils, teachers and authorities with the issues related to disability and disabled pupils.

Keywords: disability; empowerment; cultural analysis; Iran; England; school textbooks

During the last decades of the 20th and the first of the 21st Century the world stage was dominated by discussion of the inclusion of children with disabilities¹ into **mainstream primary, middle and secondary** schools. Indeed, the emergence of inclusion was observed to be grounded in the World Conference in special education held in Salamanca, Spain in 1994. At this conference, 25 international organisations and 92 governments developed a ‘statement that called for inclusion to become quite simply the norm.’ (Clough,1998:2).A review of the last two decades of literature leaves one in no doubt that inclusion in general, and inclusive education in particular, have become the new orthodoxy of educational thinking for children who attend **primary and middle schools** (Allen, 2008). In recent times, then, inclusion has supplanted integration as the educational vogue in very many countries. Inclusion, then, is the ‘buzz-word’ (Evans & Lunt, 2002, p.41) that has gained high status and acquired international currency.

Inclusion has proven itself to be of great benefit to disabled pupils. Not only as an end in itself, but also as a means of promoting greater social acceptance of difference and impairment. However, despite positive outcomes it remains the case that some children with disabilities placed in mainstream educational settings are at an increased risk of bullying and teasing (Gray, 2002), lower sociometric positioning in class (Zic & Igri, 2001) and experience social distancing (Guralnick,2002). In light of these findings this paper suggests that teachers must employ effective measures to increase the positive outcomes for all **pupils** who enter **primary and middle** schools. Such measures, we suggest, should include the analysis of school textbooks.

This study **therefore** provides an analysis of the ‘visibility of disability’ in Iranian and English educational texts. The paper examines whether textbooks provide all children with a representation of the world which enables them to take on the identity of a learner as well as to feel a sense of belonging within their school community (HSRC, 2005). Whilst research into inclusion has been detailed, an analysis of the impact of textbooks upon inclusive education has not been well–documented. The paper, divided into three sections, will therefore;

- 1) consider how education and inclusion is formulated for **pupils** in Iran and England;
- 2) detail the methodology that was employed in the study; and,

- 3) discuss the importance of textbooks in the development of inclusive education for **primary and lower secondary aged children.**

First, though, the article provides some brief contextual detail of the education systems in England and Iran.

The Education system in Iran

Iran occupies 636,363 square miles (1,648,173 km²) of the Middle East region. It “ has a population of over 68 million which makes this country the sixteenth largest country in terms of population” (Daniel & Mahdi, 2006, p. 4). Iran possesses a long history of education and Article 30 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran states that everyone has the right to free education. The education system is four-tiered starting with Dabestan (primary level of education) (grades 1–5), Rhanamai (secondary level of education (grades6–8), Dabirestan (high school level) (grades 9–11), and Pishdangshgah (pre-university level) (grade12). Schooling begins at the age of seven (Palls, 2010).

Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the secular education system in Iran was replaced by an Islamic system. The first phase toward Islamisation in the education system saw the removal of teachers who were opposed to Islamic views (Chelkowski & Dabashi, 2002). The move also saw the enforcement of the hijab and Islamic dress codes for female pupils coupled with gender segregation in educational settings (Chelkowski & Dabashi, 2002). In the 1980s, the Islamic Revolution inaugurated a complete revision of the curricula and textbooks in the Iranian education system. The contents of geography, history, literature, civics, social sciences, religion, and language textbooks were rewritten grounded on the Islamic doctrine and the new social, political, and economic status of Iran (Azimi, 2007). Textbooks for each subject in schools are authorised by the Ministry of Education and Training (Babaii & Ansary, 2003).

No reliable statistics are available in relation to pupils with physical and mental disability in Iran; however, in 2006 and 2007 alone, nearly 30% of disabled pupils were integrated into mainstream schools (State Welfare Organization 2009).

The English Educational System

Education in England is overseen by the Department for Education, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills but it is **mainly schools themselves** who implement educational policy. Education is organised into four distinct sectors. These being: primary, secondary, further and higher education. Pupils are required to start primary school at five and are required to stay in compulsory education until they reach 16 years of age. Most pupils move from primary school at aged **11** and continue their education in state secondary schools (Royal Geographical society, ND)

Pupils with SEN and/ or disability

Department for Education (DfE, 2011) statistics show that one in five children are identified as having a difficulty with learning that requires extra help to be given in class. In 2011, data also indicated that 16.4 per cent of all pupils had a Special Educational Need (SEN) and that an additional 2.8 per cent some 226,125 pupils had a learning difficulty so severe that they required the provision of a Statement of Need.

The development of inclusive education in England

Throughout the early 21st century, educational development in England was controlled by a New Labour government (Allen, 2008). A central plank to this ideal was the establishment of learning environments where stereotypical beliefs and attitudes towards disability were challenged. Of most importance was that such environments were to be ones where the moral imperative was for children and adults to not only understand but moreover view positively the differences in others (DfES 2004). Whilst inclusive education is still presently a driving force in the English education system it may be this imperative will not remain so dominant. The coalition **and subsequent Conservative** Government, led by David Cameron, have proposed reforms to inclusive provision. Speaking in 2010 the Government proposed to remove the 'bias towards inclusion'. Runswick – Cole (2011) relates this is a

substantial shift in policy and an attempt to re-narrate what Government see as the ‘problem of inclusion’.

On the importance of textbooks

Within the **primary and middle** school system a common ‘tool of the trade’ (Wigginton 2005, pg. 197) has, ‘since the advent of typography’ (Luke et. al. 1989, pg. 245), been the textbook. The significance of textbooks in the **education of children aged 3-13** should not be underestimated. Indeed, Olsen (1989) accounts pupils, during their school career, may encounter at least 32,000 textbook pages and spend 75 per cent of their time engaging with the material presented within. Textbooks though **for young children** are based upon ‘specialised forms’ of institutionalised school knowledge (Dowling 1996, pg 49). Taxel (1981, p. 33) argues that this knowledge is ‘dominated by a world view and the ideology ... of those occupying positions of socio-economic pre-eminence in society’. Crawford (2004) supports this contention relating that textbooks are social constructions which employ a ‘selective tradition’ (Williams 1961) to inculcate **young children** into the cultural and socio-economic order of society with its inherent relationships of power and dominance.

Textbooks and inclusion

Over the last few years great emphasis has been placed on the importance of inclusive curricula, in an attempt to increase the visibility of **so called minority groups** (Nind 2005). The importance of disability portrayal in **primary and middle school** education arises because the inclusion of disability issues can influence positively the self-image and motivation of such pupils (Wieman 2001). Among varied agencies in education, ‘the textbook is, in fact, the heart of the school and without the ubiquitous text there would arguably be no schools, at least as we know them’ (Westbury 1990, cited in Mohammad and Kumari 2007). Thus, finding instances of disabled people’s representation in textbooks **employed with young children**, we suggest, could be of significance.

It is our contention, then, that in respects to the creation of favourable inclusive learning environments **in primary and middle schools** the portrayal of disability within textbooks has

importance at two levels. We suggest importance firstly centres upon the recognition that textbooks can, and do, reproduce the inequalities which exist in society (Ninnes 2002). Second, we believe, textbooks have importance to inclusive practice because they enable children to identify with the social world in which they live.

From this perspective, we argue, that the representation of the world, contained within textbooks, impacts upon a child's ability to take on the identity of a learner as well as to feel a sense of belonging within their school community (HSRC 2005). Greenfield and Subrahmanyam (2003) support this premise, arguing that learning materials are key to reshaping the identity of learners. This evidence suggests that if teachers are to create enabling inclusive learning environments, where all pupils feel valued and welcomed, then, all learners must be able to 'find themselves and their world represented in the books from which they learn' (HSRC, 2005, pg7).

Methodology

The research examined the scope of the representation and treatment of disability and Disabled people within the primary **school textbooks employed in the English education system and textbooks employed in the lower and upper secondary school in Iran. It should be noted from the outset that some of the textbooks fell outside of the pedagogical materials employed with children aged 3-13. The upper secondary textbooks are included here as a point of interest as well as to suggest that the issue of representation of disability discovered in the primary and early secondary schools textbooks might be inherent throughout the range of textbooks employed by schools.**

Within the study content, textual and discourse analysis were simultaneously employed. Through such employment the research attempted to uncover the explicit and implicit message conveyed within the sample textbooks (Johnsen 1993). The overall aim of the analysis was to uncover the textbooks' subcutaneous (Johnsen 1993) layer by examining whether the sample books consciously or unconsciously promoted or represented prejudices or stereotypical ideas in respects of disability or

Disabled people (Fritzsche, 1992). The analysis was based upon a sample of three secondary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbooks for pupils aged 12–14 and four high school EFL textbooks for pupils aged 15–18 as well as 96 textbooks employed by primary schools in England.

Phase one of the research, the macro analysis, involved each textbook being read page by page with images and text which referenced disability or Disabled people being demarcated. Within phase two, the microanalysis stage, the demarcated images were analysed to ascertain how disability was located within the text and what model of disability was represented. In addition, demarcated sections of text were examined using linguistic analysis. Here linguistic forms such as lexicon, agency and action, voice, verbs and adjectives (Ninnes, 2002), were analysed to reveal any ‘hidden assumptions’ about disability and Disabled people (Crawford 2004, p. 21). During this phase, a frequency and space analysis were also conducted; simple counting and calculating of the discrete sections of text examined how frequently disability or Disabled people were mentioned.

Results

Despite the range of subjects within the sample there was, however, a paucity of data referencing disability. Indeed, in the English **primary school** textbooks only one short story extract from a literacy book published in 1976, half a page in relation to bullying in another literacy textbook, from 2000, and finally three short sentences in a science textbook from 1994 were found. In Iran only one instance of text was found in a high school textbook. Whilst this lack of data is by itself interesting, it did rather limit the linguistic analysis.

Linguistic analysis

Despite the limited sample, it is of interest to note that the contents of one book in England, from the 1970’s, were still being made available to the children. This book was very much a product of its time and as such employed language which did nothing to promote respect towards Disabled people. For example, a person with multiple disabilities was introduced **to primary school children** within **one**

story extract as ‘this blind, deaf and dumb person’. Additionally, three sentences within a science textbook employed a photograph of a male with visual impairment to discuss ‘eyes that do not work properly’. These descriptions seemingly located disability within the realms of the medical deficit. The final textbook, from 2000, was a little better in that it briefly discussed disability in terms of discrimination and bullying. This text seemingly placed the understanding of disability more within the realms of the social model.

In the Iranian texts a case study of Thomas Eddison was included in **one** textbook. The text referred to Eddison as having a ‘serious hearing problem’ and that it was this that led to his poor educational performance and that he often annoyed other pupils. Such a disability was presented as the reason for Edison’s removal from school. Further, the hearing problem was depicted as the major cause not only of Edison’s poor educational performance but also why he was bullied by his classmates. In this text, then, an impairment was depicted as a construct dominated by medical deficit. This depiction of disability cannot be observed as an empowering representation.

Analysis of the images

The analysis of the images in the textbooks revealed the limited portrayal of people with disabilities in both sets of textbooks. Of the 4015 images illustrated only 21 images of Disabled people were found and of these only two represented children. In the Iranian texts, then, people with disabilities were rendered invisible in each of the textbooks **analysed in this research**.

Of the 867 people shown in the English **primary school** texts there were only seven people with a disability. This represents only 0.8% of the total number of people shown. Furthermore, these four images were contained in just two of the books; one published in 1993 and the other in 2000. In total, then, in the English sample, only 0.28% of the sample portrayed images of disability.

The image of disability portrayed within the textbooks

The representation of disability in both data sets was then extremely limited. However, analysis of the substantive context of the images provided some interesting data. A common theme in both

Iranian and English textbooks represented people hospitalised or 'bedded' as a result of a car accident or, arguably, a temporary sickness. These images, one might suggest, portrayed physical disability in a transient form i.e. that the person might recover from their impaired mobility.

The remaining images, within the English sample, represented people with learning disabilities. Also of note, was that four of the images specifically referenced disability, ie visual impairment to represent 'difficulties with the eyes' or disability in context of discrimination. The remaining pictures, all from books published in the 1990's, located Disabled people within street scenes. For example, a male with a visual impairment chatting to two women outside a butcher's shop. On these occasions, no text referred specifically to disability and Disabled people. Interestingly, out of the numerous images of playground and classroom scenes, represented within the textbooks, not one image of a Disabled person was observed. This was the case in Iranian textbooks as well.

Additionally, in the Iranian texts the majority of the images (seven) were confined to just one book. Here we observed one empowering image of disability. This was of Disabled males playing volleyball. Interestingly, no female actor was featured with disability in any of the analysed textbooks. This suggests a double discrimination against women with disabilities on the grounds of their disability and gender. In other words, the empowerment of disabled people was defined within a very narrow perspective, which indicates the image of disabled people and empowering construct of disability is but a cultural whisper in Iranian school textbooks.

Discussion

The next section of the paper details two distinct lines of analysis. First, we analyse how the constructed representation of disability, found in both data sets, might influence **pupils'** concept of Disabled people. Second, we forward an argument that if governments – both democratic or otherwise - are to formulate inclusive learning environments, which value all pupils, then we believe that inclusive education policy has to examine how textbooks mediate and constrain the promotion of 'cultural democracy'.

What we may observe from the research detailed above is that the picture of disability in textbooks in Iran and in England is extremely limited. Although such representations do not provide a 'cultural silence' (Crawford 2000, pg.1) they do, we suggest, serve to reduce the representation of disability to that of a societal whisper. Of further concern, is that the limited construct of disability created places disability within the realms of medical deficit as the prevalent image centre upon physical disability. This medical deficit construct, we believe is problematic because it provides 'an easily assimilable version of a complex reality' (David, 2001, p. 141). Moreover, this image of disability does not enable all learners to 'find themselves and their world represented' within the textbooks that may be presented to them (HSRC 2005, pg.7). If **pupils throughout their** school career are presented with a limited construct, and moreover omission, of disability what affect will this have on their conceptualisation of Disabled people? Taxel (1989) suggests that consistently exposing children to limited constructs, such as these, can lead to the development of negative attitudes. Furthermore, Commeyras and Alverman (1996, p.32) argue that whilst omissions and misrepresentation, of minority groups, are insensitive they also have serious consequences in that they legitimate, in the mind of the reader, the constructed 'social realities' contained within the textbook. We contend that such constructed realities are harmful **to primary and middle school pupils** because they provide a distortion of the truth that leads the reader to conclude that 'certain groups, and the individuals within them, are not important members of society' (Taxel, 1989, p. 341).

In summary, then, if one accepts the above line of analysis it becomes reasonable to suggest that the mediating role of the textbook, **for pupils**, is one of the promotion of a social construction of disability which is seemingly based upon inexact scholarship, omission and imbalanced information (David, 2001). The result of this mediating influence, **for young children** it may be contended, leads **them** inextricably into the formulation of negative attitudes (Taxel, 1989) or, indeed, 'ridiculous representations' (Cai, 1994, Pg. 180) of Disabled People. Problematic, though, to the substantiation of this line of analysis is that some researchers observe it to be formulated upon a simplistic contrived notion of the role of the learner.

From these researchers standpoint, if one unreservedly accepts the line of analysis mentioned earlier, then, one must also accept that the learner's role in the information exchange is one of a passive assimilation of the 'social hieroglyph' of disability observed within the textbooks (Stray, 1994, p. 1). Whilst we accept, to some degree, that the *modus operandi* of textbooks is the cultural transmission of sanitised societal values we do not accept that **school pupils'** role in the information exchange is always the passive assimilation of the 'social hieroglyph' (Stray, 1994, p. 1). Therefore whilst we recognise that 'what is read does indeed influence the reader' (Zimet, 1976, p. 10) there is a 'light year difference' between simply reading a text and finding 'out how people actually respond to it' (Kell-Byrne 1984, p. 196). Central to our thinking then is that the learner is not passive but is an 'active, creative and dynamic' person who interacts proactively with texts 'in the process of meaning making' (Taxel, 1989, p. 35). If the role of the textbook is as straight jacket to cultural transmission we must also acknowledge that other factors mediate the process of meaning making. For example, Luke *et. al.* (1989, p. 241) relates the 'school text is always the object of teacher mediation' and that some 'teachers make children aware of ...the cultural geography of the knowledge presented in textbooks' (David, 2001, p. 140). As Apple (1992, p. 10) relates 'we cannot assume what is in the text is actually taught. Nor, can we assume what is actually taught is learnt'. Based upon this premise, it may be contended, that the 'exact role of the textbook in socialization of **young children** becomes difficult to establish' (Podeh 2005). It is our contention, then, that with respects to **children aged 3-13** socialization of disability, the role of the textbook in the process of cultural transmission remains unclear. Of greater significance, we suggest, is what the social hieroglyph of disability presented within these textbooks tells us of nature of cultural democracy within these operationalization of governmental policies of inclusion.

Cultural democracy, inclusion and textbooks

Whilst one might argue as to the immediacy of the role of textbooks in influencing **children aged 3-13** conceptualisation of disability, it is our contention that to truly understand the textbook's mediating role one must return to the foundations upon which inclusive education is built. Inclusion,

many argue, is founded upon the principles of human rights, democracy, equity and social justice with its ultimate goal being to develop schools ‘where all children are participating and treated equally’ (Sandhull, 2005, p.1). However, we suggest, that inclusion in this guise although ‘widely accepted’ has problems in converting this ‘initial idea into reality’ within schools (Churchill, 2003, p.13).

To substantiate our contention lets us take a moment to consider inclusion as formulated upon the principles of human rights and democracy. From a human rights and democracy perspective, the imperative of inclusion must be to ‘discrimination equality and to the status of vulnerable groups’ within society (Sandhull, 2005, p.4). In this form, inclusion becomes a form of cultural democracy and as such, we suggest, becomes a moral concept which necessitates the expression of the values of ‘self-fulfilment, self-determination and equality (Carr & Harnett, 1996, p. 40). However, for Berstein (1996) an essential pre-requisite, in the promotion of cultural democracy, is that the individual will have the right to participate and to be included within society at a social, intellectual and cultural level. Problematic, to the pursuance of inclusion as a facet of cultural democracy is that the very term itself suggest that ‘something smaller is included into something bigger’ (Garcia & Metcalf, 2005, p. 34).For Garcia & Metcalf, then, the term inclusion brings into sharp focus the connotation of dominant and subordinate groups within society i.e those who include and those who are included. We are minded, here, of Slee’s (2001, p. 387) contention that for inclusion to be effective ‘we have to recognise that relations of dominance’ exist in society. By doing this, it becomes apparent that obstacles to effective ‘inclusion are embedded in simple everyday habits’ and that schools as ‘integral parts of society’ are controlled by the attitudes of its dominant members (Highbeam, 2005, p. 1). Slee (2001, p. 386) contends that if inclusion is to be made effective then educators must ‘recognise disablement as cultural interplay characterised by unequal social relations’. He suggests a failure to recognise that disability is created, in such a manner, condemns inclusion to the realms of resource allocation and the physical location of Disabled pupils. It is our contention, then, that if inclusion is to move beyond the ‘phenomena of structure’ (Clough, 2005, p.74) and is to be truly built upon human rights and the democratic imperative, then, it must give ‘preference to strategies of empowerment

over more service delivery orientated responses' (Sandhull, 2005, pg.6). We suggest, here, that it is in the pursuance of this democratic imperative where the mediating role of the textbook **for young children's development of an understanding of disability** becomes most important.

Conclusions

The results, from this study, denote that the representation of disability within textbooks is limited. Furthermore, it is apparent that the construct of disability that is observed is 'infected with the notion of child-deficit' (Clough, 2005, p. 74). Clough (2005, p. 79) argues that curricula have always been a means of exclusion, and we believe that textbooks, in the representation of disability, are likewise fulfilling a similar **exclusionary role for primary and middle school children**. A text then could possibly reproduce a 'cultural artefact that shapes the way we interpret the world' (Alverman and Commeyras 2005) and arguably confirm or question assumptions about disability. All cultural artefacts, including textbooks, could potentially 'embody, reflect and mediate the views of the society from which they emerge' (Leavy 2000, para. 4). Thus, extending the invisibility of people with disabilities in the wider society. The Iranian and English textbooks **we observed**, as artefacts of society, reflect the social marginalization of people with disabilities in these countries.

It is our belief, that for inclusion to be truly effective it must be 'concerned with the well-being of learners' (Sandhull, 2005. p.5) who are placed within **primary and middle school** settings. It must be ensured, therefore, that within **these** settings inclusion is formulated not just on the deliverance of service orientated responses but also by a confrontation of resources and facilities, so as to overcome the 'current injustice [within schools, which are] based upon continued practices of privilege and power' (Highbeam, 2005, p.1). The limited construct of disability found within the textbooks is, we contend, a clear articulation of the cultural dominance of non-disabled people within our society. If we are to move forward with the important educational policy of **inclusion within primary and middle schools**, then, we suggest textbooks must be sensitively constructed. They should seek to support a culturally responsive pedagogy that would observe Disabled people being more prominently and more

positively located within the materials that support the teaching and learning of pupils within our schools.

In conclusion, as many countries such as Iran and England have approved the principle of inclusive education, educational settings need to enable the participation of minority groups, including people with disabilities. While the idea of including pupils with physical and mental disabilities in mainstream schools may be attractive, without educating nondisabled pupils about their disabled peers and raising their consciousness level regarding people with disabilities, the highest goals of inclusive education cannot be achieved. Incorporating the issues of people with disabilities into the textbooks of mainstream schools as proposed by this article could be a step toward reducing the alienation of pupils with disabilities in regular schools. After all, these pupils' parents pay taxes, and it is nothing short of an injustice to banish these pupils to special schools, while simultaneously depriving them of the opportunities to integrate naturally with their non-disabled peers.

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ⁱ People with disabilities is a common term employed in Iran