

Book Review / Recension d'ouvrage

Slee, Roger. (2011). *The irregular school: Exclusion, schooling and inclusive education*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge. 219 pages, ISBN ISBN: 978-0-415-47990 (paperback), 978-0-415-47989-9 (hardback).

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Roger Slee is one the most innovative and genuinely original thinkers working in the field of diversity today. His latest book, *The irregular school: Exclusion, schooling and inclusive education*, continues to challenge readers to broaden their thinking with respect to inclusive (and exclusive!) education, and to re-imagine what schooling might be beyond the current framework of regular and special schools and classrooms. This is not a prescriptive 'how to' book, but rather a presentation of concepts designed to generate discussion and reform. The ideas are generally clearly presented in plain language, free of academic-ese, so as to allow the discourse to become (or possibly return to being) truly public.

The book begins by examining the historical, philosophical, and research foundations of inclusive education through the lens of its black-sheep sibling (never invited to family dinners), exclusion. This reflects Slee's long-standing interest in the topic of exclusion; of who's in, who's out, and how come? (p. 152). The reader is taken on a Cook's tour of various international contexts of exclusion and invited to consider why societies and the individuals who comprise them are so indifferent in their reactions and responses to it. This section of the text makes for sober reading, enhanced by vignettes of personal experiences in impoverished areas of rural Australia. Eventually, following further consideration of marginalization, the reader is led to the building of a theory of inclusive education. No definitive passage on what it means to include is provided. Rather, a discussion cleverly designed to help readers think through the multiple issues and agendas that impact inclusive education theory is presented.

In chapters five to seven the book examines progress in inclusive education, particularly in the area of policy, in a number of international jurisdictions including Canada (but most notably the Australian States of Queensland and Victoria), identifying both promise and problems along the way.

The final chapter of the book dreams big in considering possibilities for the irregular school. It presents the reader with four action-based propositions for moving forward. These include re-framing the field, re-righting language, re-researching inclusion (which follow themes from his earlier text with Julie Allen), and re-visioning education. It also presents an agenda for collective action, outlining five key tasks; restorative, analytical, policy, education, and values. The

conclusions in this chapter make good sense and draw on the tenor and content of the preceding chapters.

While it is clear that the main purpose of this book is to expose structures that lead to exclusion and so in that sense it is theoretical, the challenge for the reader is that once one begins to entertain what is involved in implementing reform to the extent suggested the task ahead might seem overwhelming. Given the extent of existing barriers to inclusion a reader might ponder on how, in practical terms, such change can occur. Slee warns that if we have low aspirations, we might just succeed (p. 153). Perhaps there is advantage in such pondering, and this text certainly points the way to a better future through the presentation of general principles for moving forward, recognizing the complexities involved.

True to his critical side, Slee identifies and reveals what he sees as wrong-headedness in language, thought, logic, policy, practice, and research. Often damning and incisive in his condemnation he highlights instances where reform is required. As he notes himself “There is a responsibility to sound an unpopular warning in some quarters” (p. 11). Such an approach takes courage, but the sometimes strident opposition to what many might, with some justification, regard as legitimate lines of practice or inquiry might not appeal to everyone (for some this stridency will present as a necessary pre-condition to the success of the arguments). At times criticism is directed at those who explicitly oppose inclusion alongside those who are generally supportive of Slee’s ideas but who have a different point of view on some aspects (myself included), with little differentiation being made between the two. Sometimes it might have been better to sheath the sword. Overall, though, the critique is insightful and necessary – the book could hardly exist without it. It does not merely draw attention to improving systems and practices that in Slee’s view do not and will not work, as if shuffling deckchairs on the Titanic might make some sort of difference, but rather to reconceive and reconstruct the work of educating, perhaps from the ground up.

The *Irregular School*, written for an international audience, clearly resonates in Canada, and includes Canadian content, particularly in terms of references to issues in Quebec and Ontario (not surprising given that Roger spent some time in Montreal). The caution that “Teachers and other educators speak of inclusion and social capital while reinstating segregation” (p. 4) might well apply to newly minted policies of inclusion in Alberta. Canada, like elsewhere in the world, suffers from many of the pitfalls with respect to inclusion and exclusion outlined in the text and would do well to heed the advice with respect to applying a more vigorous critique to our education systems and developing more imaginative ideas, reconceptualizing schools as more authentic inclusive environments, beginning with the removal of many of the barriers that continue to lead to school exclusion.

The *Irregular School* is a must-read that makes a forward-thinking contribution to theory and discourse surrounding the idea of how to best educate all children. In the

tradition of Illich's De-schooling society it challenges us to re-think what we want from schooling, and how we might arrive at a more equitable arrangement.