Circling the Wagons: Disability and Access to Education

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Introduction

This chapter proposes a conceptual framework in which to reflect on the phenomenon of exclusion with particular reference to disability. As a reflective practitioner I want to open a dialogue where I can seek to make sense of the world where the history of disability is littered with discrimination and oppression that has hidden the humanity, individuality and ordinariness of people with disabilities. The term 'disability' appears to be a residual category, used to encapsulate a wide range of people who may or may not have anything in common in terms of their everyday experience of the world but who are lumped together because of who they are not. Everyday language is important because it reveals what is valued, what is defined as 'normal', who is categorised as 'different' and how 'outsiders' are positioned. What people with disabilities have in common is a label of 'otherness' which relies for its meaning on not being able-bodied or able-minded. At the same time ideologies of able bodied-ness and able minded-ness go largely unchallenged.

The chapter argues that unless initiatives to promote inclusiveness are grounded in principles of equality and entitlement they do little to counter discrimination, oppression and injustice, and may in fact entrench them. In this chapter I want to explore whether

the current dominant approaches to broadening access to education for people with disabilities are consolidating or dismantling existing exclusionary practices and attitudes. This is important because factors that alienate or disconnect people from each other result in silencing those who are excluded and impoverishing the community as a whole.

I call the chapter 'Circling the Wagons'– a regular defense strategy in the old cowboys' movies and a fitting metaphor to evoke a number of themes I want to explore. The first of these is exclusion – keeping out one group and defending the interests of another. When countering exclusion it is important not only to look at ways of getting or improving access but also to look at what is being guarded, how it is guarded and why it is guarded. The second theme is that of stereotyping. 'Circling the Wagons' usually takes place among a cast of clearly defined heroes, villains and victims. Who occupies each role is dependent on who is telling the story. In tackling exclusion, knowing whose perspective is privileged is key to understanding the values and beliefs that inform decisions on how to promote inclusiveness. The third theme is that of insider/outsider. Those who attacked the wagons were interested in more than these specific wagons; they knew that these wagons represented a much bigger happening yet at the same time those in the wagons knew little of their adversaries or the land they traveled through, other than the myths and legends that left them in fear of their lives.

It could probably be said that in choosing such a metaphor I am implying that access to third level education for people with disabilities is something of a battlefield. I am not sure I intended to imply that, but maybe that too is an appropriate aspect of the metaphor.

Conformity or Freedom

It is widely accepted that the inclusion and exclusion of identifiable sectors of society is a function of structural factors to do with how the educational system works. However, initiatives to promote inclusion continue to focus almost exclusively on 'supporting' those individuals who are seen to be a poor 'fit' for what the system has to offer. The chapter assumes that:

> *'There is no such thing as a neutral education process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the [learner] into the logic of the system and bring about conformity to it or it becomes the practice of freedom'* (Freire, 1972, p56).

This quote from Freire indicates that interventions which do not lead to change within the education system, serve to bolster and sustain what exists.

The discourses of educational policy and action with regard to 'disability' are characterised by references to difference as deficiency. For example:

> *Secondary students with high-incidence cognitative disabilities often struggle to meet the demands of the general education curriculum due to poor reading skills.*
> (Boyle et al 2003, p203)

In the above statement students are described as 'struggling' and the reason given is that they have poor reading skills. The question is poor in relation to what? The tone of the quote implies that a discussion will follow which will focus on assisting these students in

their struggle, helping them to be more like those whom we must assume do not struggle. I expect there will be little – if any – discussion of the parameters that define the 'general education curriculum'. Why is it acceptable that the curriculum does not meet the needs of some of the learners it is intended to serve? Are these learners labelled as having 'cognitive disabilities' in order to excuse the shortcomings of the curriculum? The overarching question relates to the purpose of education; is education primarily concerned with 'what is learned' (curriculum, institutional standards) or with 'the learner' (developing skills, capabilities and potential)? An emphasis on 'what is learned' tends to favour learners who can comply with set procedures, while emphasis on 'the learner' tends to be more responsive to diversity in learning styles.

Policy documents emanating from Ireland, the EU and the UN make much of the desire to empower people with disabilities along with other non-traditional students. The dependency created by the discredited charity model of service delivery in the past is soundly rejected. Nevertheless, initiatives to improve access to education for people with disabilities are heavily reliant on codifying conditions and measuring their severity. No support is put in place until the individual has his/her 'deficiency' certified. There is little to suggest a celebration of difference but much about identifying the extent to which the individual does not 'fit' or the ways that he/she deviates from some predetermined 'norm'. The dominant perception of disability is as a condition that necessitates interventions rather than of a sector of the population that is poorly served.

A recent report on access to third level education in Ireland stated:

A significant rise in the participation rates of students with disabilities has been achieved in recent years. The headline target set in 2001 has been met and exceeded. However, progress has been slow for certain people with disabilities, particularly people who are deaf or blind, people with physical disabilities and people with multiple disabilities. (National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008-2013, p64).

The report also states that not withstanding the investment to enable greater participation, it is students from the most advantaged socio-economic backgrounds who are benefiting most. In Ireland students who are identified as having a disability account for 3.2%[1] of the undergraduate population. More than two thirds are registered as having a learning difficulty. The specific learning difficulty of the vast majority is dyslexia. Of all the students identified as having a disability a miniscule number come from designated disadvantaged schools. It is safe to say that poverty or socio-economic disadvantage remains as great a barrier for students with disabilities as it does for all other categories of non-traditional students. Although the statistics vary across all OECD countries, the link between socio-economic status and retention and performance rates are clearly apparent. One has to conclude that while targeted supports and funding may appear to be the decisive factor that determines the likelihood of a person with disability succeeding in education; class is the over-riding factor that determines whether one gets to the point of being able to take advantage of these supports.

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[1] The corresponding British figures are: England 4.4%, Wales 5.4%, Scotland 3.3% and Northern Ireland 3.3% (HESA, 2006/7).

Approaches to Exclusion: 'Pragmatism' versus 'Radical'

By way of opening the dialogue to promote a better understand of the phenomenon of educational exclusion I look at two oppositional approaches to exclusion – one that I term 'pragmatism' and one that I term 'radical'. I use the term 'pragmatism' to describe an approach to education that Freire (1994, xii) described as follows:

> *For educational pragmatists, there are no more dreams. Likewise there is no more reading the world. The new educational pragmatism embraces a technical training without political analysis, because such analyses upset the smoothness of educational technicism. … To the educational pragmatist, other social and critical preoccupations represent not just a waste of time but a real obstacle in their process of skills banking.*

I use the term 'radical' to capture an approach to education in which *'Pedagogy is a matter of principle and purpose rather than mere technique'* (Crowther et al., 2000,p174).

By exploring these two very different approaches I hope to reveal the importance of how we conceptualise exclusion and how this conceptualisation determines our responses.

Responses to Exclusion

Expansion in the provision of education to people with disabilities worldwide, is undoubtedly driven by a complex range of forces including financial considerations, demands for greater equity and access to education, a desire to respond to new demands

from pressure groups, the availability of funding supports for initiatives that promote greater access, and a commitment to a vision of education that is participatory and democratic. Whether these initiatives respond to the social, economic, cultural and political needs of these hitherto excluded learners, or merely offer opportunities for individual learners to participate in a fundamentally unchanged and essentially elitist system, is largely dependent on the extent to which these moves are driven by a pragmatist or radical approach to inclusion.

The following diagram depicts the distinguishing characteristics of pragmatist and radical approaches.

Approaches to exclusion	**Pragmatist**	**Radical**
Perspective on problem	Unfortunate occurrence	Predictable occurrence
Location of the problem	Excluded individual	Structural inequalities in the education system
Motivation to intervene	Individual could benefit from inclusion	Human rights
Main concern	Maintain the integrity of the education system	Acknowledge the social / economic & personal impact of exclusion on the individual
Strengths	Public appeal Success is measurable	Highlights the inherent elitism of the educational system
Weaknesses	Education becomes a privilege rather than a right	Threatens existing system and hard to measure success
Desired outcome	Enable student to meet the	Enable student to understand his/her

	needs of the system	learning style
Pedagogy	Transmit knowledge Pragmatism / skill banking	Create potential to 'Read the world'

Perspective on problem

All of the data on exclusion suggest an educational system that pushes out, or keeps out, significant numbers of people, including those who have disabilities. The majority of these are from the lowest socio-economic groupings. If you are poor your chances of gaining access to education are poor and if you do gain access your chances of performing well are far less than if you are well-off. If you are poor and deemed to have a disability your chances are particularly low.

Location of the problem

When the problem of exclusion is located in those who are under-represented, then these individuals and groupings become the main focus of attention. The reasons why they are excluded are attributed to their lack of capacity to engage appropriately with the system (Tett, 2006). This analysis is particularly evident in third level equity and access programmes. Students who enter institutions via these initiatives are categorised as students with 'special needs' or disabilities. Once these students have gained access, special supports are put in place to retain them within the system. These supports focus on students' differences in terms of how they process information, or respond to established teaching and examining procedures, and life style issues such as dietary requirements, or wheelchair ramps. These differences are not seen as a resource to be

drawn upon but as deficiencies to be rectified. Access to education under these conditions implies a degree of benevolence on the part of a system that accommodates these 'outsiders' as exceptional cases.

Rather than problematise the student, a radical approach recognises the institution as exercising social, cultural, economic and other preferences that effectively favour some over others. If the problem is located in the system, then the focus of attention shifts away from '…integrating *deficient* people…' (Crowther et al, 2000, p179) and towards identifying the deficiencies of the system. This approach is concerned with knowing how the system works, how it reflects and reproduces existing inequalities in society and revealing the values that sustain it. A radical approach is concerned with revealing whose 'reason' is being presented under the guise of 'universal values' in determining what constitutes the typical learner, what knowledge is deemed worthwhile, how it is created, the purposes of learning and how it is measured or examined. It raises questions as to who benefits from how the system currently functions and what motivates the financial investment and effort on the part of educational institutions that seek to 'fit' individual students into the existing system. An approach to exclusion that acknowledges the economic and power inequalities at play outside the education system is better positioned to understand the nature and scale of the problem and to consider the values, beliefs, assumptions and practices that shape and sustain an education system that does not or cannot serve the interests of particular groupings such as students with disabilities.

Critiques of the broader educational system that raise all of these questions have served to inform the provision of appropriate pre-entry courses and support services to learners and staff to make access possible for a broader range of learners with disabilities. While these are important interventions and ones that need to be attended to, the tendency to remain aloof from critiquing the entire education system, has allowed piecemeal adjustments to be made to the system, enabling it to flourish without fundamental change.

Motivation to intervene

Education up to a certain level is widely accepted worldwide as a human right. UNESCO produces an annual *Education for All Global Monitoring Report* that tracks the progress of individual counties towards this goal. Agencies such as UNESCO invariable justify their call for universal education on social and economic grounds. The benefits to the individual, while recognised, are less compelling than the correlations between education and good health, longer life expectancy, environmental protection, and so on. In addition, the term lifelong learning, for all its many shortcomings and disputed meanings, challenges the notion that learning is confined to a particular stage in life. Nevertheless, despite the dominance of these conceptual frameworks, the amount of education one has a right to remains problematic and ill-defined. This is particularly evident when it comes to the provision of education for people with disabilities. Clauses abound in the documents that relate to meeting the educational needs of children and adults with disabilities. The main one is 'reasonable accommodation'. There is no such 'out clause' in relation to those who have been excluded on other grounds such as gender, religion,

race. It could be argued that 'disability' is the last frontier where it is allowable to compromise human rights.

Over the past five years EU agreements and numerous reports on the practices in third level education have urged the sector to undertake deep-rooted changes to the structure, content, methodology, purpose, delivery and nature of the system with a view to providing for a wider constituency (Corradi et al., 2006).

A report on services for students with disabilities in third level institutions in Ireland noted that:

> *'Problems and their solutions, often uniquely associated with learning difficulties, can have much wider application. Many solutions, developed for students with learning difficulties in such areas as study skills, numeracy, literacy, etc. could if more widely implemented have beneficial outcomes for many students. Currently these developments are not having any impact on course design; there are no procedures of systems for the necessary assimilation because the personnel concerned are excluded from the relevant academic councils and committees.'*
> (AHEAD, 2005 p27)

Notwithstanding these calls for reform, efforts to tackle inequality in third level education suggest that only those who are deemed to be most able within such groups are given access while the remainder continue to be excluded. The rhetoric of widening participation appears to be about increasing the pool of potential students from among

those who can be moulded to 'fit' the needs of the institution.   There is as yet, little or no indication that third level institutions are keen to tackle the more complex underlying causes of exclusion.

Main concern

One aspect of the 'maintaining standards' discourse is a concern not to 'over-advantage' non-disabled students through the provision of supports. A concern of this nature is only meaningful in the context of the competitive dimension of student performance in examinations. This assumes that ranking students according to their relative performances is a worthy educational aim and that a 'level playing field' is a realisable or desirable condition for the provision of education.

The radical response to exclusion has no commitment to maintaining the integrity of the system. On the contrary, if the problem is endemic in the system, then unless the system is fundamentally reformed, it will continue to exclude in ways that are eminently predictable. If the values that underpinned past practices and that resulted in excluding learners with disabilities, are the same as the values that underpin current practices that seek to include some learners with disabilities, this is seen as constituting an unchanged stance that will ultimately not tackle the main problem.

Pedagogy

If education is viewed as essentially about the business of knowledge transmission, pragmatism or skill-banking it implies an acceptance of the current parameters that define worthwhile learning and measurement of that learning.

This approach to educational provision tends to be expert-driven. The measure of success is almost exclusively in terms of quantifiable indicators. The main concern is with the delivery of services as laid down in a plan. Evaluation results may serve as feedback to modify implementation activities, or as input to future planning, but rarely serve to alter the plan itself. Success is defined as the accomplishment of stated objectives irrespective of whether these objectives emerge as inappropriate for the overall betterment of the quality of life of the target population. The dominance of this approach is evident in the access and student support programmes in Europe.

By contrast, a radical approach acknowledges that learning which results in a capacity to read one's world involves comprehending the social and cultural forces that cause oppression and inequality. The success of such an approach can only be determined by monitoring the inequality experienced by people with disabilities. To do that necessitates more than a quantitative expansion or adaptation of the existing education system. Rather it requires a shift away from instrumental learning to learning for citizenship; learning that enables students to appreciate who they are, to make their contribution to society, and in so doing to actively contribute to shaping that society. In this kind of learning the educator or teacher is a co-learner, an active participant in unveiling the world as experienced by people with disabilities. The educator intervenes to facilitate

people with disabilities to reclaim their right to be subjects of that world rather than objects of an 'expert's' actions (Freire, 1994, pxi-xii). As Barr (2008, p201) notes, "thinking for oneself does not mean thinking by oneself" – on the contrary, individualising the experience of exclusion obscures the main features of it.

An approach to pedagogy that values the capacity to read the world calls for an appreciation of difference in terms of previous experience and perspective. It sees diversity in these areas as strengths rather than deficits. It also calls for:

- creating an environment where learners can transcend the emotional and intellectual stagnation that often results from negative educational experiences;
- both the educator and the learner looking inward to reveal the constellation of beliefs and values that shape their personal interpretations of the world;
- looking outward further than the immediate experience of a group of learners, to include an engagement with the wider contexts that cause exclusion;
- establishing partnerships particularly with those who are excluded in order to refashion the provision of educational services;
- establishing such partnerships at the levels of policy-making and co-ordination of provision as well as at the level of implementation.

Outsiders and Insiders

People with disabilities, along with other marginalised sectors of the population are self-consciousness with regard to their isolation and exclusion. It is not simply a matter of

being disconnected from the forces that determine the dominant economic, cultural and political realities in their immediate community and across the world. What distinguishes marginalised sectors of the population is their experience of exclusion as a dynamic process that marginalises them from the decisions that impact on their lives.

Until diversity is nurtured as a source of strength, initiatives designed to widen participation are in danger of perpetuating an approach to education where all but a selected few of those who are *'different'* remain excluded and those who are deemed worthy of inclusion are corralled and manipulated until they conform to a predetermined ideal.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2008) claims the following:

- The Convention marks a 'paradigm shift' in attitudes and approaches to persons with disabilities.
- Persons with disabilities are not viewed as 'objects' of charity…rather as 'subjects' with rights, who are capable of claiming those rights and making decisions for their lives based on free and informed consent as well as being active members of society.
- The Convention gives universal recognition to the dignity of persons with disabilities.

As countries sign up to the Convention there is a real opportunity to push for inclusiveness that truly honours these principles. In the words of the Bengali poet, Tagore:

The problem is not how to wipe out all differences,

but how to unite with all differences intact.

(Rabindranath Tagore)

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