

Inclusive education: a special right?

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We need to make a further shift in how we perceive the role of education. We have to conceive educational institutions as not simply a preparation for work but as an opportunity for children to appreciate human diversity and build positive characters and social values. Indeed, while there are many things I learned from my non-disabled peers at school and beyond, I hope that I also contributed to their experience and indirectly helped them enrich their lives.

Introduction

Children born in the 'majority world' are often denied their most basic rights, let alone that of education. By contrast, we in Europe often underestimate the value of education in our lives and take it for granted. However, we may be unaware that even in our societies, there are some children and adults who are educated apart from their peers or isolated within the educational system – if given an education at all (Parsons, 1999).

Over the years of delivering lectures on disability issues at the University of Malta, I realised that personal accounts and experiences can go very far in helping students reflect on what inclusive education is all about, so I decided that I should put my personal experiences into words and relate them to today's context.

Shameful, exceptional or equal?

My educational experience was a typical one. I attended mainstream schools to complete my primary and secondary education, where I attained the necessary qualifications to be admitted to post-secondary level and eventually started reading for a Bachelor's degree in English.

Looking back, I realise that many factors had to be in place for me to get where I am today. Indeed, for much of my primary and secondary education, I was the only physically disabled child in the entire school. Back then, I was still able to walk and climb stairs, and I was not that conscious of my difference – even if I got tired more easily than my peers. Though at times I sensed that some teachers looked at me in an odd way – as if I did not quite belong – my peers treated me like an equal. On one occasion, an older boy hit me full in the face with a football that was aimed at the goalpost, giving me mild concussion! I only remember this event because I ended up getting a good scolding from my teacher for being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

As I progressed further with my education, I started meeting other disabled people and, for the first time, grew more aware that there were others who shared some of my experiences and had their own unique way of tackling difficult situations. Yet, I felt that going about my business and presenting myself as 'normal' as possible was the course to follow. Whether I wished to admit it or not, school had socialised me into accepting that my physical disability was a source of shame and somehow a failure on my part to improve (Barnes, 2003).

At university, I would also become a regular wheelchair user, which created its own problems once I realised that I now had to look out for accessibility in the environment. However, it would not be until I developed a visual impairment in the first year of my English Masters degree that I knew that I could not cope with the amount of literature I needed to get through to complete my studies. Over the next few years, I had to abandon my previous plans and was faced with learning new knowledge and skills. Moreover, my sense of exclusion and failure forced me to face the questions I had had as a physically disabled child and later as a visually impaired wheelchair user (Reiser and Mason, 1990).

I admit that it was not easy to cope with a new impairment. While my physical disability was part of my normality and I had learned to adapt to it, I approached my visual impairment from the perspective of a sighted person. Indeed, I had the idea that blindness was a tragedy (French and Swain, 2004) and that one should only admire people like Helen Keller'.

We often misrepresent disabled people who we perceive as 'achievers' as some sort of super-humans with extraordinary learning abilities, and yet condemn those who appear to be 'stuck' as being so out of laziness or lack of determination. In this, we forget that even in the lives of people like Helen Keller, social class, educational opportunities and even some of the people she met in her life had an impact on her future in radical ways (Crow, 2000). I too found myself facing flattering praise from people who thought of me as being exceptional and outstanding for getting as far as I had. But, in my case, if it had not been for my parents who chose to send me to a mainstream school, the teachers that believed in me, the dedicated lecturers, and later the National Commission Persons with Disability (KNPD) who helped me get my life sorted, my future would have been very different indeed.

Being perceived as out of the ordinary does not help much in establishing our right to an education, since, ironically, the fact that we made it through school seems to imply that our educational system is good as it is.

The benefits of mainstream education

In Malta, the education system started including disabled children in the early 1990s with the adoption of an inclusive policy (KNPD, 1993;



MCIE, 2000). This policy was introduced in the later years of my secondary education, which meant that it was too late for me to enjoy and too early for me to understand the effect it would have on future generations of disabled children. Today, when I visit schools to give talks to children, I am pleasantly surprised that there are more disabled children attending the mainstream, that more schools are accessible and that children are increasingly aware that disabled children are part of the classroom. In fact, it seems that, at times, it is the teachers who need to understand the idea behind inclusive education.

In this sense, the role of education in our life tends to be limited to academic learning. Undoubtedly, learning basic literacy and numeracy skills and general knowledge remain an important aspect of any educational formation. Yet, there is more to education than academic performance. Indeed, the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994) emphasises the right of every child, irrespective of gender, race, ethnicity, faith or disability, to an education with other children. One cannot understate the importance of children learning together. Not so long ago, children with impairments were often sent to segregated or 'special' schools, even during the time when I was attending the mainstream. At that time, it was not compulsory for schools to accept a disabled pupil, and it is very possible that if I had developed a more severe mobility impairment or been perceived to be holding back my peers, my parents would have been advised to consider an alternative or even a special school (Camilleri and Callus, 2001).

Attending mainstream education has taught me about how the real world works. For me, the best times at school were not the lessons – even if I enjoyed many subjects and loved to learn new things – but the times I spent with my peers, at school and outside

of school, when I made new friends and learned about new people. Of course, there were also painful experiences, but even those were essential if I had to learn about the adult world. I also learned what responsibility meant and that I could not expect to get away with whatever I wanted.

Inclusion over integration

Happy as my school years were, there were occasions during my education when I felt excluded. This was partly my fault because of my pride; for instance, I denied admitting that I found it difficult to carry my heavy satchel up three flights of stairs at school every day. But I did not want to be seen as requiring 'special treatment' like those disabled children I would watch on charity marathons at Christmas. I knew I was different but I didn't want to be regarded as 'one of them' – dependent, pathetic, pitiful and without individuality. I was aware that, with all its benefits, education had also implicitly taught me that, for society, having an impairment was a fate almost worse than death. Of course, I would never share these private thoughts with my friends, and I tried to act like a 'normal boy', which in many ways I was. Yet, as I internalised these negative conceptions about my body, I was invariably loathing part of who I was (Hunt, 1966; Reiser and Mason, 1990; Barnes, 1992; Shakespeare, 1997).

Looking back, my experience of education in my early life was that of integration and not of inclusion. Here, we must make a radical shift in our thoughts about education. When I was at school, I had to prove that I could keep up with the curriculum and that I posed no challenges to the administration. This is not denying that I was

assisted like my peers, but I was unaware that I was required to adapt to the system and that the school was under no obligation to accommodate me in any way. Integration and segregated education are based on a 'medical model of disability', which perceives the problems faced by disabled people as exclusively rooted in impairment (Oliver, 1990).

Inclusion, on the other hand, means that the education system adapts to the needs of the student. In effect, this involves providing an accessible environment, alternative learning material in accessible formats, learning support and the services of personal assistance, Braille instructors and sign language teachers. In this context, inclusion identifies the problems faced by disabled people, as society is structured and organised in such a way that it takes little or no account of people with impairments and thus excludes them from social activity and participation – including education (UPIAS, 1976; Oliver, 1990; Reiser and Mason, 1990).

Conclusion: Why education is a human right

The UN's first convention of the twenty-first century was the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (UNCRPD) in 2006, which all Commonwealth member countries have signed. Following in the tradition of the Salamanca Statement, education is considered to be an essential right to ensure that disabled people are truly included in all aspects of society. In fact, the right of disabled children to education (Article 24) emphasises that the school system, at all levels, should make sure that disabled children and adults are provided with an education that offers them an opportunity to an education on an equal basis to that of others. In other words, this does not mean simply providing the disabled person with a place at school but also ensuring that the necessary means and resources are in place to maximise his/her potential (UN Enable, 2011).

I remain indebted to the many people I have met on this lifelong journey in my education. While I am aware that there are still problems with the inclusive education system, I welcome the fact that Malta's Inclusive Education policy has redefined the role of what were formerly 'special schools'. These are now resource centres offering disabled students specialised services without the need for them to be segregated from other schoolchildren, and this should help to further change our society. The National Special School Reform was another step towards recognising the contribution disabled people can make in society, given the opportunity and proper support to remain included within mainstream education (Ministry of Education, 2009).

Ultimately, the whole point of education is not only to prepare our children, disabled or not, to function in an adult world. Education is meant to ensure that every person is valued and supported in society. The goal of education is thus to build a better society that promotes inclusion and co-operation rather than status and competitiveness.

It is worth remembering that just over a century ago, another population was considered uneducable, and efforts to provide them with a proper education were met by strong resistance and criticism. Of course, I am talking about girls and women who were given the right to education much later than boys or men (Whitehead, 1999). Sadly, this is a reality that prevails in some parts of the majority world (United Nations, 2007). Yet, few of us would

argue that girls and women should be denied their right to a proper education. So why does this have to be any different in the case of disabled children and adults?

Endnote

- 1 Helen Keller (1880–1968) was an American author, political activist and lecturer, and the first deafblind person to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree.

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