

Disability and Special Educational Needs: Some Perennial European Concerns

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In this brief paper I propose to first, offer some opening remarks including my reasons for personal involvement in this particular field of study. Secondly, I will identify some key issues relating to disability which European societies are struggling with. Finally, I will make some concluding remarks.

In this paper I have been *very selective* over the issues I will attempt to briefly examine. Please do not see this as implying that I do not feel equally passionate about other issues such as parental participation.

I do not want to give the impression that European societies have effectively engaged with these issues and all that is necessary is to emulate them. Nothing could be further from the truth. These are some key concerns that are being struggled over. Thus all European societies are open to criticism on each of these issues.

Finally, educational issues, and disability is no exception, are complex, contradictory and contentious. This topic, therefore, raises the most fundamental questions and values. The process of engagement is thus both exciting and disturbing.

Setting the Context

From my experience of both researching and working with disabled people, I do believe it is essential that any able-bodied white, male, academic makes public the reasons for their involvement. In my academic life particular perennial issues have been at the root of all my work. These are fundamental concerns relating to inequality, social justice and the struggles of marginalised groups. Such interests are not unrelated to my personal experience of being a working-class youth in a one-parent family, living within poor socio-economic conditions. The question of disability raises all the aforementioned concerns and more, which demand urgent, serious and what one disabled analyst has called 'emancipatory research' (Oliver, 1992). Another reason for my involvement arises from my personal experience of

being a school failure and a difficult, troublesome pupil. In a forthcoming publication I have attempted to describe my experiences in the following way:-

"The issue of labeling is a very significant topic for me because it was such a crucial element in my school experience. I was a school failure and left school without a single qualification. I attended an all boys' secondary modern school, having failed my 11+ examination. Traditional methods of teaching, streaming and coercive forms of control were central features of the life of the school. Acts of public degradation, often culminating in physical punishment, remain vivid in my memory. The daily enactment of negative labels such as 'thick', 'stupid', and 'hopeless' reminded me that my position within the school was one which 'could only be expected from a person like me'. Any sense of self-pride and collective identity had to be achieved and maintained against an essentially demeaning environment. Thus, whenever I think about the question of labels, painful memories are resurrected." (Barton, 1993, p.31).

The question of disability requires a recognition of the centrality of the social construction of categories, of power-relations and conditions and of the specific historical social context in which these intersect, are experienced and challenged. This provides another set of complex factors influencing my commitment to this issue. Finally, and without minimising the reality of personal suffering which is a feature of disabled people's constant experience, the question of disability is what C. W. Mills calls a *public issue* and not a personal trouble (1970). It is a hostile, unfriendly, discriminatory environment which needs to be challenged and changed. Explanations which mainly focus on the individual will ultimately be inadequate.

Some Perennial Issues: A European perspective.

1. Defining Disability

How disability is defined is of crucial impor-

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tance. The presuppositions informing particular definitions can be offensive and provide the basis of stereotyping and stigmatisation. One of the dominant influences shaping policies and practices has been the medical model. From this perspective there is an emphasis upon an individual's inabilities or deficiencies. 'Able-bodiedness' is viewed as the acceptable criterion of 'normality'. Terms such as 'cripple', 'handicapped', 'retarded' or 'spastic' reinforce this type of individualised medical definition in which functional limitations predominate.

In a powerful critique of the medical model, Brisenden (1986) who was himself a disabled person vividly describes his feelings in the following way:

"We are seen as 'abnormal' because we are different, we are problem people, lacking the equipment for social integration. But the truth is, like everybody else, we have a range

of things we *can* and *cannot* do, a range of abilities both mental and physical that are unique to us as individuals. The only difference between us and other people is that we are viewed through spectacles that only focus on our inabilities...."(p. 3).

This particular perspective which Brisenden refers to entails a set of assumptions, priorities and explanations which are themselves disabling. These can get translated into the questions researchers ask in investigations involving disabled people. For example, in September 1988 the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS) published a report which included findings on various issues relating to disability. One disabled analyst has criticised the disabling assumptions informing the interview schedule and has produced an alternative set of questions. These are informed by a social theory of disability. It is useful to contrast these:-

OPCS 1986 SURVEY

- Can you tell me what is wrong with you? What complaint causes your difficulty in holding, gripping or turning things?
- Are your difficulties in understanding people mainly due to a hearing problem?
- Do you have a scar, blemish or deformity which limits your daily activities?
- Have you attended a special school because of your health problem or disability?
- Does your health problem/disability mean that you need to live with relatives or someone else who can help look after you?
- Did you move here because of your health problem/disability?
- How difficult is it for you to get about your immediate neighborhood on your own?
- Does your health problem/disability prevent you from going out as often or as far as you would like?
- Does your health problem/disability make it difficult for you to travel by bus?
- Does your health problem/disability affect your work at present?

(OPCS 1986)

ALTERNATIVE QUESTIONS

- Can you tell me what is wrong with society? What defects in the design of everyday equipment like jars, bottles and tins causes you difficulty in holding, gripping or turning them?
- Are your difficulties in understanding people mainly due to their inabilities to communicate with you?
- Do other people's reactions to any scar, blemish or deformity you may have, limit your daily activities?
- Have you attended a special school because of your education authority's policy of sending people with your health problem or disability to such places?
- Are community services so poor that you need to rely on you with the right level of personal assistance?
- What inadequacies in your housing caused you to move here?
- What are the environmental constraints which make it difficult for you to get about in your immediate neighborhood?
- Are there any transport or financial problems which prevent you from going out as often or as far as you would like?
- Do poorly-designed buses make it difficult for someone with your health problem/disability to use them?
- Do you have problems at work in anyway because of the physical environment or the attitudes of others?

(Oliver, M. 1990)

Now an important question arises therefore, - What is the definition of 'disability' informing the discussion document on 'Special Education' in Malta?

The perspective which disabled people and their organisations are increasingly supporting in Europe is one in which 'disability' is viewed as a form of oppression. It is thus an unadaptive, unhelpful and unfriendly environment which needs to be examined and changed. Such physical and social restrictions have been highlighted by Oliver (1990):

"All disabled people experience disability as social restriction, whether these restrictions occur as a consequence of inaccessible built environments, questionable notions of intelligence and social competence, the inability of the general public to use sign language, the lack of reading material in Braille or hostile public attitudes to people with non-visible disabilities" (p. xiv- Introduction).

Being concerned with the well-being of disabled people requires an examination of those material conditions and social relations which contribute to their dehumanisation and isolationism.

Listen to this disabled (Maltese) person writing in *The Times* on Friday 18th June 1993 about his experience on a recent visit to Malta:

Sir, - I always wanted to visit the country of my birth, but I was appalled at the lack of facilities because of the high and numerous steps, most shops, banks, and most other public places are out of bounds for someone in a wheelchair (p. 4).

Such restrictions result in *social exclusion* or for the few who manage to interact the painful experience, stemming from censure and unfamiliarity, of the patronising, individualised 'gaze'. The categories we use to clarify our thinking about disability are crucial because of the serious danger that:

"once having categorised a child we use our a-priori knowledge of that category, rather than what we learn empirically from the child, to determine our total image of the child and all our predictions of his or her potential" (Daunt, 1991, p. 136).

2. Segregated - Inclusive Provision

The issue of disability provides an opportunity for raising serious questions about the nature of the existing society and the kind of society we would like to see develop. Furthermore, it gives us a concrete example of the complex and contentious nature of the issues involved. A vivid example of this is over the question of the form and relationship between segre-

gated and inclusive forms of policy and practice.

Various arguments have contributed at different historical periods to providing the impetus and maintenance of segregated special education. They include the following:-

Grounds for the existence of a segregated form of special education

1. It is viewed as essential in order to offer the type of education such children need.
 - a) They need protection from the unacceptable features of the world including those found in mainstream schools.
 - b) Special schools are staffed by teachers who possess particular qualities - especially patience, dedication and love.
 - c) Special schools provide a special curriculum.
2. It is viewed as necessary on administrative convenience/efficiency grounds. Centralising specialist equipment, support services and teachers is seen as a most effective way of deploying resources.
3. It is viewed as necessary in order to enhance the smooth running of mainstream schooling. The difficult, objectionable and unwanted pupils can be placed in such schools. They include:-
 - a) Pupils from poor socio-economic backgrounds.
 - b) Over-representation of black pupils.
 - c) Increasing numbers of male pupils.

Special education from this perspective involves a discourse and practice of exclusion. It is a process through which difficult and objectionable pupils are segregated from others.

The groups of exclusion involve cognitive, behavioural and physical factors. Often it is a combination of all three.

Increasing numbers of disabled people are expressing their criticism of this type of provision. Their criticisms include over-protective attitudes on the part of staff, low-expectations, inferior curriculum as well as the contribution these schools make in legitimating stereotypes based on ignorance. One disabled woman sums up such feelings in the following way:

"People's expectations of us are informed by their previous experience of disabled people. If disabled people are segregated, are treated as alien,

as different in a fundamental way, then we will never be accepted as full members of society. This is the strongest argument against special schools and against separate provision" (Morris, 1990, p. 59).

Being excluded from daily interactions with their contemporaries, disabled pupils' knowledge of the social world is limited and hardly constitutes a good preparation for participation in society (Fish, 1985).

From this perspective the continuation of segregated schooling or post school institutions for disabled people is attributable mainly to the weaknesses of current policy and practice which fails to meet their needs. These unmet needs can only be catered for in a system of provision which is based on inclusive principles. This involves recognising this as a human rights issue and not one which relies on charity or the favours of powerful groups.

Integration or main streaming means different things to different groups or individuals. One group of active supporters of radical changes in policy and practice in England have created an *Inclusive Education Charter*.

The integration charter

Ending segregation in education for all children and young people with disabilities or learning difficulties.

1. We fully support an end to all segregated education on the grounds of disability or learning difficulty, as a policy commitment and goal for this country.
2. We see the ending of segregation in education as a human rights issue which belongs within equal opportunities policies.
3. We believe that all children share equal value and status. We therefore believe that the exclusion of children from the mainstream because of disability or learning difficulty is a devaluation and is discriminating.
4. We envisage the gradual transfer of resources, expertise, staff and pupils from segregated schools to an appropriately-supported and diverse mainstream.
5. We believe that segregated education is a major cause of society's widespread prejudice against adults with disabilities or difficulties. De-segregating special education is therefore a crucial first step in helping to change discriminatory atti-

tudes, in creating greater understanding and in developing a fairer society.

6. We believe that efforts to increase participation of people with disabilities or difficulties in learning in community life will be seriously jeopardised unless segregated education is reduced and ultimately ended.
7. For these reasons we call on central and local governments to do all in their power to work as quickly as possible towards the goal of a de-segregated education system.

(CSIE 1989)

It is vitally important to recognise that this whole question of inclusive provision is not merely about resources. It is about fundamental values concerning choice, independence and rights. We need to locate this within the context of our vision of society and to what extent society is catering for the needs of *all* its members. How far does a commitment to the principle that all people are to be regarded as of equal value inform the policy assumptions and directives within the National Policy Document in Malta?

3. Part of an Equal Opportunities Policy

If we are to resist complacency and recognise the degree of struggle still to be engaged with if official rhetoric is to be translated into reality in substantive terms in the lives of *all* citizens, then the question of disability needs to be an integral part of a well thought through, adequately resourced and carefully monitored equal opportunities policy. In many societies where it exists it is often a bolt-on, tokenistic gesture. Political action is required if disabled people are to experience greater controls over their lives and a meaningful participation in society. Placing the issue within the context of equal opportunities is essential for the following reasons. First, because disability is a major form of social differentiation in modern societies and thus is part of the wider and fundamental issue of inequalities, discrimination and dehumanisation. Secondly, by being an integral part of an equal opportunities approach it will provide a basis for the identification of those features of the existing society including, policy and practices within specific institutions and contexts, that are offensive, unacceptable and thus must be challenged and changed. Thirdly, such a framework will provide a stimulus for the crucial task of establishing connections between other

discriminated groups (women and black people) in order to engender some common struggles. Fourthly, it will be a means of critically engaging with individualised and deficit models and interpretations of disability. As we have previously noted, it removes the emphasis from viewing the topic as a present trouble, to that of a *public issue*. Finally, it will contribute to equal opportunities policies being non-disabilist by redressing the extent to which disability has been excluded from them.

We must never underestimate the seriousness of the task we face if we are to break down the structures and their ideological supports which exclude, debilitate and control disabled people. This is a *war* and the stakes are extremely high.

To what extent will the developments within Malta address this crucial task?

4. The Voice and Representation of Disabled People

A crucial lesson, but one which is difficult to learn, is that policies and practices in relation to disability must be viewed as neither natural nor immutable. They are social constructions related to specific historical moments and are thus subject to change and are to be struggled over.

What is beginning to be recognised (but there is still an awful long way to go) is that we have historically, seriously underestimated the abilities of disabled people. Indeed, depending on the severity of the impairment, they have had little, or no personal history or identity outside what has been imposed upon them by powerful professionals. Either because of fear, ignorance or paternalistic forms of *care* we have, and still do, deny them their basic human rights.

In Europe we are witnessing the development of self-advocacy movements, of organisations of disabled people in national conferences, protests, and a greater involvement in the decisions affecting their daily lives. For some, especially those with severe learning difficulties, much still needs to be done. Thus, the question raised by Micheleine Mason, a disabled person must be taken seriously by all those, including governments, involved in working in this area:

"Where are the studies asking disabled people what they think of their education so far? Where is the consultative mechanism to improve the service

according to the needs and aspirations of its consumers? You won't find them. Why not? Because disabled people are still the victims of a deeply held prejudice which essentially says that we are incapable of knowing what is best for us." (1990, p. 363).

Disabled people are increasingly challenging many aspects of professional involvement in their lives, and are demanding a greater control over important decisions. This includes:

- a say in the type and amount of service provided.
- more control over the allocation of resources especially in relation to independent living.
- new forms of accountability of service providers to disabled people.
- marriage, sexual orientations/relations.

These demands do raise the fundamental issue of the development and support for organisations *of* rather than *for* disabled people. This is particularly significant in relation to government funds and their allocations. It also challenges governments and policy makers over the question of representation, i.e. disabled people's membership/access to policy and planning committees.

What has happened in Malta and what will happen in the future with regard to this issue?

It is not a favour, or a privilege we are concerned with here, but a basic right to be involved in decisions over their lives, futures and entitlements.

5. Anti-Discrimination Legislation

As a result of the stubbornness of the inequalities and discriminatory practices disabled people experience in society on a daily basis, there is a growing demand in Europe for the introduction of *Anti-discrimination Legislation*. Whilst this is not viewed as a sufficient condition in itself to achieve the sorts of changes felt necessary, it will at least give access to the courts. Thus, for example, Governments can be held accountable and be required to make sure official rhetoric is realised in practice. In the European context this has become particularly important because as Daunt (1991) so forcefully reminds us, that there is not:

"... much evidence that national governments are willing to think in terms of a national comprehensive plan to meet the demands of disabled people; too often they seem to prefer to respond to pressures in an ad hoc way" (p. 174).

What of the situation in Malta with regard to this issue?

Conclusion

What I have attempted to do in this brief paper is to provide some insights into the issues which European societies are struggling with in relation to the question of disability. Clearly, the seriousness and effectiveness of such engagements vary from country to country. However, I do believe that these are perennial concerns.

I am also delighted to be associated with a Conference concerned with the document on a National Policy in Malta.

In conclusion, therefore, I would raise the following notes of warning: First, beware of succumbing to the belief that all this is merely about resources and more of them. Of course it is about resources, **but it is about much more**. It is about fundamental values and the transformation of disability processes, behaviours, attitudes, discourses and structures. It is about developing a view of difference which is positive and enabling. We are not advocating that disabled people be accepted as normal (or as normal as possible) in the current sense of the word, but that they are part of the **accepted diversity** of humanity, which involves the acknowledgment and acceptance of difference. They are thus valued for themselves. (Branson & Miller 1992)

Secondly, beware of 'experts', particularly from the West, bearing gifts of easy, slick, quick answers to these issues. There are none. It is a difficult and demanding struggle which any society is engaged in where the serious concern is to develop social justice, equity and dignity for *all* its members.

Thirdly, it is vitally important to encourage discussion and debate in order to generate a more informed commitment by increasing numbers of people. I hope these thoughts this morning will contribute to this process. This document which this Conference is celebrating must be viewed as an *initial step* in the process of dealing with the important question of disability in Malta. It must not become a basis for complacency.

Finally, this is much more than an academic exercise for me. I actually want to see the world changed. When Martin Luther King, the American black civil rights leader, made one of his famous speeches he stated:

"I have a dream that one day this nation will

rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed - we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men (sic) are created equal."

He uttered these words in the face of a racist society which had a history of slavery and discriminating policies and practices. He spoke from personal knowledge of the effects of such an oppressive system. He dreamed, he hoped, he had a vision. He paid the ultimate price for his beliefs.

What dream, what vision, do we have for Malta? What price are we willing to pay for its realisation?

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