INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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'Inclusive education' has become a popular catch-phrase in education. It is frequently used as a slogan for action as well as a justification for a host of practices, some of which are contradictory to each other. It is crucial to clarify what inclusive education entails otherwise we may actually be blindly acting in a way which is contrary to our own beliefs. The issue of clarification is also important because the term inclusive education has been used from different, and at times contrary, philosophical and political positions. Indeed, no one would dare today to argue against inclusive education yet not all uses of inclusive education are the same.

The word 'inclusive' may be seen to be redundant as education in its fullest and most meaningful sense should be inclusive rather than exclusive since education, by definition, should be open to possibilities and a variety of perspectives. However, historically, we know that education has been misused and certain dominant views of education have not been inclusive – certain views, in fact, have marginalized certain people on racial and ethnic grounds, sexuality, social class and accents, abilities, and so on. Unfortunately, such narrow conceptions of education still exist. For example, popular testing regimes that are widely in use in North America and other Western countries are based on narrow notions of literacy where the primary, if not sole emphasis, is on linear forms of literacy to the disadvantage of other forms of literacy such as the poetic, the dramatic, and the oral. Given that narrow views of education are still in operation, it makes pedagogical and ethical sense to argue for the importance of inclusive education.

But, one may rightly ask: Inclusion of what? This becomes a vital question to address unless one wants to argue that anything goes. To answer this question fairly one needs to consider several points. First, what is deemed to be 'normal' or 'dominant'? Second, is what is considered 'normal' as inclusive as it could be on ethical and pedagogical grounds? Third, what unintended bias might the dominant view carry with it? Needless to say these are both educational and political questions that we cannot avoid as professionals.

Given that we proclaim democracy as a political and value system that is more ethically sound than other forms of political arrangements, our education should be consistent with the values that are honoured by democracy. These should be the values that form the guiding principles in answering the above questions. In essence, democracy values equity over the 'one size fits all' mentality, it values critical and open discussions rather than silencing people's views, it values social justice in the sense of fulfilling the needs of all rather than the few, and it values opening possibilities rather than an attitude of fatalism and deficit mentality.

Inclusive education needs to be based on the democratic values identified. The 'inclusivity' in inclusive education is not an empty notion. Certain behaviours and attitudes which are contrary to the values identified cannot be included in 'inclusive education'. As John Dewey noted a long time ago, open-mindedness is not the same as empty-mindedness. Inclusive education cannot include authoritarian tendencies, bullying, fear of expression of thought and action, marginalization, standardization, or a one size fits all mentality.

Inclusive education is hindered by several common myths that are found both in practices and policies. Equity is still conflated with one size fits all or standardization. Equity, however, is not identical to equity or sameness. Equity takes the contextual differences and needs into account and attempts to fulfill them all. Whether standardization is exhibited in evaluation practices, or curricula, or report cards, or stereotyped, it is equally problematic. When standardization is then coupled with emphasis on competition, narrow utility, and purely empirical evidence, the dangers of standardization multiply. These are exactly the conditions that continue to reproduce inequities, even if these are not intended.

The ideology of standardization has led to more fear and silencing of diverse positions. In all of my empirical studies (both locally and nationally) the issue of fear emerges as a central theme both in interviews with educators as well as students. Another equally predominant theme is that of deficit mentality. The deficit mentality, without considering a variety of evidence, privileges certain norms, usually white, middle class norms. Whatever is different from dominant norms is deemed to be less valuable and worthwhile. As a result, the deficit mentality always blames the student or her family or culture or context for the failures, rather than the very problems that the system itself (including curricula, testing, conceptions and practice of leadership and pedagogy) generates and reproduces. Students and their families then internalize these very deficits and believe that they are never able to change. Of course a critique of deficit mentality does not romanticize the students and their cultures— these too need to be examined, but the criteria used are crucial. If we only utilize one set of criteria, then by definition, we would have excluded certain other criteria which may be equally worthwhile although they may differ from what is considered normal. Indeed, there are many examples one can offer from the recent history of the Western world to show that the deficit mentality has marginalized certain people and ways of life. An obvious example is the fight for racial and gender equality.

I have argued that the nature and scope of inclusive education have to be guided by democratic principles given that we claim to live in a democracy. In order to fulfill these democratic principles and practices, we need to be aware of several myths including the conflation of equity with sameness, and the deficit mentality. In conclusion I offer a series of reflective questions which I consider as I evaluate my own practices, for I too fall into the traps of the deficit mentality: Is equity taken seriously in our actions although policies make reference to it? Are we aware of the differences between sameness (or equality) and equity which focuses on acknowledging and fulfilling different needs? Are we aware that standardization can in fact reproduce inequities? Can we really understand differences if we do not understand the contexts from which they arise? Can we fulfill the different needs of students if we do not understand and appreciate cultures, beliefs, and values which differ from dominant neo-liberal ways of thinking and being in the world?