

Who is the Leader?

Since the formation of the Alliance for Inclusive Education, disabled people have proclaimed that the struggle for inclusion must be led by disabled people themselves with parents and professionals taking the role of ally. I have come to think that this issue is difficult to explain, has never been debated, and is certainly not accepted by many. What do we mean by leadership? Which disabled people are we talking about, and what is an ally? What follows is my thinking and as such is incomplete and open to discussion and development. I hope it will be a start on the journey to clarity on this issue.

The question about what is the nature of leadership in this context presupposes that we are in agreement that the issue we are dealing with is one of oppression and not simply one of bad practice or misunderstanding. The children who are excluded from schools are almost exclusively from poor, working class, ethnic minority or refugee/asylum seeker backgrounds and struggling, or they are disabled and struggling. They are also young people, an oppressed group itself with very few rights of their own. It is important to recognise that exclusion is a function of oppression especially when that function is masked by the rhetoric of 'choice'.

It also presupposes an agreement that we all have the fundamental right to self-determination. For example, we try and allow our children to define their own needs - "Are you hungry?" and to have choice about how to fill those needs - "Do you want cheese on toast or beans on toast?" because we have an instinctive understanding that we all need to develop our own thinking about all matters which concern us in order to develop our humanity. We understand that inclusion on an individual level is about helping a person to make their unique contribution to the world. The same applies to groups of people who have been victims of oppression. This experience is universal in that, whether the excuse is class, race, gender, age or disability, we have all had our own thinking ignored or suppressed, and our power to define our own needs, make meaningful choices or contribute to the world severely limited. At the same time, a small minority of people, mostly white, mostly male, are groomed to run things, and to run them for their own (their group's) benefit however well they try to cover that up.

This imbalance of power is everywhere and affects all our relationships, especially within the inclusion movement which is focussed on those who are relegated to the bottom of the heap of human worth. It is the easiest thing for those with comparative power to say to themselves "I am a good person. I want to help people. I want to end injustice. I want to use my education, skills, resources, confidence to make the world a better place." and then to proceed to organise life for

the oppressed by redefining their needs, putting them in places which they believe are better for them (i.e mainstream schools) and only asking their opinion when they are pretty sure their opinion coincides with theirs, wearily polishing their halos at the end of the day.

There are at least two things wrong with this approach. Firstly, they might be wrong because they have not listened enough to the details of the problem as it is actually experienced by the 'excluded'. Secondly, and more importantly, this approach turns the struggle into an intellectual battle between two factions of the 'powerful' without doing anything to empower the groups of people who have been defined as victims. I do not think this can ever work because, in straight 'fight' terms, the other faction is the State backed by the whole apparatus of global capitalism, and they hold all the cards.

Now it may sound odd to say that it is only the 'victims' who can actually win this fight, but I believe it is true. When the oppressed start to fight back on their own behalf, be they Rosa Parks, Emmeline Pankhurst or Tara Flood, something different happens. Change happens at a much deeper level. The oppressed start to believe in themselves, unite around common goals, and force change by non-compliance. This takes a lot of courage. The perception of them in the mind of the oppressors changes, stereotypes are dissolved, limits are seen as false, respect grows and eventually friendship and comradeship become possible. This brings about a cultural change which makes retreat into the old ways impossible.

What does the leadership of disabled people mean in this context? It certainly doesn't mean accepting the view of any person with a limp and a loud voice. I think it means helping us to fight back. It means accepting the policies and goals of the disability movement. These have been hammered out over many years through debate in the most democratic forums we have yet managed to create (National Assemblies, self run organisations etc). Not every disabled person agrees with everything. Many have not yet had access to the thinking, but there is a working majority on many issues. Currently the international disabled people's community supports the ending of all segregated education and its replacement with well supported inclusive education in which every child has the right to have his/individual needs met. This is a mandate.

When the disability movement throws up strong disabled people who can help organise on the ground to turn these policies into living realities, then they need to be recognised and supported as leaders. I don't just mean patting them on the back now and again. I mean throwing yourself behind them. Don't compete with them. Give them support, backing, information, resources, platforms, encouragement, even love, and then it is much more likely that they will succeed than if

you don't. Many wonderful disabled leaders have succumbed to discouragement and exhaustion because this support was not forthcoming.

Disabled people can be leaders of everyone, including our allies. We can, and are, helping other excluded people to come together and organise, even very young people. I think it is the stereotype of disabled people that we can only think about ourselves and our issues that confuses many potential allies into believing that they must stay in charge. And of course our history of exclusion and poor education can feed this stereotype. However, many of us understand fully the deep implications of inclusion for all people, even those marooned in positions of privileged isolation, and we can, and must, inspire and guide the whole movement.

I have always remembered the time I first time I heard owning-class adults talk (and cry about) their experiences of boarding school. I suddenly saw how, as children, we had much in common, and how we had been hurt in similar ways, although the purpose of the exclusion was completely different. I think too of my Dad, growing up able-bodied but very poor. He caught tuberculosis as a child as was sent to an open air school to recover (or at least to cut down on the risk of infecting others). He left school at thirteen unable to read and write. This experience too affected the whole of his life.

We are all damaged by the kind of society that uses exclusion as a social tool. In this sense there are no 'allies', only victims. Taking the lead from disabled people means coming alongside us, being open and honest and brave about your own stories in the same way we choose to, in order to shed light on the real cost to our humanity of our current policies and practices. I see no conflict in this. In fact I think it is the only way we can work together in a true partnership.

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