

## **The Micropolitics of Inclusive Education by Shereen Benjamin. Open University Press 2002**

Social inclusion as an idea, a social agenda and an overarching policy impulse has, sheltering under its umbrella, a range of other specific 'inclusions'. One such relates to education and in particular to the inclusion of individuals with a range of learning needs. It is expressed in a belief that where possible, young people with special needs should be educated along with their peers who apparently lack special needs; and if possible in the same institutions using the same curriculum. The justification for this has invoked pupils rights, equal opportunity, equity and so forth. It is clearly a contested area; strong arguments flow in many directions, many voices are raised in support of one position or another.

Ethnographic studies of inclusive education give an opportunity for specific voices to be heard, in a way that large quantitative studies often do not. Both types of approach are clearly needed if we are to have a rich and informative account at the individual, local level on the one hand, and an overview to inform policy, on the other. The least frequently heard voice, however, is that of young people themselves. When that voice is joined by and connected with that of their teachers and supporters, it is doubly welcome. Shereen Benjamin's recently published, *The Mircopolitics of Inclusive Education*, takes this further, by locating these voices and the policy and practice impulses that inform, influence and arguably shape them, in a broader national policy context.

Benjamin's elegant and accessible account of these issues as they expressed themselves in one London girl's secondary school forms the basis of her book. Her account, based on her own research, unpacks and characterises the potential conflicts occurring at a macro-political level. These conflicts arise when policy relating to the standards agenda, league tables and educational performance comes up against that aimed at including all pupils in a single educational context. The former, is characterised by an emphasis on the limited notion of key stage assessment outcomes and public examination success by particular pupils and the latter, by a system of identification and classification that implicitly assumes such achievements are beyond the reach of those with special needs. From this point of view the emphasis on academic achievement (the achieving of five grades A-C at GSCE for example) becomes an excluding approach for those apparently unable to engage with this criterion of success. In such circumstances then, how do those with special needs produce themselves, (In a sense, construct their identities from their own experiences and what they glean from other's views of them); how do the institutions they learn in seek to produce them; how is there success recognised and valued both by themselves and those around them?

Over nine chapters, Benjamin skilfully weaves three key stories into one discursive cloth. The first story is developed through chapters one to three as the policy background and implications, particularly for practice, are explored. Benjamin's methodological approach draws on feminist post-structural and identity work perspectives: How is the school produced in particular ways; what factors create that production and the characteristics it displays to itself and to others in its associated community? The school in question is portrayed as successful, effective and orientated towards equal opportunities but is it inclusive when those vary attributes feed off notions of success that are limited and limiting for many of its pupils? The implications of these macro-political aspects give way, towards the end of chapter 3, to a specific localising of failure and its meaning for those not embraced by the vision of success revealed in earlier chapters. This unfolding of the costs such a production of value creates, are explored in terms of their impact on participants in the school environment, particularly the teachers and pupils. Chapter four looks at the meaning of inclusion and introduces the

specific locus of learning support micro-politics; the research context for Benjamin as a learning support teacher and researcher. Her own story and what it means to be a teacher and researcher in such a context, adds another thread to the patterns being made. We are made aware, as the chapters proceed, that the author is struggling with her own understanding of the issues involved; that her production of her self as teacher, supporter and advocate for the young women involved, is undergoing subtle and significant changes. What emerges clearly at this stage is that the teachers and pupils at the school entertain what appears to be a tacitly agreed view that success is possible for all; to do otherwise would imply uncertainties about the value of their mutual enterprise and the value of the criteria of success being employed. Over subsequent chapters the voice of those for whom the criteria do not apply begin to be heard. The notion of being 'a special needs student' is explored both in terms of its construction by the institution *itself* and by the students *themselves*. In the course of chapter four, the difference between the schools' creation of the pupils as ones for whom success is possible is contrasted with what their day-to-day reality reveals to the students themselves.

Students are positioned, and position themselves, in various ways. Benjamin defines three broad categories on the basis of her observations: student self productions that she characterises as being either 'sweet little girls', 'big bad girls' or 'lazy girls'. Chapters 5 and 6 explore these 'productions' in detail quoting tellingly from the interviews gathered during the research process. These chapters should be read by practicing teachers and head teachers for they contain nuggets of revelatory gold. Mining these nuggets, would certainly provide raw material for a whole school review of practice and its meanings!

In chapter seven, the material of Benjamin's research takes further shape as she explores the deficit discourse emerging in the preceding chapters and subjects it to a consideration of the various notions of success being used at the school by its students and staff. On one level there is a view informed by national bench marks, objectives and policy injunctions, by which academic success is the key criterion. On another level, a discourse of 'consolation' as Benjamin labels it, is apparent, whereby individual progress is regarded as an achievement and duly measured, recorded and celebrated, while a third discourse relating to the 'really disabled' student is constructed. This discourse is developed further in chapter eight, by viewing individual value as a matter of personal and social progress. This of course stands in contrast to what is being valued for the majority of students at the school- academic success, and to a lesser extent, those in the 'consolation' category. Two student case studies, concerning Cassandra and Josie illustrate this aspect; the notion of pupil diversity runs into problems when pupil learning needs are constructed as being *very* different, in so doing, issues are raised about the feminist post-structural analytical perspective used by the author to inform the stories being told. Here, as earlier Benjamin shows the reflexive nature of the account she has given, by highlighting the need to acknowledge and understand the differences between her student participants' view of what reality was for them and her own understanding of those same productions.

In her concluding chapter, the material woven previously is carefully examined. Issues about the nature of naming and labelling emerge, assumptions about the validity and usefulness of the notion of intellectual subordination, which has informed the account and analysis of earlier chapters are raised. Questions about what reality means for different people in the context of their respective 'abilities'; what this might mean both to them and to the person considering those differences are reflected upon. Does learning need have a basis in material reality or is it entirely socially and politically produced? Benjamin suggests it may have a material component but queries the basis of its social and political formation. To what extent are schools complicit in the making of these social and political identifications and to what extent do they resist them, being influenced by wider forces? It is in the complex interactions and elidings that occur at the micro- level of inclusion that needs to be investigated.

Benjamin in her thoughtful and humane account of both the research process and its findings has offered the reader multiple insights into the issues she has raised and much food for thought and reflection. For the researcher this is about the processes one engages with in the act of research and ones relationship with those participating in and forming, the focus of our research. For teachers and head teachers, important insights are offered into what might be happening in their own schools at present but which may go unrecognised because of daily pressures, themselves often derived from macro-political, policy requirements. Students, should they gain access to the text, may realise that others are in the same position as themselves; how they coped with the productive forces applied to them, as evidenced in this study, has pointers for how *they* might cope with the same pressures. Policy makers would benefit in two ways. The first by gaining an insight into the real school impact of their often abstracted and distant policy making and second, the importance of small scale ethnographic research as a way of accessing a rich account of particular sites and contexts.

The value of this book goes beyond the context of the Inclusion debate. More broadly, it speaks to the need to consider the interactions between multiple levels of context, between policy and practice and between understanding and meaning. It also demonstrates that where such consideration is not made, contradictions may emerge that will frustrate and negate the value of what is being undertaken. More importantly perhaps, young people may be produced as, and encouraged to produce *themselves* as failing, and of little worth. Clearly, that is unacceptable.

Karl Wall