

THE POLITICAL NATURE OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Dr. Piku Chowdhury

Abstract- Scholarly studies have repeatedly pointed out that disability and inclusion should be re-envisioned as cultural politics and not from an absolutely ideological point of view. The depoliticization of the struggle and conversion into a somewhat academic core of deliberation, has stripped the issue of the much-needed agency and what is more alarming, is a parallel development of an antagonism against the educated intelligentsia who tend to uphold or engage in inclusive narratives in a refined and detached academic spirit. The paper remains a humble attempt at exploring the presence of an inherent politics in the adoption of the issue of inclusion as reflected by the tension between the individual and the social action, and a certain degree of complacency in the policy makers and practitioners in their willful denial of a knowledge gap, that is carefully maintained by political action in institutionalized teacher education.

Key words: Teacher education. Inclusion, politicization, agency.

Inclusion as Cultural Politics:

Slee (2003)¹ argued that disability and inclusion should be re-envisioned as cultural politics while Ballard (2003)² aptly pointed out that it is of central significance that inclusion should be perceived not only from an ideological stance but also from an overtly political analysis and well-planned action. According to Corbett & Slee (2000)³, inclusion is a “distinctly political activity” (p.136), that veritably includes what Barton (2003)⁴ asserts as “both a disturbing and challenging activity which is an essential feature of the struggle for change” (p,12). The disability movement and the demand for inclusion had always been a history of struggle for social justice and equity and thus by its very nature political. If complete or effective inclusion has been rendered a partially fulfilled and even somewhat utopian project in the modern world prioritizing other socio-economic issues, it is partly due to the gradual depoliticization of the struggle for inclusion. The ignored dissidence that fuels a sustained and organized political movement, has mellowed with time and as Barton (2004)⁵ aptly points out, this anger of the exploited and the excluded, is often dissipated and rendered neutral:

The importance of anger, rage and deeply felt commitment against the offensive, damaging aspects of an unjust system and our daily complicity have become sanitized, inhibited and displaced into other less important and depoliticized endeavours. (p.67)

The Intellectuals and the depoliticization of the struggle for Inclusive Education:

The depoliticization of the struggle and conversion into a somewhat academic core of deliberation, has stripped the issue of the much-needed agency and what is more alarming, is a parallel development of an antagonism against the educated intelligentsia who tend to uphold or engage in inclusive narratives in a refined and detached academic spirit. There is an inherent politics in the adoption of the issue of inclusion as reflected by the tension between the individual and the social action and the excluded have increasingly become aware of this. Holdsworth (1993)⁶ pertinently points out that –

Disabled people...encounter a whole range of people throughout our lives; parents, caregivers, brothers, sisters, professionals like doctors, nurses, OTs, social workers – even celebrities who sometimes “adopt us”. Are they our allies? Many will think so and some will be surprised to find out that, not only are they not our allies, but, in fact, are the beast itself. (p.4)

Academic engagement in the issue of inclusion, especially in the field of teacher education, involves a wider spectrum of political debate. The politics of the already included, enlightened and empowered intellectuals dictating the terms of academic engagement in inclusion exposes lacunae in political will. There is also an increasing debate regarding what particular discipline inclusion should be included in and whether the emerging disability studies in education is adequate to foster effective inclusion in society. In fact, the academic curricular revisions in teacher education, aimed at preparing teachers for inclusive classrooms, in form of predominantly theoretical inclusion of papers on inclusive education with little or no scope of supervised practice teaching in inclusive classrooms, deepen the chasm between theory and social action and the lack of political will in attempting true inclusion. It is also necessary to avoid proselytizing. We are reminded of Foucault (1991)⁷ who in his book *Remarks on Marx*, had overtly pointed out the intriguing and deeply disturbing politics of centralization of power in the intellectual section of the society that questions and subverts the formative role of the intellectual in participating in a political will for social justice and true inclusion. And this is to be achieved by sustained analytical, critical and active participation in the day-to-day social action of inclusion. The issue has to be realized through sustained practice in existing disciplines and not by relegating the same to some newly emerged or tentative disciplinary domain. Interdisciplinary questionings and active engagements too could be a viable mode of achieving effective inclusion in the field of education as well as in society, instead of disciplinary boundaries and truncated academic programs:

The role of the intellectual does not consist in telling others what they must do. What right would they have to do that? And remember all prophecies, promises, injunctions and programs that the intellectuals have managed to formulate in the course of the last two centuries. The job of an intellectual does not consist in moulding the political will of others. It is a matter of performing analyses in their own fields, of interrogating anew the evidence and postulates, of shaking up habits, ways of acting and thinking, of dispelling commonplace beliefs, of taking a new measure of rules and institutions...it is a matter of participating in the formation of a political will, where [the intellectual] is called to perform a role as a citizen. (pp.11-12)

The Knowledge Gap:

Then again there is a certain degree of complacency in the policy makers and practitioners in their willful denial of a knowledge gap, that is carefully maintained by political action in institutionalized teacher education. There is a deep knowledge gap regarding what inclusion in essence looks like and how it is accepted by the excluded children, young adults, their families and caregivers. There is no provision of active engagement with the excluded strata of society that the student-teachers or teacher trainees would be encountering in real-life classrooms after passing out of the teacher education institutes. Action research or compulsory projects with mandatory engagement with the marginalized voices are still out of the scope of current teacher education curriculum and practice in the country. Teacher educators themselves are neither prepared nor tested for competencies required for inclusive education. What remains in both the teacher educators and trainees is often an emotive response to the excluded and marginalized from the pedestal of the privileges that has never really been in touch with ground reality. Learned and acquired conceptions regarding the excluded are translated into policy and guide the intellectual's thoughts in most of the cases and therefore triggers crude emotion in certain enthusiasts instead of organized political thought and action.

Eminent philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1984)⁸ in his illuminating work *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, reveals that the inherent intellectual confusion regarding engagement in any struggle for inclusion, invites two categories of response, the first being an attribution to individual wish and the second being more moral in nature. It is the second category that seemingly influences more people and takes on a didactic turn. People who take interest in inclusionary engagements because they ought to, tend to bask in the glory of a certain degree of moral obligation being fulfilled and preach people to follow. The active politics of inclusion, then is reduced to a moral suggestion that is urged and pressed upon on people in the guise of a well-argued ethical project charged with raw emotion. Emotivism, according to MacIntyre, is indeed a widespread phenomenon, but it leaves an overwhelming sense of confusion as any engagement resulting from moral pressure or didactic force, is bound to leave one perplexed and drained. In worst cases, as aptly asserted by Hernstein (1992)⁹ it leads to a sense of deception in the long run as is bound to happen with any effort not initiated from within, but externally boosted:

Now people will say "It is good" and think they mean "It is good", but without knowing, they are really doing only what people used to do when they said "I like it" or "I want it", namely expressing their own feelings and trying to get other people to feel, do or believe certain things. And everyone is deceived: listeners are deceived about what speakers are doing; speakers are self-deceived about what they themselves are doing; and moral philosophers are either deceived, complacent or complicitous. (pp.213-214)

The disillusionment with political agenda of sustainable inclusion thus has its roots in such scattered highly emotive individual efforts instead of an organized political will to initiate and utilize well-organized and thoughtfully conceived plans of action where people are engaged meaningfully and are made to understand their roles. The essential political nature of inclusion had thus been realized by many, but then a critical area of concern remains to be the type of politics one may adopt or engage in in order to challenge the exclusion, marginalizing and inequity that have been institutionalized or is politically shelved to make way for more immediately politically rewarding issues. Academics find it difficult to act politically against the exclusionary practices at different levels within their own institutions. However, as many scholars like Booth (2003)¹⁰ and Brantlinger (2006)¹¹ argue, intellectuals may adopt language and communication as a weapon against institutional exclusionary practices by communicating across a multiplicity of cultures, identities and ways of thinking, and by resisting and rejecting language of exclusion that appropriates inclusive education by special education. Apple (2001)¹² in *Educating the Right Way* asserts that the dynamics of power must be challenged by use of subversive tactics of counterhegemonic alliances and practices and by reclaiming the academic intellectual autonomy now unfortunately constrained by over insistence on audit culture and professional regulations.

Democratic Intellectualism for Effective Inclusion:

The true political nature of inclusion then must be reclaimed by what Paterson (2003)¹³ calls "democratic intellectualism" (p.69) that offers resistance to hegemony of an institutionalized political culture that deforms and restricts liberty in thought and political action. Then only the involvement or active participation of intellectuals engaged in inclusive education, in both formulation and execution or implementation of government policies and plans would be effective in terms of inclusion. Both local and national governments should engage in advisory and executive positions, the representatives from the democratic intellectuals from the field of inclusive education, established in their own disciplines by virtue of their sustained and prolonged active engagement in the struggle for inclusion. Slee, an eminent scholar and activist of inclusive education, may be cited as an example. Slee had served time in the Queensland Government and exemplified the scope of democratic intellectualism influencing the government by facilitating change in form of minimizing the confrontational politics between the government and the parent of the marginalized through establishment of a forum for dialogue based on mutual respect, despite the tendency of the civil servants and politicians to "dance around a politics of pragmatism"¹⁴ (p.220) and adopting a hegemonic stand of omniscience with little or no regard for the voice of the excluded and their caregivers, hitherto pushed to the realm of special education with utmost facility. Parental alliances too serve as a powerful political association granting support in new initiatives and during times of need, against social inequity and authoritative tendency of ignoring the legitimate demands of the marginalized.

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