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Book Reviews

Towards Inclusive Learning in Higher Education Developing curricula for disabled students

Mike Adams & Sally Brown (eds)

Abingdon: Routledge, 2006, 200pp. ISBN-13: 978-0-415-36529-1 (pbk)

The Tomlinson Report (1996) challenged the education sector to take the rhetoric of inclusive education seriously, and to implement inclusion, for the benefit of all learners. In 2001, Adams & Brown wrote a report that recommended focusing on teaching and learning for any future funding of initiatives to support disability in higher education (HE) - moreover, they urged the involvement of academic staff. As part of their consistent commitment to this approach, the current book demonstrates that there is good practice developing among academic staff.

Within that context, and with the need to be proactive about legislation such as the Disability Discrimination Act (2005), they and their team of authors address several urgent questions: what are the current barriers to inclusive education? How can we facilitate transition and fair access into higher education for disabled students? How can we improve upon the use of information and communication technology (ICT) for teaching, and also with regard to examination and assessment? What are the implications for quality assurance and benchmark descriptors in following international legislation? What are the prospects of work placements and employment?

There are 15 chapters, written by a range of authors chosen from those working on Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)-funded disability projects (e.g. Chapman & Carlisle), Education and Social Research Council (ESRC) projects (Fuller & Healey) and other contributors from the international community (e.g. Fernie & Henning from New Zealand). The introduction provides a useful précis of each chapter, and indicates overlaps between chapters 'to facilitate browsing' (p.5). Each chapter raises interesting issues that need further consideration, of which space allows only a few to be mentioned here: in Chapter 9, on veterinary training, the idea of limited licensing is explored as an alternative to omnicompetence, and this concept has potential for development elsewhere. In Chapters 11 and 12, multimedia and virtual learning environments are considered, with both strengths and weaknesses analysed. The

further development of such work in ICT will show us, for example, whether podcasting can be developed to the advantage of the whole community, and whether sites such as Facebook and other social networking software can also be used to democratise the virtual campus that is becoming a key factor in inclusive education, for all students.

This book is a useful resource and manages well the different agendas of policy, practice and theory. The authors and editors present for our consideration the possibility that good pedagogy will benefit all learners, whether disabled or not. This trend is emerging strongly in analysis of needs for school-aged pupils too; Lewis & Norwich (2007) propose that this (inclusion of all) is a more sophisticated model than the currently held model based on using an assigned SEN (Special Educational Needs) category to gauge a learner's pedagogical needs. Healey *et al.* take this idea further to propose that there is a sense in which we can consider that all learners are impaired (Adams & Brown, 2006, p.33). This is a refreshing idea – when turned on its head – to suggest that all learners have untapped potential, such as proposed by Vygotsky and Bruner. However, learners differ in the level of discrepancy between what their learning environment offers and what they need and we must accept the differences in degree as well as type of difficulty. Deaf students, as a case in point, may still be significantly held back in their learning, as highlighted by Mole & Peacock in Chapter 10; their work shows the great gulf that exists for a deaf student entering an academic community that still uses spoken English as the vehicle for most of its pedagogy. There is a tension here between offering the same for all but making it better, or that *and* some highly specialist provision. Hence we see the requirement still for a three-dimensional model of need: there are common or general needs (for all), there are distinct or specialised needs (for some) and there are unique needs (for individuals) (Lewis & Norwich, 2007). The chapters in this book illustrate examples of all three levels and they do it well. Adams & Brown and their team of writer-researchers contextualise the issues clearly, from setting the higher education context, through identifying the barriers to higher education, to raising the aspirations both of students to enter HE and of staff to meet their needs, and also analysing the issues regarding transition from school to higher education. And there's the rub, of course, because of the need to create more of this kind of work in the schools and colleges that prepare students for higher education.

The conclusion sets out challenges for the higher education community which deserve to be addressed seriously. I cannot do justice to them all here; they include the need to focus on the pedagogy of delivery as well as of content, and to look at social justice

as a vehicle for supporting staff in developing existing good practice to become more effective. This book provides a welcome synthesis of conceptually useful approaches. If we take such a text seriously, and I believe we should, we will be able to investigate which of these approaches are indeed valid and generalisable and which are doomed to fail to make an impact without significant funding, willpower from senior management and growing involvement of academic staff and the whole student body.

The next step for the sector may be to disseminate these models of good practice, to encourage universities to engage with such expertise actively, and to activate and educate those students who regard themselves as not impaired: the majority student group has great potential to support and facilitate the mainstreaming of disabled students and this is an area ready for new work. Adams & Brown's book seems to stand alone in providing the scale of coverage we require to take this debate further; in 2008, we can look forward to Fuller's edited text on the evidence and findings from the four year ESRC-funded project L139-25-0135: *Enhancing the quality and outcomes of disabled students' learning in higher education*. Based at four universities, this will look at dilemmas for staff, including issues around fair assessment, listening to disabled students, organisational issues and appropriate pedagogy. It will also report on the student voice directly, analysing identity issues, teaching and learning needs and transitions to the workplace. Thus the debate will continue to inform and enhance good practice.

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Reference

LEWIS, A. & NORWICH, B. (2007) Special teaching for special children? Pedagogies for inclusion, *Educational and Child Psychology*, vol.24, no.3, pp.54-67.