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Thought piece: The Inclusive Teacher: Values and (com)passion in a wicked world

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The Inclusive Teacher: Values and (com)passion in a wicked world

This article will explore the challenge for a teacher, striving to take an inclusive approach to their work in education. It suggests that they can navigate the complexity of a context dominated by wicked problems through their values and passions, embodied by a compassionate approach.

Keywords: inclusive; teacher; passion; wicked; compassion

The motivation of practitioners who seek to take an inclusive approach is a moral drive to provide the opportunity for education to all learners, regardless of status in terms of diversity and typical or non-typical profiles. However from a UK perspective, education in schools is based within a changing and diverse range of structures, from fee-paying independent schools, through academies and free schools, to local authority maintained schools. The generic nature of education policy, often designed with mainstream secondary schools in mind, can frequently neglect the particular characteristics of settings which are impacted by the policies. As an interpreter of national, local and setting-based policy, the teacher has a certain amount of autonomy. It could be argued that this autonomy is defined by the teacher themselves, dependent on their strength of feeling, passion, belief in the pedagogical approaches they connect with and the strength with which they decide to follow it. When the inclusive teacher's strength of belief contrasts with the ethos underpinning the policies or the strategies recommended within them, they need to make a choice when interpreting them. The choice to either comply with the policy directives and compromise their own beliefs, or subvert the policy implementation in order to enact their own values and beliefs.

The inclusive teacher is driven by a moral imperative and a belief that "education is a human right" (UNESCO 2009, p.8), founded upon a humanist approach

which values all individuals within a community, regarding their differences as positives to be acknowledged and built upon.

Analysis of the current context of the education climate in the UK highlights an ethos that is very different to that of the inclusive teacher's. Analysts recognise a normative ethos exemplified through the 'standards-agenda' within a neo-liberal agenda. This is based upon a "Thatcher-inspired" assessment and accountability horizon (Vislie 2003, p.32) within a system dominated by short-term measures and snapshot assessment. These systems of assessment within educational institutions, led through testing of individual learners, emphasise individual competition and hierarchical structures which are endemic in society more widely (Tomlinson 2017). Schools experience this competitive approach through imposition of floor targets, league tables and public reporting of inspections, which place them in competition with other schools in their locality, under the banner of parent-choice. This approach is developing within the broader context of education provision and organisation being deeply embroiled with notions of financial efficiency and reducing budgets. This financial and political context sees schools making decisions about support which places learners in competition with each other. These are decisions about allocating limited funding towards particular individuals or groups of learners who are likely to evidence improvement within a year, whilst often compromising the support available to other learners.

Education institutions in the UK are characterised by being in competition with each other, and individual learners in the institution being in competition for funding, provision and qualifications. This characterisation is further complicated by the competing and sometimes contradictory demands placed upon schools to fulfil a range of roles beyond what might be understood as the core academic purpose. These

demands include: preparing learners for successful employment, being centres of safety, care, health and wellbeing, developing environmental sustainability, acting as community hubs and embracing creative approaches whilst succeeding in improving annually collated performative measures. Murgatroyd (2010) identifies that these competing demands, combined with institutional intransigence, where the model of schools has changed very little in over 150 years, set schools up to be failing institutions and contextualises this as a wicked problem. Problems are wicked in that they exist within complex social organisations (Briggs 2007) where there are a range of causes and no straightforward linear solutions which can be identified through applying generic principals (Blackman *et al.* 2006).

Teachers in the UK are performing their profession within these institutions where the concept of failure dominates the discourse. With teaching being a vocation (Huebner 1996 cited Schwarz 1999, Buijs 2005), having moved further from being a highly remunerated and respected over the past 20 years, teachers are placed within a highly challenging situation. This context could be regarded as presenting a causal link to the issues of teacher retention (DfE / CooperGibson Research 2018). Hougaard et al. (2016, p.49) refer to this wicked context of competing and contradictory demands as the “PAID reality, standing for Pressured, Always-on, Information Overloaded, and Distracted.”

In this wicked context, the inclusive teacher has the challenge of navigating and maintaining integrity with resilience (Doney 2013). This resilience is upheld by the inclusive teacher’s values and, in particular their passion for the desire to bring about a “more just and equal society” (UNESCO 2009, p. 8). This passion for a human rights-based approach of reaching out to all learners (UNESCO 2017) provides the resilience for skilful practice through a ‘feel’ for how to act. (Bourdieu 1990, p.197). The

inclusive teacher uses relational thinking as opposed to binary thinking (Hill Collins & Bilge 2016), as by acknowledging and valuing difference, they reject a normative, right/wrong, binary approach. They give attention to the psychological implications of working within the wicked system (Armstrong 2017) and particularly the relationships within a community of practice in which diversity is seen as a positive. They exemplify a relational passion, understanding that learning and outcomes are more robust, flexible and successful (Dame Burnell 2018) where there are positive relationships between diverse people.

This relational passion, with a strength of commitment to others, leads to a notion of (com)passion. Compassion, as an empathic meeting of humans within the context of learning. Compassion can be mutually beneficial (Kagan 2014) and offers the opportunity for creative and successful results (Hougaard & Carter 2018) within a wicked context. This values-driven intersectional approach of learning across the divisions of social inequality, with close links to critical pedagogies (Friere 1996), embodied by compassionate relationships, provides the inclusive teacher with strength and opportunities to navigate the complexities presented by the wicked education system. A compassionate approach enables the inclusive teacher to understand and use the heterogeneity of those involved in the complex and wicked educational systems (Briggs 2007, p.244) to make choices which contribute to a co-evolving, co-adaptive and fluid (Morrison 2008, p.26-27) community of learning.

Word count: 1010

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