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Title :

The Cross of the Moment Inclusive Education : How are we disabled?

Abstract :

*Despite equal opportunities policies in Universities and Colleges across the country, it remains the fact that Further and Higher Education remain closed to the vast majority of people who are perceived to be not able-bodied. Those who are visually impaired, hearing impaired or with mobility needs are disadvantaged to such an extent that embarking on a course is fraught with difficulties even before the studying begins. The lack of resources and support and the lack of will within the Institutions to make them available add up to discriminatory behaviour that is not only wrong in itself but also **deprives those of us who are non-disabled** from a rich learning experience. This lecture seeks to address some of the issues around inclusion and how it impinges both on education and the well being of our society.*

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The abstract for this lecture, which you have probably read, is, of necessity both limited and limiting. And so at the outset, in the light of that, I make two points which I ask you to bear in mind. The first is that what I am going to say is, I believe, as true and as relevant with regard to people with learning difficulties as it is to those with physical disabilities. Secondly, it has very serious implications for the church which seems to be even less willing and able to accommodate and embrace people with disabilities and learning difficulties than are places of education.

The barriers which a person with a physical disability has to face and overcome in order to enrol on and proceed through a chosen course of study are many. For those of us with a will to see and acknowledge them, some at least of those barriers are all too evident. Policies of Government and Funding Council criteria are gradually persuading and encouraging places of Further and Higher Education to change their ways and in the last decade or so many changes have taken place. But there still remains a long way to go.

An F.E.F.C. report written less than a year ago entitled "Student Voices" documents the experience of 266 students with physical disabilities alone cited a whole range of obstacles they had encountered. Practical difficulties included

- 1) the inaccessibility of rooms, lecture theatres and sometimes whole buildings;
- 2) the lack of time allowed for coffee breaks, going to the toilet and moving between lectures;
- 3) poorly designed facilities - particularly canteens and libraries and
- 4) the inadequate provision of appropriate equipment and materials.

This was compounded for some by the discriminatory attitudes of some institutions and some staff which manifested in patronising behaviour, showing a lack of respect and having low expectations of their physically disabled students.

One student summed up his experience of the Equal Opportunities Policy at his college as being "about as equal as a see-saw with a six ton weight on one end and a feather on the other."

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This lecture however is focusing not on disability but on inclusion; to see beyond the various disabilities that are so often used to describe and define the students themselves and to ask to what extent are we disabling ourselves as a society by segregating certain groups of people?

I want to start at the place where the theme of this series of lectures suggests we start - at the cross, itself a symbol of brokenness, disability and limitation. In the one sense, of course, all of us are disabled, however fit and healthy we might be. We have physical limitation, we suffer from fatigue, stress and illness, and, as we grow older so our physical capacities wane. In the cross we see what the American theologian Nancy Eiesland dares to call the "Disabled God". A God incarnate in a human body who suffers physical torture, physical impairment and death.

"The theological lenses through which we have traditionally viewed our own and others' bodies distorts the physical presence not only of people with disabilities but also of the incarnate God". (1).

Countering the notion of Christ's resurrected body as one of glorious perfection, she reminds us of some of the post-resurrection appearances. Jesus shows his disciples his torn hands and pierced side as evidence that it is truly he they are seeing. (Luke 24:29f, John 20:27).

"In presenting his impaired hands and feet to his startled friends the resurrected Jesus is revealed as the disabled God...(who) is not only the One from Heaven but the revelation of true personhood, underscoring the reality that full personhood is fully compatible with the experience of disability." (2)

Another approach is one offered by the Canadian writer and international lecturer Judith Snow. With very limited use of her limbs and no power in her motor muscles, she writes with her mouth using a breath operated Morse Code system. Rather than to talk and think in terms of disability she prefers to talk and think in terms of different forms of giftedness. For:

"Believing in disability allows us to have certain thoughts and assumption about people.... The whole notion of disability depends on the thought that people can be hampered by limitations." (3)

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This leads the rest of us trying to find ways of fixing things for them and making things better. Giftedness however leads us to look for and affirm in people the many ordinary and extraordinary gifts that they have.

A gift, in Judith's eyes is: "anything that one is or has or does that creates an opportunity for meaningful interaction with at least one other person." ⁽⁴⁾

There are two gifts that we all have. The first is "presence", for we are all embodied beings. The second is that all of us are different, in hundreds, perhaps even thousands of different ways. Our bodies, experience, culture, interests, tastes, desires and thinking make each of us unique. That makes our potential contribution to the mosaic that is community also unique.

It is to the implications this has for community that I would like to turn next - the communities that are our places of education. If we acknowledge that it goes without saying that people with physical disabilities can be as academically able, as intelligent and as insightful as able bodied people, with as much to contribute to society (and I hope we can all say that) then as long as places of education remain reluctant to accommodate their needs, all of us lose out; not only the students themselves but the staff and students with whom they would be interacting and working alongside and the society of the future which may well, as a result, be deprived of their skill and expertise. We all suffer the loss. We are all disabled in the sense that we are prevented from benefiting from

- 1) the richness and diversity that the contributions of physically disabled students would bring;
- 2) their particular experiences which would enrich our own and
- 3) their very difference which could be gifts to us all.

In addition to that it is an issue of injustice - another dominant theme in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Equality of opportunity is not available to those with physical disabilities. Only those with the will, determination and perseverance to fight for what they want and hope to fulfil their aspirations. Judith Snow maintains that the strength and vitality of any community depends on how many people are getting a chance to have their dreams expressed and realised. The rest of us are severely weakened and impoverished without the gifts they have and want to share with us.

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The inclusion of physically disabled people also has implications for the education process itself. Sadly, in recent years, the approach to education and learning has narrowed considerably and become increasingly focused on students absorbing a great body of knowledge in order to be able to pass exams. That is important, of course. To gain a qualification would no doubt be cited as the main reason for enrolling on a course in the first place. Nevertheless, the broader understanding of education as providing opportunities to grow and to develop as a whole person seems to be getting lost. Time away at university and college can be invaluable in providing opportunities to explore ideas and values; to meet different kinds of people from different backgrounds with different cultures, different beliefs and different ways of thinking which can broaden and enrich our own perspective on life. It can give us the chance to reflect on our experiences, our understanding of who we are and where we might fit in in the world. These are some of the largely unseen and sometimes unacknowledged benefits of education to which students with physical disabilities have a great deal to offer - and would, if they were more readily included.

But we can say yet more. An inclusive approach to the actual teaching of a subject would also benefit all learners. Up until recently the inclusion of people with physical disabilities in mainstream colleges and universities has been thought of in terms of providing additional human support or physical aids to enable them to gain access onto courses. The Tomlinson Report which came out only last year recommends a more radical approach - "the re-designing of the very processes of learning, assessment and organisation so as to fit the objectives and learning styles of the students".⁽⁵⁾ That is not just students with disabilities but every student. This means that the focus is no longer on how to accommodate the few people with disabilities but to look at each student as an individual and try to understand how they learn best so that they can best be helped to learn. With such an approach the student can only benefit. For, in effect, the report is asking for courses to be tailor made to match the requirements of each student. It acknowledges in the process that the wider the spectrum of capacity and ability in a class, the greater the insight and ingenuity called for on the part of the teacher.

The report comes out of the F.E. sector where, because of the nature of the courses offered and the breadth of potential students it aims to attract, the implications are profound. It is not, however, without implications for H.E.. For the fact remains that all of us learn differently and each student would benefit from that being recognised and accommodated as they seek to meet the requirement of their chosen course of study.

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But the barriers are many and don't just lie in the realm of funding, which is often used as the excuse for not doing anything to make F. and H.E. more accessible to those with physical disabilities. Prejudice could also be cited: prejudice born out of a fear of difference and a reluctance to recognise the richness that can bring. Ignorance is also prevalent, with physical disability often being equated in people's minds with low academic ability. There may also be elements of laziness on the part of university authorities and staff who would rather not deal with the upheavals of change, whether in organising the re-designing of buildings or the necessary changes that would undoubtedly be required in a person's teaching methods and materials. There will even be anxieties about how to relate to someone with short stumpy arms and no legs, or to someone who can't hear a word that is spoken.

All this is to be expected - we are only human after all. But the question is, are we going to stay with our prejudices and fears, our ignorance, laziness and anxieties or are we going to do something to change the situation - for the good of all? That, I suggest, is a poignant "cross of the moment". A cross that, thankfully, an increasing number of people are seeking to climb. In so doing they are gradually rendering our fears and illusions powerless. ⁽⁶⁾

Over the last few decades it has been astonishing to witness group after group of marginalised and oppressed people begin to raise their voices in an attempt to have their experiences heard and taken seriously. Their fight for the dignity and respect that is their due has challenged the rest of us to embrace and to value their unique contributions to society: the women's movement and the rise of feminism; the gay and lesbian communities together with all those whose orientation is not heterosexual; the fall of apartheid and the continuing struggle for people of colour across the world. Now, people with physical disabilities are adding their voices and some are beginning to listen.

I leave the final word to a lecturer from my own institute of H.E., himself an active campaigner for the full inclusion of people with disabilities into the education system.

"We have to find different ways of hearing each other. We have to find different ways of seeing each other. We have to find different ways of learning together and, more importantly, we have to find different ways of "being" together... Those who administer and those who teach have

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to recognise and value changes necessary for learners to make their personal and unique contributions. They have to learn that different contributions can be valued equally to the benefit of the whole (institution).⁽⁷⁾

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References

- 1) Nancy Eiesland: *The Disabled God - Towards a Liberation Theology*. Abingdon Press 1994 (ISBN 0-687-10801-2) page 99.
- 2) Eiesland page 100.
- 3) Judith Snow: *What's Really Worth Doing and How To do It*. Inclusion Press 1994 (ISBN 1-89418-17-8) page 12
- 4) Snow page 18
- 5) Tomlinson Report page 4
- 6) The theme of the series of lectures was taken from this piece of poetry (Source unknown):
"We would rather be ruined than changed;
We would rather die in our dread
Than climb the cross of the movement and see our illusions die".
- 7) Joe Whittaker and John Kenworthy: *"The Struggle for Inclusive Education - A Struggle against Educational Apartheid"* pages 2 and 3.