

## Book Review

### *Addressing Tensions and Dilemmas in Inclusive Education: Living with uncertainty*

---

Review by Paula Hamilton

---

*Addressing Tensions and Dilemmas in Inclusive Education: Living with uncertainty*

Brahm Norwich

Routledge, 2013

USA and Canada

189 pages

ISBN: 9780415528481

\$40.95 U.S. Paper; Hardcover \$155.00

The main theme of 'Addressing Tensions and Dilemmas in Inclusive Education' is the theoretical examination of the philosophical tensions and complexities associated with the provision of inclusive education for children and young people with disabilities and learning difficulties. A contemporary mix of concepts, values and boundaries, the field of inclusion is complex and highly contested (Boyle and Topping, 2012; Westwood, 2013). Brahm Norwich, a Professor of Educational Psychology and Special Educational Needs (SEN) at the University of Exeter in the UK, is an established writer in this field. Unlike many books of its genre, this text goes beyond a descriptive account of the ideological values of inclusive education and how learners with disabilities and learning difficulties can be supported. Much of Norwich's work is aimed at the critical exploration of ambiguities and tensions, bridging a gap within extant literature.

This well structured, scholarly text is organised into nine chapters, with key themes revisited and critiqued throughout. The introductory chapter provides a clear theoretical stance; Norwich adopts a 'realist' rather than 'utopian' version of inclusion and tends to engage in debates to the ideological left. Five main tensions are presented: participation-protection; choice-equity; generic-specialist; real-relative; knowledge as investigation-emancipation, which Norwich argues, underpin many of the conflicts associated with contemporary education for disabled learners. In chapter two, Norwich critiques the emergence of sociological theories and tensions that arise from the polarisation of medical, individual and social models of disability. Drawing upon global research, chapter three presents various classification systems used to group learners who have special educational needs. Norwich asserts the term SEN has given rise to an ambiguous hierarchy of general categories of deficiencies that give little consideration to specific contexts and individual needs. Chapter four examines conflicting perspectives relating to the purpose of education and the curriculum. Norwich explores models of curriculum design in terms of commonality and differentiation. While supportive of common programmes, he argues there remains a need for more specialised programmes. Chapter five appraises tensions arising from 'generic-specialist' teaching and 'rights-needs' based approaches. Norwich asserts that universal inclusive pedagogy – learning together, addressing individual needs, avoiding ability labelling, grouping and withdrawal – is based on false dichotomies. Instead, he veers towards moderate (maximal) inclusive pedagogy, and is supportive of the Wave model which connects generic and specialist pedagogy. In chapter six, Norwich undertakes further analysis of dilemmas of difference which exist for disabled/SEN learners. Consideration is given, in chapter seven, to concerns from the perspectives of learners and their parents. Concepts of parent-partnerships are analysed, as are the complex relationships that often exist between disabled children and adults. A philosophical analytical lens is adopted in chapter eight to pursue prior concepts. With regard to inclusive education research, Norwich stresses the importance of fostering relationships between diverse disciplines, methodologies and theoretical stances. Norwich concludes the book by restating the key dilemmas and arguments considered and providing a summary of theoretical principles, which he proposes will inform how tensions and dilemmas can be addressed in practice.

Each thought provoking chapter presents more questions and dilemmas than it does in providing straightforward resolutions. This, however, is not out of context as Norwich is highly critical of the indifferent thinking style often associated with the analysis of values, pressures and constraints related to issues in inclusive education. He warns against the ready acceptance of over-simplified explanations and in viewing polarised concepts as oppositional positions. Instead, he advocates a style of thinking which recognises the complex interaction between plural values but which works to achieve a balance between opposing positions, while acknowledging that resolutions may be less than ideal, involve residual tensions and lead to negative consequences for some individuals. Norwich calls for the deconstruction of polarised theories and uncertainties which trouble inclusion and general education and for the findings to be presented to policy makers as a series of 'aporias'. This critical and deconstructive approach provides a useful tool for acquiring further insight into the contemporary contradictions that often exist between 'policy intention' and 'policy reality'. Despite a plethora of inclusive policies in the UK, the movement toward effective inclusion 'remains a work in progress' (Westwood, 2013:6). All too frequently, the *reality* of classroom communities is overlooked, preventing inclusive principles from effectively translating into practice (Westwood, 2013).

This book undisputedly makes a valuable contribution to the field of special education, however, I have a couple of minor criticisms. Firstly, Norwich argues that the broader definition of inclusion 'distances inclusive education from the specific circumstances of disability and difficulties' and 'that the interests of those with disabilities might be secondary to or overlooked when pursuing other *less* [my use of italics] minority interests; for example gender and socio-economic class interests' (Norwich, 2013:3,4). Whilst appreciating that the assimilation of SEN into the wider concept of inclusion may have taken some focus off issues facing learners with disabilities, what does Norwich mean by *less* minority interests? Does it imply that there is a hierarchy of importance attached to aspects of diversity? If the narrow SEN definition of inclusive education is to be reinstated, this could result in the needs of other groups of learners at risk of marginalisation, underperformance and discrimination being overlooked. There is evidence to suggest that SEN and disability remains the dominant feature of inclusive education, theoretically and in practice (Armstrong and Richards, 2011; Nutbrown and Clough, 2013). Even Norwich reports how 'an analysis of the UK BEL, Australian education index and US (ERIC) databases between 3 and 15 times as many papers on inclusive education or inclusion were about SEN/disability as about gender or ethnicity' (Norwich, 2013:4). In the attempt to prevent any further watering down of matters associated with SEN/disability, we cannot afford not to pay due diligence to other aspects of diversity and dilemmas of difference.

I would also like to comment on the fleeting reference made to the relationship between SEN/disability and other aspects of diversity, especially where an individual is affected by multiple areas of difference. The paradoxes associated with intersecting differences in gender, ethnic and linguistic diversity, social class *and* SEN/disability would have offered additional complexities and dilemmas to explore. There is much research to indicate that the following learners are more at risk of being identified or labelled as having specific learning needs or behavioural difficulties: boys; male learners of African and Caribbean origin; children with language difficulties/differences; and children living in poverty (Boyle and Topping, 2012; Smith, 2012). For example, research undertaken by Hamilton (2013) shows the complexity of identifying special educational needs among migrant worker children new to the UK as factors associated with diversity of culture, language, educational systems, gender and social class fuse together complicating the context and possible diagnosis.

Finally, although comprehensive theoretical conclusions are presented, I am not sure how effectively these will be translated into practice. Norwich (2013:2) proposes that the theoretical conclusions he provides will 'frame how practical issues are approached and decisions made'. However, due to the complexity of the dilemmas considered and lack of clear-cut or final solutions, there is a risk that his theoretical guidance will remain 'in text' rather than used to critically explore excessive differences, tensions and dilemmas *in* practice. Concise recommendations, relevant to practice, could have been offered at the end of each chapter, making it more likely that Norwich's valuable contributions find their way into educational settings.

These minor gripes aside, this is a well researched and comprehensive text. It contains powerful and critically reflective messages, offering readers new ways of forward thinking. This book will be essential reading for post-graduate SEN/disability specialists – a text not to be missed – however, I am sceptical as to how widely accessible it will be to undergraduate students and school practitioners.

To conclude, as theoretical ambiguities habitually frame policies and practices associated with general and inclusive education, it is vital to adopt Norwich's style of thinking; the rejection of over-simplified explanations, the deconstruction of polarised concepts, the critical exploration of tensions and dilemmas of difference. Not only can such thinking lead to a better appreciation of one's own political and professional stance, it can result in educators moving beyond simply responding to government policies and initiatives to a more informed and powerful position that can take forward the movement of effective inclusive education.

### References

- Armstrong, F. and Richards, G. (2011), Introduction, in Richards, G. and Armstrong, A. (eds), *Teaching and Learning in Diverse and Inclusive Classrooms*, pp.1-6. Oxon: Routledge.
- Boyle, C. and Topping, K. (2012), *What Works in Inclusion?* Berkshire: Open University Press.
- Hamilton, P. (2013), 'Including migrant worker children in the learning and social context of the rural primary school', *Education 3-12*, Vol. 41, No. 2, pp. 202-217.
- Nutbrown, C. and Clough, P. (2013), *Inclusion in the Early Years*. Second edition. London: Sage.
- Smith, E. (2012), *Key Issues in Education and Social Justice*. London: Sage
- Westwood, P. (2013), *Inclusive and Adaptive Teaching: Meeting the challenge of diversity in the classroom*. Oxon: Routledge.

*Address Correspondences to:*

Dr. Paula Hamilton, Glyndŵr University  
Wrexham, UK  
p.hamilton@glyndwr.ac.uk