
Reviewed by Dr Jackie Ravet, University of Aberdeen

There has been a veritable explosion of autism publications over the past decade. Nonetheless, this book on social inclusion for students with autism spectrum disorders, edited by Cathy Little, is a welcome addition. What makes it distinctive is its singular focus on the social difficulties associated with autism, and its emphasis on what we can do to address them. This focus is immensely valuable given the ubiquity of the social challenges faced by children, young people and adults on the autism spectrum, and the practice dilemmas faced by practitioners in educational settings trying to support them. Indeed, support provision for social inclusion in education, and across other services, is still far from adequate. This book therefore gives fitting emphasis to an issue that continues to demand attention and which often gets lost in the plethora of generic texts currently on the market.

The book is organised into three parts. Part 1 is an introductory section with a generic focus. In this section, Cathy Little takes on the thorny issue of the definition of social inclusion in education and the complexities it raises. The need for explicit facilitation and targeted social skills instruction to ensure ‘active demonstration’ of social inclusion is emphasised – the message being that social inclusion does not just happen by virtue of learning alongside others. In subsequent chapters this theme is developed with an analysis of some of the evidence-based interventions that can be used to support social inclusion, such as social skills clubs, social priming and peer-mediated interventions. Social vulnerability and bullying are also explored, with penetrating analysis of why it arises and its devastating impact. Good practice guidance on how to reduce and eliminate bullying and victimisation in students with autism is a valuable feature of this discussion. Powerful case studies provide insights into the lived experience of social isolation and the toll that bullying and marginalisation takes on people with autism.

Part 2 takes a more detailed look at social inclusion across the three stages of education and into the post-school period. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 aim to cast light on the key issues associated with autism and social inclusion in the pre-school, primary and secondary stages; a critical focus given that around 73% of children diagnosed with the condition are now included in mainstream schools in the UK. Each chapter provides a critique of the expectations, demands and opportunities for social development that are particular to each stage, and the specific challenges this poses for children and young people with autism. These challenges are related to differences in sensory processing, executive
functioning, emotion regulation and difficulties with social communication and understanding associated with a diagnosis.

Social rejection, exclusion and the experience of bullying are re-visited in this section. Loneliness and anxiety amongst children with autism are widely reported in the research, though it is emphasised in the book that experiences vary depending on a wide range of personal, diagnostic and environmental factors. So, the reader is rightly cautioned to avoid simplistic generalisations. It is also made clear that a range of interventions have been developed to support social inclusion in school – especially peer-mediated interventions and those with an emphasis on adapting attitudes, ethos and the social and learning environment of the classroom, rather than ‘fixing’ the child. As Bartoli emphasises, these interventions ‘bring potential for positive change’ (p 81) and signal that much can be done by teachers and other stakeholders to influence social inclusion and general quality of life at school for individuals with autism.

Chapter 8 deals with the adult post-school phase very much neglected by autism researchers. Here, the interaction between the manifestations of autism and socio-cultural barriers are critically examined to explore their impact on social functioning and social inclusion. Social capital, or more precisely, the lack of it amongst many adults with autism, and its implications for quality of life, are key themes. This chapter considers in some detail how widespread social exclusion amongst adults is being addressed in an Australian context. Though this context is not fully transferrable to the UK, the two have enough in common to ensure that lessons can be learnt from the Australian model presented.

Stakeholders are the central focus of Part 3 of the book. This section provides an analysis of the role of teachers, peers, families and the wider cultural context in influencing social inclusion, and critically explores the complex theoretical and practice issues associated with the stakeholder role. Perceptions of, and attitudes towards, individuals with autism clearly lie at the heart of the matter and are an important focus for discussion. However, the study reported in chapter 9 indicates that despite positive attitudes, teachers still tend not to actively plan for the social participation of their students with autism. This is linked to a lack of knowledge and understanding of the approaches and interventions that might support such participation. Professional development in autism is therefore strongly implicated to ensure the structuring and facilitation of social inclusion.

Research presented in chapter 10 suggests that peer-mediated approaches can be very successful in facilitating inclusion. Several approaches are evaluated which have been proven to enhance social networks around children and young people with autism, bringing improvements in social skills and increased social interaction and friendships. However, there is a salutary warning that these outcomes may come at a cost in the form of peer burnout unless schools provide sensitive monitoring and support. In chapter 11, the pivotal role of families is added to the emerging picture. Research is presented indicating that positive practices, characterised by a focus on fostering self-determination, self-advocacy and the social skills development of young children with autism result in a much more positive experience of social inclusion further down the line. Strong home-school links are also correlated to positive social outcomes.
What comes over strongly in section 3 is the fact that no single stakeholder can bear the burden of responsibility for facilitating social inclusion; it can only be achieved through a collaborative effort involving teachers, peers and families alongside self-determining individuals with autism. However, chapter 12 reminds us that the influence of wider culture is always at play and has a powerful, though subtle, role as a transmitter of attitudes, values, beliefs and practices in relation to disability that shape our perspectives, whether we realise it or not. The examples from Thai culture and Buddhism included in this chapter capture the complex layers of influence that impinge on the social experiences of individuals with autism, and that must be taken into account in any analysis of autism and social inclusion. In the final chapter, Stephen Shore, an academic with autism, provides a personal reflection upon his experiences of social inclusion that complements the central arguments of the book. His thoughts on the range of modifications that might enhance provision for social inclusion reinforce key messages – especially the emphasis on peers, positive ethos and the importance of environmental adaptation.

Overall, Cathy Little has pulled together an impressive team of authors to critically explore an important, highly complex, multidimensional issue of central concern to autism policy, research and practice. What I especially appreciated is that the chapters are concise, well focused and not too long! Key theoretical issues are highlighted and linked to current research and good practice principles, ensuring a scholarly but accessible tone. There is also a commitment across the book to a socio-ecological, rather than a medical model of autism which focuses on environmental rather than individual transformation and change. Thus, a deficit model of disability is avoided.

The inclusion of case studies by people with autism in several chapters is also a powerful and defining feature of the book. These case studies, though short, are used very effectively to illuminate key themes and to bring theory to life. They also give voice to a group that is still widely silenced and help to mitigate an imbalance in comparable books towards the ‘medical’, the ‘theoretical’ and the ‘expert’ that has dominated until relatively recently. The book therefore addresses several gaps and weaknesses in the current literature. The result is impressive and comes highly recommended. The autism community, families, practitioners and researchers should welcome it.

QUESTIONING LEADERSHIP: NEW DIRECTIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

Reviewed by Ms Laura Wilson, University of West of Scotland.

Whether or not you are an educational leader, manager, academic or researcher in the field of education, this book will have you reflecting on your own practice and that of others. It questions what leadership is, if it is necessary, how it evolved, what it may look like in the future. The book certainly takes up the
challenge of conceptualising leadership in a new way! Throughout this text there is significant mention of how and why educational leadership (as a field of practice and inquiry) has changed and grown throughout the 20th and 21st Century.

The preface states that there has not been another book of its kind since 2005, and this is quite positively true. It is a refreshing read for educators around the world. Early on, leadership is referred to as the ‘L word’ and quite rightly so. Its global outlook is welcomed as are case studies presented and the perspectives offered through the lens of modern French social theory. The book comprises three major parts, each containing four chapters plus an additional piece of writing that promises to offer a critical commentary. The order progresses from foundational issues in leadership theory, epistemological and ontological issues in leadership to future directions of leading and learning.

Part I of this publication provides an insightful look at the Foundational issues in leadership theory. Relational leadership is posited by Eacott, his argument based on the belief that leadership is not an external knowable entity but the product of cognition- a social construct. The reader is encouraged to challenge his argument, in the interest of scholarly enterprise. This theme is common throughout Part I as Brooks raises such questions as a major theme in his chapter. Indeed he suggests that perhaps everything we know about educational leadership is wrong? Thankfully, the overarching answer is ‘no’. Refreshingly he suggests that there is a desperate need for research that ‘deeply explores the relationships between leadership and learning’ (p.41). Sound advice from Brooks who recommends that research in this area would be more beneficial if designed and conducted to and from school and society. Furthermore, if more people (in this case, educationalists it can be presumed), actively question and reflect on their own work and that of others critically, an understanding of best practice can be achieved. As Part 1 draws to a close, English and Ehrich provide a chapter that explores the perspective of leadership as individualistic. Their notion of a leader is three fold, and it certainly does not endorse the need for ‘heroic leadership’. They are forthright is suggesting that it will be some time before formal leadership ‘disappears from the cultural landscape’. The chapter concludes by stating that the leadership issue is interpretative and subjective. Their argument (and that of Lakomski) is that organisations can run without leaders, ‘at least for a time’ (p.54). The commentary for Part I provides an overview of leadership styles. It highlights that differences between leadership, management and administration are not easily observable in the practices of school principals. For principals reading this book, I wonder to what extent they would agree?

Part II, Postmodernist perspectives on leadership is not for the faint hearted. To define the term postmodernist in this context is a challenge, yet it is successfully achieved to some extent in this section of the book. Each chapter seeks to define the concept of leadership, some more convincingly than others. The examples range from Nieshe’s use of metaphors in Chapter 5 (relating zombies to educational leadership), to significant reference to Foucauldian terms and theory and an empirically grounded case study.

Part III, Select issues in leadership theory and practice, provides an assortment of views about leadership fundamentals and how best to solve the
leadership-related problems that exist in all levels of Twenty-First Century educational institutions. Of course, this is no straightforward task and this section may seem contradictory at times to some readers. Yet, throughout Part III, authors are consistent in their idea that definitions of leadership are contentious and unagreeable. Youngs, in Chapter 9, seeks to reposition distributed/shared leadership. He does so by applying Bourdieu’s ideas of fields and capital and sharing empirical data. Riveros et al continue with the idea of leadership repositioning in Chapter 10, focusing on leadership standards, albeit their belittling of such. Chapter 11 provides an insight to how principal leadership can be inclusive of others in schools and use the International Successful School Principal Project (ISSPP) in order to do so. Sharing their conceptual map, based on ISSPP findings, Drysdale and Gurr provide opportunities for future research to develop. The commentary in this section raises many questions and at times is rather frank.

Overall, this text raises issues about how we think about, study and practice educational leadership. The book addresses major issues for leadership in education and attempts to offer diverse perspectives by emerging and established scholars. This publication would be useful for aspiring and current educational leaders as it questions the norm and provides a theoretical underpinning. Often the authors suggest that head teachers, principals and senior staff need an improved appreciation and understanding of theory to enhance their practice in educational management and leadership. Perhaps by reading this text they might just do so.

DIGNITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION: EXPLORING ULTIMATE WORTH IN A POST-SECULAR WORK,

Reviewed by Dr Yonah Matemba, University of West of Scotland

Robert Bowie’s book is a welcome addition (Volume 11) to Peter Lang Publishers fascinating new series under the title Religions, Education and Values. The book draws on a range of secondary sources to provide a critical understanding of the uses and applications of dignity (human worthiness) - a well-known but seldom explained issue in the discourse - within human rights in a post-secular (Western) socio-cultural milieu. Notably, it recognises the “irreconcilability of visions” in the human rights discourse, and its implication for Human Rights Education (HRE) between on one hand human rights as part of “a secularizing vision of the modern West” and on other as a “deviation from God’s law” (p. 1). What the book proposes should be done to deal with this tension (and potential crisis) is worth discussing but first let me highlight other key aspects about this book.

Dignity and Human Rights Education is voluminous book (304 pp) comprising 10 chapters that are divided into three parts. Part I (Chapters 1-4) examines HRE, religion, the English curriculum, dignity and the post-secular setting in which these issues are understood and debated. Part II (Chapters 5-7) provides the conceptual framework that underpins how dignity within a human rights discourse
is theorised based on insights from Cicero (in antiquity), Christianity (Christo-centric framework) and Kant (the Enlightenment period). Part III (Chapters 8-10) discusses three key issues. First, it analyses HRE literature and explicates the different ways the discourse, if at all, touches on dignity. Secondly, it interrogates the important question of whether the post-secular understanding of dignity within human rights literature can benefit from meta-narratives based on multiple sources (i.e. inclusive rather than exclusive approaches) of information be it philosophical, religions and others. Finally, it proposes a re-contextualisation of HRE taking cognisance of the “inherent worth of the human person though (sic) self-reflective and dialogic undertakings … [as] part of the enquiry into what it is to live a flourishing life” (p. 173).

Through a critical examination of the relevant sources, for example, United Nations (UN) documents and educational materials in the English curriculum, the book reveals a “reluctance to make connections with the experience of life” (p. 253) in the discussion of human rights, with the consequence of which “secular formation of HRE is emphasized and religious links are not acknowledged” (p. 13). The book takes issue with the secular characterisation of HRE—for example, only seeing religion in negative terms as a source of problems—and argues for need to recast educational research in ways that allow (multi) religious insights to contribute towards a nuanced conceptualisation of dignity within a human rights post-secular framework.

As an educator I find Chapter 3 particularly insightful because it illuminates how human rights are reflected (or not) in English curriculum, particularly after 2010 when the “emphasis shifted from international human rights to fundamental British values” (p. 100), related to the removal of human rights from the aims of the curriculum. And yet as the book keenly observes, despite the political tension this caused resulting in the tweaking of the national policy to align it with initiatives such as UNICEF’s Rights Respective Schools, universal human rights continue to have a diminished role in the English curriculum as the cases of Religious Education (RE) and Citizenship Education (CE) here illustrate. The book explains that while evidently CE is committed to human rights the “treatment it gives is principally in terms of legal structures and issues of justice” and for its part although RE makes reference to human rights and acknowledges the links it makes with religious narratives, the Agreed Syllabuses different schools follow have “widely differing approaches to the inclusion of human rights and different attitudes towards it” (p. 100).

Returning to the crisis of visions referred to earlier related to the conflicting conceptions of human rights, the book makes an important contribution to the discourse by highlighting the need to “embrace a pluralistic approach that includes a range of different approaches to human rights rather, rather than an exclusive one which articulates or advocates a single philosophy of human rights” (p. 101). Given that the post-secular environment does not privilege one view over another, per se and at a time when religion has merely been transformed rather than removed (by secularisation) from public life, there is need to conceptualise human rights using multiple narratives (i.e. secular, educational, multi-religious and philosophical). To find a consensus (unity of purpose) from the different viewpoints (i.e. plurality of voices) the book proposes the concept of
dignity as the singular moral value of utmost importance underpinning post-secular conceptions of human rights. Put simply, dignity is seen as the placeholder that provides a point of agreement and “an invitation to people from different backgrounds to come together and discuss the ultimate worth of the human person in their traditions and their situation” (p. 127).

Although the book acknowledges that for a subject such as dignity “there are probably countless possible sources that could be explored” (p. 3), qualitative insights from teachers, policymakers and students could have provided an additional layer of understanding either to collaborate or challenge the documentary evidence, especially related to the discussion around HRE in the English curriculum. A related point is that while the conceptual theorisation is strong, the book gives scant attention to methodological issues related to the research methodology used, analytical process, and selection (and rationale) of emergent themes. However, these methodological limitations do not in any way diminish the importance of this book in articulating so convincingly the need to place dignity at the heart of human rights towards a holistic understanding of HRE from multiple perspectives in tune with a post-secular lebenswelt (lifeworld). I am sure that classroom practitioners, academics, policy-makers and non-governmental UN agencies such as UNESCO, UNICEF and UNHCR will be challenged, as I have been, on the necessity of dignity as an important feature in HRE discourse, national policy and school practice.