

Book Review / Recension d'ouvrage

Porter, Gordon, Deidre Smith (Eds.). (2011). *Exploring Inclusive Educational Practices Through Professional Inquiry*. The Netherlands: Sense Publishers. 279 pages, ISBN 978-94-6091-556-7 (paperback), 978-94-6091-557-4 (hardback).

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Overview of the Book

Exploring Inclusive Educational Practices provides an excellent framework for the important work of sustained reflection and implementation of inclusive education.

Porter and Smith refer to inclusion, defined as all students, including those with disabilities and other special needs, are educated in regular classrooms with their peers in their community schools (p. 18/19), as being a pillar of education. They expertly weave 25 diverse case studies into a five pillared (to extend their metaphor) framework describing inclusive education. Pillar one asks readers to reflect on their commitment to inclusion - do we “walk the talk” of our values? Pillar two moves into practice - what does inclusion look like at the school level? What professional knowledge and practices are required to ensure that inclusion happens? Pillar three broadens to consider the entire school framework. What are the whole school level plans and practices required to make inclusion work? Pillar four aptly addresses the variety of typical challenges and barriers to making inclusive schools a reality. Pillar five addresses the role of parents, clearly respecting the critical role of parents at the heart of inclusive education. (p. 173)

Providing an understanding of multiple perspectives.

One of the major strengths of this book is its ability to raise the profile of the multiple perspectives of the variety of “players” who are required to make inclusive education work. Two vehicles provide these perspectives. First, the book provides case studies from the perspective of students, families, teachers, resource teachers and school principals, covering elementary and high school situations. These case studies provide excellent snap-shots of the lives of real people. The second vehicle to understanding perspectives comes from the various commentaries on each case situation. Commentators include the same roles as case study authors, but with more diversity. They are an international group: members of faculties of education, both professors and administrators; graduate students; leaders of community organizations; professional development consultants; and members of government ministries of education. The commentaries help the reader to develop new insights, understandings and questions. I often found myself wanting more details about the lives of the people involved in the cases, in order to reflect more

deeply on strategies to “resolve” these challenging situations. Alas, books have limited numbers of pages.

Raising the Bar

The call to *Raise the Bar* (p.25) of expectations for educators, families and communities is excellent. More links to peer-reviewed research, regarding specific strategies, would help readers who wished to pursue their inevitable question of “what do I do in my classroom/home tomorrow? Where can I begin? Some excellent strategies are shared, such as MAPs, but this area of the book could be expanded, perhaps with a reference list. It would also be helpful to emphasize more that the majority of the strategies designed initially to help people who have disabilities, such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), enhance learning for ALL students.

Canada Today

As is discussed, there is frequently a great deal of tension around inclusion. I appreciate the fact that this book raises all the challenges and supports readers to deal with them head on. Many people are working on all of the issues related to inclusion, but are frustrated that our current best known knowledge in each area is difficult to disseminate to others in a way that will enable action. Furthermore, our world is flooded with content. We need more explicit ways to access and process all this inert information: ways for us to work with it, reflect upon it, synthesize it and move forward to rise above it and create new knowledge.

Professional Inquiry within a Knowledge Building Framework

This book’s laudable purpose is to support Professional Inquiry. The authors suggest that readers reflect upon the questions it raises surrounding leadership practices; teaching practices; instructional practices; school culture, professional judgment, assumptions and beliefs and ethical practice (p, 151-2), advocacy (p. 166.). All of these questions are crucial and apply to every situation. They are inter-related. Perhaps one reason people are challenged by inclusion is facing the complexity. It might be helpful if we drew upon the work of other Canadians, Scardamalia and Bereiter to frame Porter and Smith’s Inclusion Professional Inquiry with another level of discourse. If participants in a Professional Inquiry were able to categorize their reflections within a knowledge building framework it would create an environment where people could value their starting points, but expect one another to continually progress. For example, can we look at everything we do in education as an “improvable idea”, to use Scardamalia’s (M. Scardamalia, Bereiter, C. , 2010) knowledge building terms? Can we deal with the unresolved issues and the emotional pain of most of the case study figures, as their authentic questions; can we value every participant, hence democratizing knowledge and can we all focus on improving our community knowledge? (M. Scardamalia, Bransford, Kozma, & Quellmalz, 2009)

It is critical for our society that we continually improve our communal skills at providing the best possible education for ALL students. I strongly recommend reading this book and starting a sustained Professional Inquiry.

References

- Scardamalia, M., Bereiter, C. . (2010). A Brief History of Knowledge Building. *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology*, 36((1)), 2-16.
- Scardamalia, M., Bransford, J., Kozma, B., & Quellmalz, E. (2009). "Classroom Learning Environments and Formative Evaluation" Working Group. Unpublished White Paper. University of Toronto.