

Being well in an unwell world

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There's more than a little prescience in the opening pages of Manuel Castells' 2019 book, *Rupture: The Crisis of Liberal Democracy*. Let's turn to Castells' himself, and it is important to acknowledge that he is writing this before pandemic – before the onslaught of COVID-19. For the record, on April 26th, 2023 the World Health Organisation reported 764,474,387 cumulative cases of COVID-19 globally and 6,915,286 deaths (WHO, 2023a) on its COVID-19 Dashboard. WHO itself suggests that this data understates the impact of COVID (WHO, 2023b). Back to Castells -

There are malignant winds blowing on this blue planet. Our lives are reeling in the maelstrom of multiple crises. An economic crisis that persists through labour insecurity and low wages. A fanatical terrorism that fractures human existence, feeds day-to-day fear and fuels restrictions on liberty in the name of security. A seemingly inexorable march towards our only home, Earth, becoming uninhabitable. The permanent threat of resorting to wars as a way of dealing with conflicts. Rampant violence against women who dare to be themselves. A whole galaxy of communications dominated by lies, now known as post-truth. A transparent society in which we have all been turned into data. And a culture reduced to entertainment, built on stimulating our basest instincts and the commercialisation of our demons.

(Castells, 2019:3)

A self-proclaimed analyst of crises, Castells then suggests that there is an even deeper crisis "... which has devastating consequences on the (in)capability of dealing with the multiple crises that poison our lives". This more profound crisis is "... the rupture of the relationship between those who govern and the governed" (Castells, 2019:3). Testing this claim is not difficult. You will remember Donald Trump's call of: "You have to show strength. ... Be there, be wild!" which mobilised an angry mob, including the orange-hatted far-right Proud Boys, to descend on Capitol Hill in Washington D.C. on January 6, 2021, with malicious intent (Barry & Frenkel, 2021). The world watched aghast as the terror unfolded. What could be more emblematic of Castells' observation?

*Continuing this somewhat distressing introduction and with your permission, I'll return to my opening pages for a string of essays collected in *Inclusive Education Isn't Dead, It Just Smells Funny*:*

Political landscapes change and with it so too the lexicons of public debate. Hate is no longer whispered; its pitch is loud and shrill. For as Toni Morrison (2017) who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993 tells us with elegant force:

“Why should we want to know the stranger when it is easier to estrange another? Why should we want to close the distance when we can close the gate?”

*The Trump presidency, undersigned by fear and loathing, is building a social imaginary of national fortification, banishment of the immigrant, and derision of the basic principles of fairness. In true Hegelian form, Zizek (2016) reminds us that these disparities reflect the presence of the negative deep within the weave of those things we offer as fundamental positives. It's not a case of good co-existing with evil, but more a case of evil lurking deep within good. That which it commissions preys on the essence of democracy: freedom of speech, movement, and association. Classic expressions of democracy condemn us to “defend to the death” the right of expression of those who would tear democracy and freedom apart. When our foundational beliefs are threatened, we must not capitulate. We must redouble our efforts to restore that which we believe in.
(Slee, 2018a:1)*

Castells' prophetic observations are sadly underlined and amplified by:

- The regularity of devastating climatic events.
- The Russian invasion of Ukraine.
- Devastating events in the Middle East.
- The escalation of warfare in Sudan as Lt. Generals Abdul Fattah Al-Burhan and Lt. General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo allow their personal animosity to engulf the nation in yet another unnecessary war that has sent hundreds of thousands of people into exile.
- Escalating hostility towards those seeking asylum.
- The growing gap between poverty and privilege both between and within nations.
- The quiet discrimination against and exclusion of vulnerable population cohorts locally and globally.
- The continuing fracture of politics and rise of populism.

Before the 2020 pandemic and his untimely death, Ulrich Beck's book *Metamorphosis of the World* declared his belief that the world was unhinged – meaning the world was broken and it had gone mad (Beck, 2016). It is not a well world.

This address is offered as a provocation – what can we do about the state of the world as social scientists? Marx's (1969) critique of Ludwig Feuerbach which was originally published as an appendix to *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* in 1888 comprises eleven theses. Thesis Eleven has become one of the most familiar and enduring quotes from Marx:

The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.

In his work on the end of capitalism Streeck (2016), rises to a challenge issued by Burawoy (2005; see also 2021) in his Presidential Address to the American Sociology Association; namely the challenge to explore the public mission of sociology. Streeck (2016: 237) was fascinated “... with the contrast between the progressive decay of politics and economy in the United States and the star-studded social sciences departments from Harvard to Stanford”. “What was all this brilliance good for?” he asks.

He calls for sociology to ready itself “for the moment in which the foundations of modern society will again have to be rethought” (p. 250). I am convinced that moment is upon us.

In the remainder of this address, I will consider the state of what is referred to as inclusive education with specific reference to disabled students. My use of the reference: disabled students is deliberate and not in keeping with the people first preference for “students with disabilities”. My intention, in keeping with the British Disabled People’s Movement is to reaffirm disablement as a social construct; a consequence of a world unable to meet the demands of justice and difference.

Let me suggest that as the discourses of identity, diversity and inclusion have become more emphatic in education policy, the reality is that as Zygmunt Bauman suggests we are increasingly mixophobic (Bauman, 2004). We have passed that moment in education where business as usual is acceptable (Slee, 2019). Ironically, I will draw on lessons from pandemic to suggest how we might establish transdisciplinary-based intellectual activism. In a recent essay, John Gray (Kaplan, Gray & Thompson, 2023:24) writes:

Human beings confront tragedy when they know that whatever they do may not be enough to avert disaster. In such circumstances a measure of fatalism is reasonable, though it need not entail passivity.

This address is my steadfast reminder to myself to build resistance to the gravitational pull of collective fatalism.

As inclusion recedes

As a resident of England, I was distressed by the publication in March of this year of The Special Education and Disabilities (SEND) and Alternative Provision Plan (DfE, 2023a) which was presented to the parliament in Westminster by the Secretaries of State for Education, and Health and Social Care: Gillian Keegan and Steve Barclay. An accompanying press release was posted on March 2 2023, by Claire Coutinho the Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing announcing The Plan and the establishment of the National SEND and Alternative Provision Implementation Board. Why is this cause for distress? Let’s turn to the announcement itself in a press release with the banner proclaiming: “Transformational reform begins for children and young people with SEND: Plan for better, fairer access to high quality special educational needs and disabilities support”.

The SEND and AP improvement plan published today (Thursday 2 March) confirms investment in training for thousands of workers so children can get the help they need earlier, alongside thousands of additional specialist school places for those with the greatest needs – as 33 new special free schools are approved to be built as of today.

(DfE, 2023b: my emphasis)

Further into the press release, we receive more detail:

The local authorities selected today to have 33 new special free schools built in their areas add to the 49 already in the pipeline. These new places come with the government’s £2.6 billion investment between 2022 and 2025 to increase special school and alternative provision capacity.

(DfE, 2023b)

Let me quickly register some observations on the United Kingdom’s response to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) and its application through The Special Education and Disabilities (SEND) and Alternative Provision Plan (DfE, 2023a).

First, the less than United Kingdom, comprising four education jurisdictions with divergent approaches to the education of students with disabilities, constitutes a single signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In April 2009 the Houses of Lords and Commons' Joint Committee on Human Rights tabled, United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Reservations and Interpretative Declaration, the twelfth report of the parliamentary session of 2008 – 09 (House of Commons, 2009). For the United Kingdom government it declared, the general education system refers to both mainstream and special schools and the project of inclusive education is best served by the existence of both.

... the Government feels it necessary to enter a reservation and an interpretative declaration to make clear its understanding that a commitment to inclusive education is not incompatible with the continued existence of special schools.

(House of Commons, 2009: 17)

Accordingly, the reservation and the interpretative declaration are set out as follows:

The UK reserves the right for disabled children to be educated outside their local community where more appropriate educational provision is available elsewhere.

Nevertheless, parents of disabled children have the same opportunity as other parents to state a preference for the school at which they wish their child to be educated.

The interpretative declaration includes an express commitment to inclusive education, but expresses the Government's view that any general education system may include both special and mainstream schools:

The United Kingdom Government is committed to continuing to develop an inclusive system where parents of disabled children have increasing access to mainstream schools and staff, and which have the capacity to meet the needs of disabled children. The General Educational System in the UK includes mainstream and special schools, which the UK Government understands is allowed under the Convention.

(House of Commons, 2009: 14)

The United Kingdom has demonstrated fidelity to its intention regarding Article 24, espousing a commitment to inclusive education while supporting the status quo – maintaining a bifurcated system of regular schools and investing more extensively in separate special education. This is an investment in sustaining a divided world.

In this respect, England is not Robinson Crusoe. Other jurisdictions are also fluent in a special educational doublespeak deployed to deflect from the failure to embrace the more authentic reforms required for transforming schooling. The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities issued General Comment No. 4 (2016) on the right to inclusive education (United Nations, 2016:11) clarified the principles of Article 24 and the responsibilities of signatory nations interested in authenticity in their pronouncements, policies, and practices.

Progressive realization means that States parties have a specific and continuing obligation to move as expeditiously and effectively as possible towards the full realization of Article 24. This is not compatible with sustaining two systems of education: a mainstream education system and a special/segregated education system. Progressive realization must be read in conjunction with the overall objective of the Convention to establish clear obligations

for States parties in respect of the full realization of the rights in question. Similarly, States parties are encouraged to redefine budgetary allocations for education, including by transferring part of their budgets to the development of inclusive education.

My critics in special education (e.g., Hornby & Kauffman, 2023) will interpret this as my continuing demonisation of special schooling and promotion of regular schooling. This charge is reductive and risible. The mutuality of the two strands reflects the design flaws of both. I am not supporting the elimination of special education in favour of unchanging regular education provision. Consistent with my earlier pronouncements (Slee, 2011) and the guidance of CRPD's General Comment 4 on Article 24 Education, inclusive education calls for systemic examination and overhaul to achieve excellent and inclusive education for all children (Slee, 2018b).

And back home in Australia?

Australia is a signatory to UNCRPD Article 24 on Education and has its own Disability Discrimination Act (1992) which makes illegal discrimination in education based on disability. Predictably, there are caveats to protect against undue institutional hardship. All 6 state and the 2 territory education jurisdictions in Australia declare themselves to be providers of inclusive education. All have bifurcated provision, and all have seen growth in the number of special schools. Two recent developments are worth noting.

First, on March 10 2015, a primary school principal in Canberra in the Australian Capital Territory contracted a pool-fence maker to construct a cage that was placed in a storeroom that abutted a classroom for the purpose of restraining a young boy with autism. The 2 metres by 2 metres cage was paradoxically called The Sanctuary. The discovery of the cage by The Canberra Times led to an inquiry and review of "the complex needs of children and challenging behaviour" led by Professor Tony Shaddock (Shaddock, Packer & Roy, 2016). It also led to revelations of problematic restraint provisions across other jurisdictions (Slee & Tait, 2022:14).

Second, an Australia-wide Royal Commission into Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability was convened in April 2019 (Royal Commission into Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, 2019). A public hearing was held in November of that year for four days in the northern Queensland city of Townsville to gather evidence concerning:

1. Inclusiveness in education as it relates to students with disability; and
2. The implementation of existing policies and procedures relating to inclusive education of students with disability, with focus on the Queensland government education system. (Royal Commission into Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, 2020: 5)

The expert witness evidence to the Royal Commissioners has been published in an Interim Report from the public hearing (Royal Commission into Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, 2020) detailing nine areas of complaint:

- Gate-keeping – schools illegally screening out students with disabilities.
- Higher levels of disciplinary absences & adjusted attendance.
- Mistreatment by teachers & other students.
- Restrictive practices such as seclusion and containment.
- Lack of reasonable adjustments as required by law.
- Low expectations for students with disabilities.

- Poor complaint handling.
- Funding gaps.
- Inadequate professional training.

Resilience & resistance?

What are our options as social scientists – as social activists? Perhaps we are better placed to move forward after pandemic than before it. Let us consider the following propositions:

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that fundamental change to time-honoured social organisation and practices is not only possible, it is also essential to our survival.

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted the discovery that connection and engagement are essential for good mental health and wellbeing.

Stephen Ball and Jordi Collet-Sabe (2021) courageously return to first principles, recognising school as an “intolerable institution” requiring more than cosmetic adjustment:

One consequence of the failure to open up substantive questions, for researchers and social and political movements seeking to reform or improve the school, is submission to a constant cycle of hope and despair, of progress and defeat, of challenge and incorporation.

(Ball & Collet-Sabe, 2021:3)

Ball and Collet-Sabe (2021) commence with “Rogan’s point (is) that the critique of capitalism in the twentieth century shifted away from a fundamental demolition of its ‘moral and spiritual desolation’ to a single-minded focus on the calculation of the relative advantages and disadvantages it generates – a shift from ‘Is it morally wrong?’ to ‘Does it have bad outcomes?’ – Who wins and who loses?”, to argue for a return to an examination of the epistemic foundations of schooling to counter the “similar displacement or avoidance of moral argumentation by calculative evaluation”.

This is the character and depth of intellectual resistance that I am calling for as a basis for activism capable of achieving wellbeing in an unwell world. The arrangement of knowledge served by traditional disciplinary divisions delivers dysfunction.

The Australian musician and writer, Nick Cave, poignantly tells us: The history of education policy over the last 40 years suggests that the resilience of ableism in education is oxygenated by evolving forms of special and regular education that seek greater surveillance, calibration, and regulation of student differences. It is hard for parents to be optimistic when daily their hearts are broken by the exclusion of their children. Talking about wellbeing is empty when we fail to confront ableism in education, allowing it to lurk in the shadows of special educational needs discourse. Generating hope depends in large measure on demonstrating a will to think and do otherwise.

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