Reflections on the Social Model of Disability, and Ableism

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Having lived nineteen years as the mother of a special needs child—(and yes, this is my language choice; disabled still sounds so finite), and forty-five years as the daughter of a disabled mother (her terminology, although never used with any sense of defeat), I'm fascinated to discover these carefully separated spheres of the Social Model of Disability and the Medical or Individual Model (Shakespeare, 2017, p. 196). Like bubbles drifting from the wand though, have you ever noticed how they cling to each other? How sometimes one orb has to cleave itself to join another? This is a picture of how disability appears to me.

Numerous times I've been inwardly and outwardly thankful to be living in this time period, beyond a time when disability was seen as divine punishment (Shakespeare, 2017, p. 195), and far from a place where disability means you are disposed of (http://drawnfromwaterthemovie.com/). So thankful am I for the recognition of a biological deficit (Shakespeare, 2017) and the scientific advances that resulted from that (and plastic! To make feeding and breathing tubes!).

"The social model demonstrates that the problems disabled people face are the result of social oppression and exclusion, not their individual deficits" (Shakespeare, 2017, p. 196). I would like to see this demonstration. While this article certainly opened my eyes to the many other ways the lives of the disabled are made even more difficult, attributing "the problems" (all the problems being implied) to social oppression and exclusion seems a very wide brush at work, painting all with the same colour. Were the problems evident at birth? (if the disability is genetic or was obtained at birth). For instance, my son could not breathe within minutes of birth. A problem. Did this stem from oppression? Only if oxygen was the oppressor. This is where Shakespeare's later assertion, that disability is rife with complex interplay between individual and environmental factors (p. 202), begins to calm the waters stirred by that previous stance.

Then again, could it be true?

Could we even consider the impairment from another perspective, through another lens? Since "normal is the line drawn around an arbitrary set of ideas a group determines is acceptable", (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 85), let us try. My son has the expressive verbal abilities of a 22-month old. A disability. A disability? Can we create a world where this is not a problem, not a deficit, not a shame to be pitied? Verbal communication is a pillar of mammoth proportions across ours and every other land, although some communities have embraced the silence, the symbol, or transmission of thought through clicks and whistles. What is our answer? Technology. Is it the glove that fits all? Many, yes. All…no.

I question Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017, p. 88) in their description of the education system as segregating. Perhaps 30 years ago this was the case, but integrated classrooms have been the norm for years now, and if not in a classroom, then at least a class within a school. Whether they fulfill the mandate of the social model of disability is a topic for another endless conversation.

The last point of Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017, p. 86) that I wanted to comment on was the tragic idea that learning flows from the abled to the disabled, and never the reverse. This is the lack of humility the authors also reference later in the article (p. 95). As teachers, we have often unwittingly played this character, the leading role of "all knowing". May we recognize that learning can be delivered through the unlikeliest of packages.

REFERENCES

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