

Harmony of Diverse Voices: A personal narrative from inside a mixed-ability choir

Rita Hoffmann

Abstract:

When the world speaks about inclusion, they hardly ever think of special schools as inclusive educational settings. To give this talk a personal form it is handed over, (read out) as a letter which aims to look beyond the well-established concept of inclusion. It questions the segregating role of special schools, points out the meaning of reasonable mainstreaming, and sees music as means to learn respecting diversity. It is aimed to relate why students with various dis/abilities initiated the birth of a new choir at the School of the Blind in Budapest. It talks about the pillars of an inclusive choir, and describes the atmosphere where students with various dis/abilities can work together. In the letter I underline the significance of shared responsibility, and depict this inclusive choir's work from the angle of a non-musician member. This insider approach aims to broaden the concept of inclusion and reconsider and color the image of people with disabilities.

Dear You All,

My name is Rita Hoffmann, I am a legally blind Hungarian researcher of cultural representations and narratives of disability, including disability life writing. As a Fulbrighter I could spend several months at the University of California, Berkeley first in 2012, then the academic year of 2019/2020 - thanks to two prestigious professors and very good friends, Professor Georgina Kleege and Professor Susan Schweik.

In Berkeley I experienced that personal stories make the States humane and inclusive. Therefore, I would like to share an amazing experience of my life in a letter addressed to all of you.

To tell the truth, I feel privileged to participate in this inspiring conference, and can be part of such a unique community in spite of the fact that I am NOT a musician. But because I love singing, and my colleague and friend, Maria Flamich devotes so much of her time and energy to lead a choir of the blind, I decided to join and see how it works. The only feature we members all share (apart from the love of music, of course) is visual impairment. In fact, we are a mixed-ability choir. Most of us are blind, but some are visually blind, and almost all members are very diverse concerning their dis/abilities. So... I think it is an inclusive choir in a special school. In this "letter" I am telling you how I feel in the choir as a non-musician. In the meantime, I encourage you to join me and look beyond the concept of inclusion, moreover, question and discuss the segregating nature of special schools. And finally, let us think over the role of music in social inclusion

So let us discover together what makes this choir inclusive and what role it plays in our lives.

Interestingly enough, in educational context special schools are hardly ever considered inclusive in Hungary, and the recent pedagogical paradigms, such as mainstreaming and inclusive education tend to consider special schools segregating.

I find this attitude rather questionable, especially in cases when the circumstances are far from being ready for reasonable mainstreaming. You now may ask what I mean by reasonable mainstreaming. I call reasonable mainstreaming, or reasonable inclusion the phenomenon when economic and personal conditions are provided for disabled students, their parents and schools, with special regard to teachers, to educate disabled students in mainstream settings. As far as inclusion in education is concerned, I think we all have our own ideas, thoughts, and even second thoughts of that sensitive topic.

What we can all agree in is that it is a diverse concept. Its opposite is exclusion, or segregation, as educators oftentimes prefer to say. For most of us, the word: segregation carries a stigmatizing connotation. Therefore, people concerned do everything to turn their attention to the earliest possible mainstream education, which they think is the only way to social inclusion, whereas the story I am telling you illustrates that special schools may really be inclusive.

It all started in 2018 when a music teacher, who directed the choir, left the school, and of course, the choir of the blind. The students concerned, however, insisted on singing and because they all knew, Maria is not only an English language teacher, but also an amateur classical singer, they convinced her to re-start the ensemble. Ever since the school of the blind was established it always had a choir which formed a positive image of blind people in

Hungary. As mainstream schools began to take disabled students out of the special schools, now mainly blind students with additional disabilities learn in special educational settings. That is one of the reasons why the number of music lessons, including choir sessions has officially decreased. Special needs teachers tend to give priority to other subjects and tasks. The hunger for singing together, however, has been increasing: blind adults, including teachers from inside and outside school also joined the choir. About a year ago the choir grew to twenty five members, students and teachers sang in the choir, some of us were highly on the spectrum, some of us with a minimum of verbal capacity, and some of us with university degrees. Slowly these voices started to sound in harmony. Students with various dis/abilities learned to open up their own, closed worlds and communicate. Teachers discovered so far hidden treasures of their students. I, as a non-musician outsider, watched amazed by the steps, methods, the ways, and the secrets led to this harmony. What do you think are the secrets?

I believe one secret is knowing students and their dis/abilities. The knowledge of who is good and in what. The other one is the teachers' ability to listen and plan the learning process as well as the repertoire according to the information they gain while listening to students.. And a very important feature is to share responsibility.

Maria gives various tasks to the members, which are carefully tailored to their abilities. The ones who are good at playing the piano, always accompany the warming up, the ones who have AP, give the starting pitch. One person is responsible for one masterpiece. Tasks and responsibility of a successful performance are shared amongst members, so those who are hardly ever listened to can express themselves, find an audience, and get empowered. Step by step, note by note.

I am convinced that whether you are professors, professional or amateur musicians, students or parents, or anyone in the audience, you should experience the harmony of diverse voices. This is what I wish you from the bottom of my heart.

Best regards:
Rita Hoffmann
Budapest, 09/14/2020

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