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Neil Alexander-Passe. (2022). *Invisible Differences, Visible Success*. DIO Press Inc, New York: ISBN: 9781645042358

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I pointed to a building in the courtyard and said, "That's where I stayed". [My parents] were confused until I explained that every time they dropped me at school, I was escorted to the bathroom block, locked in there all day. [My parents] were told that I was a disruptive child, so was locked up every day so the school could cope with me.

- The Michael Vermeersch Interview, pp75-95

Harrowing stories such as the excerpt above pervade Dr Alexander-Passe's latest work, drawing the reader in while bringing the book to life. But it's no mere collection of tragic stories. Indeed, this is a book that challenges the narrative that those who are "different" should be either pitied or admired. In doing so, Alexander-Passe has successfully collapsed the "twice exceptional" binary, and given the reader a far more satisfying three-dimensional view of the reality – and the humanity – of what it means to not quite fit in.

Invisible Differences, Visible Success does something rare in the world of Diversity and Inclusion: it combines scientific method with readability, and research with the voices of the people behind the data. Divided into clear sections, the forewords and introduction lay the groundwork for how we might look upon "invisible differences" and interpret the stories people tell in the research project itself. They open a conversational space for thinking more deeply about how we apply fixed models of ability and disability to multifaceted identities within diverse and changing contexts. They question the idea that a person is either "disabled or not" by questioning the monolithic concepts of both personhood and disability, and raise the tantalising thought of (dis)ability as being non-binary. They challenge the very language of ableism by

compelling us to think about how differences are not to be measured in terms of a distance from an absolute standard, but by complex networks of *Ich und Du, I and thou*.

The research project which underpins the book, consisting of roughly a dozen interviews with people whose lived experiences of autism, dyslexia, ADHD, hearing impairments, mental health issues, chronic pain and fatigue, visual stress, diabetes, and epilepsy often intersect and create new patterns of differentiated experience, is enlightening. It also demands engaged dialogue with the reader: on almost every page, I found myself saying “Yes, I found that too, so how did you overcome it?”, or “They really did that? And you still graduated school?”, or even “I can’t believe that happened to you too!”. In this respect, the book becomes something of a conversation partner more than a static read, and acts as more than simply an opportunity for learning: it invites an active entry into the very discourse of the project.

Each of the interviews takes on a broad structure to allow for meaningful comparisons between case studies, while at the same time allowing room for personalised and important digressions. Indeed, without such room, the book would feel inauthentic – when the discussions centre on individuality, differences, and differentiations, it should be no surprise that the interviews allow for divergence and flexibility themselves. In this respect, the case studies never feel roboticised, always organic. There is never a feeling that the author takes on a diagnostic approach to his subjects, either: the approach is strongly experiential. He lets the subjects speak for themselves, with the result that the characters of those being interviewed shine through – some humble, some less so; some traumatised, some triumphant – shedding important light on the responses. For after all, in a book showing the complexity of our identities, one would hope for those identities to be highlighted. Identity, we are reminded through the very structure of the interviews, is key to understanding difference.

Finally, there is the discussion and conclusion. What we are given is the author's own review of the structure of his interviews, along with his thoughts on what they demonstrated. From a reader's perspective, we can locate some thought-provoking, challenging, and indeed paradigm-changing insights.

No more, we are prompted to realise, should we accept the idea that "disability" fits inelegantly into either the "medical" or the "social" model. These are not appropriate archetypes for the individual, contextual, shifting, organic, complex and interactive nature of the people – the real-life human beings – involved. And while Alexander-Passe argues for Aimee Valeras's "bi-ability" model, where individuals have the ability to travel between ability and disability, control and transform their needs relating to the situatedness of being able and disabled, navigate the pathways connecting ability and disability, live life in the middle of ability and disability, and identify as both able and disabled, the realisation that shines through is that ability and disability are non-binary, and we, the people, *all the people*, are equally non-binary where our ableness is concerned.

This is more than that one might be "a little bit able and a little bit disabled", it's that the paradigm of ability and disability is unfit for purpose. The binary tick-boxes that the author repeatedly asks about on forms, asking "Do you consider yourself disabled?" act as evidence for this. How many of us have read that question, chewed on our pencils, and thought, "That's the wrong thing to ask"?

And this leads to the author's key point, that how one recognises oneself is important, and it may not fit into the ability / disability opposition. Such a hegemonic false dichotomy removes the choice from many people's identity, and such a removal of identity-choice becomes an ethical crime. The interviews demonstrate clearly that the outcome of this removal is a

lifelong quest from all of the interviewees to prove their own self-worth against a framework that isn't appropriate to their identities, to their experiences, or to their needs. We see that ability (or disability) is not a social *model*, but a social *construct*, as much a part of created identity as gender, ethnicity, and citizenship. Indeed, because of the barriers people come up against every single day in a society which looks at "the different" as "faulty", it may be the most obvious, and the most pressing, non-binary construct of them all.

This is a book about the many, not the few; and accordingly, it's a book *for* the many, not the few. Its easy style and conversational manner appeal to those who would class themselves (or be classed by others) as different, allowing them to recognise themselves in the voices of the people being interviewed and liberate themselves from the constraints of unsuitable labelling. It also provides a rich mine of ideas for those teaching in the field of diversity and inclusion, adding new currency to old exchanges about neurodiversity, neurodivergence, and neurotypicality, providing a solid evidential basis for open, inclusive, supportive, and listening practices. But importantly, it should appeal to lecturers in the legal field, dealing with disability rights and equality laws. With the insights offered in this book, perhaps some of our archaic norms of "able and disabled" can at last give way to something more sensitive to the needs, and the talents, of a wealth of people who have previously feel compelled to make their differences invisible.

We leave the final words to Dr Alexander-Passe himself, when he says:

So what I am suggesting is a change, from schools to the workplace, with the language used, turning from defining abnormal versus normal to recognising that invisible-hidden disabilities-differences have a lot to give to society, offering new solutions to new problems.

- Conclusion, p388.

And Dr Alexander-Passe has, indeed, offered something remarkable to apply to many of our problems, old and new.