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Inclusive Education: Key Themes

Chapter overview

This first chapter of our book sets out the central themes that we will be developing in later chapters. We pose the question: 'Does the idea of inclusive education amount to anything more than the vacuous theorizations of postmodernism on the one hand or the reframing of traditional policies for the management of troublesome children on the other hand?' In other words, is the idea of inclusive education an illusion? We argue that despite the idealism that characterized the origins of the inclusive education movement, its meaning in theory and policy is ambiguous and in practice its implementation has been limited. Yet, educational policy and practice are highly contested in different local contexts and it is in these contextualized struggles over the values and purposes of education that hope lies. We conclude by sketching out some ideas for rethinking the inclusive education project framed by the broader relationships between the contested values of education and the practical possibilities for making a difference.

Setting the scene

Worldwide, social inclusion has become a major focus of the policies of governments. Education reform is generally seen as a key driver for achieving social integration and cohesion. Until fairly recently, the separation between 'mainstream' schooling and 'special education' rested upon the idea of separate kinds of education for different kinds of children. Increasingly these categorical distinctions have been challenged. In part, this challenge has arisen from growing recognition of the broad continuum of human needs and the inadequacy of models that constrain educational possibilities by imposing different systems of schooling on those who are in some sense believed to be 'abnormal' or, to use a euphemism, 'special' (even where the intention is ultimately to foster

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greater integration into the mainstream system of schooling and/or society). Opposition to traditional systems of special education has often been led by disabled people and their supporters who have argued that 'special education' restricts opportunities for disabled people as citizens because of the way in which it labels them as having intellectual, social and/or physical deficits. In addition to these arguments, education policy-makers have also become interested in wider issues of social inclusion and how education might play a significant role in promoting social cohesion in societies that are increasingly diverse, socially and culturally. These ideas are to be found not just in the developed countries of North America, Europe and Australasia. In the developing world, too, considerable interest has been shown in the idea of 'inclusive education'. International agencies such as the United Nations and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Bank and the UK's Department for International Development have been powerful advocates of 'inclusion' as a core principle of schooling and education systems.

In this book we examine the development of these new ideas about 'inclusive education' and their relationship to broader social policies aimed at promoting social inclusion. We argue in particular that:

- the idea of 'inclusive education', although historically closely related to debates and reforms in the field of special education, actually goes well beyond special education in its approach to social integration;

- inclusive education should be understood in the context of an approach to the 'problems' of social diversity which are the outcome of social changes since the end of the Second World War and which include the end of colonialism, the increase of labour-force mobility, and the tension between global and local cultures;

- there are continuing contradictions between policy and practice as education systems attempt to manage the social and economic complexities of national and cultural identity in societies that are highly diversified internally and yet globally interconnected;

- the growth of 'inclusive education' in the developing world in part reflects the attempt of these countries to promote the social and educational advantages of access to schooling and educational resources, and in part reflects the export of first-world thinking to countries which reinforces dependency and what Paulo Friere called 'the culture of silence'.

What is meant by 'inclusion'?

The meaning of 'inclusion' is by no means clear and perhaps conveniently blurs the edges of social policy with a feel-good rhetoric that no one could be

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opposed to. What does it really mean to have an education system that is 'inclusive'? Who is thought to be in need of inclusion and why? If education should be inclusive, then what practices is it contesting, what common values is it advocating, and by what criteria should its successes be judged? The introduction of these policies to education systems both in the countries of the North and in the 'developing countries' of post-colonial globalization is underpinned by a complex and contested process of social change. While social policy is dominated by the rhetoric of inclusion, the reality for many remains one of exclusion and the panacea of 'inclusion' masks many sins.

Inclusion and the politics of disability

The history of special education in Europe, North America and Australasia throughout the twentieth century was a history of expansion: growth in the number of children identified as having special educational needs, growth in the number of categories of 'handicap' or 'impairment' and growth in the number of schools outside the mainstream for children whose needs were seen as different to those of 'normal' children. In these countries, however, the concept of special educational needs was never simply synonymous with 'impairment'. Few children identified as having 'special educational needs' would later as adults be recognized as being 'disabled' and the terms 'impairment' and 'disability' were hardly ones that would resonate with the experiences of most children in special schools. There is little overlap between educational categories of special education need and generally much more narrow categories of disability or impairment used in the management of resources and identities in the adult world. Most children in special education have tended to be labelled as having learning difficulties or behavioural problems but these are labels with little scientific, let alone educational, credibility.

Nonetheless, the label of special educational needs plays a significant role in extending to a much greater number of people an educational rationale for failure within the educational system and the subsequent social marginalization and denial of opportunities that follows for those who are unsuccessful within the ordinary school system. In this way the disability discourse is seen by Fulcher as deflecting attention 'from the fact that it is failure in the education apparatus by those whose concern it should be to provide an inclusive curriculum, and to provide teachers with a sense of competence in such a curriculum, which constructs the politics of integration' (Fulcher, 1989: 276).

The concept of special educational needs is embedded in the trinity of social class, gender and race. The importance of these factors and indeed the social processes implicated in their application, have been well described by sociologists from at least the 1970s onwards (for example, Tomlinson, 1981, 1982). Yet the label continues to be used in ways that mask the intersection and

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operation of these factors in the identification of those with special educational needs in the daily decision-making of policy-makers and practitioners across the world. As many writers have argued it is only by examining these wider social relationships that insight is possible into the role of special educational needs as a discourse of power and its abuses.

In the developed world, the idea of 'inclusive education' is one that has challenged the traditional view and role of special education. This challenge has been significantly driven by the disabled people's movement in the UK, the USA and in Europe. It has fundamentally questioned policies and practices that have promoted segregation and 'human improvement', which have their origins in the eugenics movement and the social Darwinism of the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. In place of eugenics, the disability movement has advanced a model of 'inclusive education' that is linked to a broader campaign for social justice and human rights.

That policy in this area continues to be contested is evident in the experience of a number of developed countries. In the UK, for example, the policy of inclusion has become a central plank of government reform since 1997. On the other hand, the radical ideas about social justice that characterized the development of inclusion as a political agitation by the disabled people's movement have largely been lost within the technical approaches to inclusive education that framed those policy applications in the UK in the narrower terms of 'school improvement', diversity of provision for different needs and academic achievement (Armstrong, 2005).

Case study

Greece: a policy case study

In Greece, the *renaming* of 'special classes' to 'inclusive classes' was one of the ways that education policy responded to the impetus of inclusion (Law 2817/2000). In the same legislation that introduced the name of 'inclusive classes', a complex bureaucratic assessment and evaluation process for the identification of students with a disability was put into place. This process reinforced the dominance of the 'medical model' in the education system by requiring children and young people to be 'labelled' with one of the recognized categories of disability before educational provision in the form of resources, additional support and instructional differentiation could become available. In practice, inclusive classes have continued in most cases to perform their role as 'withdrawn rooms' were students spend significant periods of their school time. This model 'regulates' the management of a part of the school population and

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'avoids "contaminating" the mainstream educational praxis with "special education intervention or differentiation"' (Zoniou-Sideri et al., 2006: 285).

The dominance of a 'deficit model' in the Greek context is reinforced in the new Law. Despite the recognition that 'disability constitutes a natural part of the human condition' (Law 3699/2008, article 1, point 1), the dominance of a deficit approach is evident in the statement that 'the type and degree of special educational needs defines the form, kind and category of Special Education provision' (Law 3699/2008, article 2, point 1).

In the developing world as in the developed world inclusive education is used in quite different ways that mean different things. Sometimes it is framed in terms of social justice, such as where it is directly linked to the UNESCO's Education for All policy. In this reading an advocacy position is at the heart of the inclusive model. Translated into particular national settings within the developing world, inclusive education may in practice be a useful policy option that is less resource intensive than other approaches to the provision of services for disabled children. A more wide-ranging critique, however, might point to the context of exceptionally low achievement and the failure of educational systems in the developing world to address adequately the needs of the majority of a country's population. In this respect the language of 'inclusion' mirrors the role of the language of special education in Europe and North America from the late eighteenth century onwards as those systems sought to manage the 'flotsam and jetsam' created by a system of mass schooling. On the other hand, it is important to examine the reasons for system failure as these are often related to a combination of limited resources and the external manipulation of educational policy by external funding agencies pursuing agendas arising in the developed world. This places the notion of inclusion in highly contested political territory.

The politics of inclusive education

To appreciate the complex history that underpins the development of inclusive education, as both a political and a policy/practice discourse, a discussion of the meaning and significance of 'inclusion' in global educational practice today must be made concrete. For instance, in the newly globalizing discourse of inclusion, its radical humanistic philosophical premises should be placed in the more sobering context of the intersection between colonial histories and post-colonial contexts of countries in the developed and developing world (for example, by contrasting its rhetorical stance towards social cohesion with its practical limitations, or even complicity, in the management of diversity and, in particular, racial and cultural diversity in the interests of social hegemony, both nationally and internationally).

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Similarly, the technological advances of the twenty-first century, the globalization of economic markets and the penetration of 'first-world' knowledge and policy solutions into the developing world all may be understood as spreading an evangelical belief in the inclusion of diversity. Alternatively globalization and its impact on conceptualizations of inclusion may be understood in terms of a technical rationalism which has separated social practice from ethical thinking in the management of global social inequality. The precarious position of developing country economies, starved of investment, historically constrained (internally as well as externally) by the baggage of colonialism, and economically disenfranchised by the political dominance of first-world countries, their donor agencies and the interests of multinational companies, is commonly reflected in both the need to develop human capital alongside economic investment and the inability of these countries to lift themselves out of disadvantages that are structural, global and embedded in the historical and cultural legacy of colonialism. Within this context, the exhortations of first-world aid agencies and international donors for countries to adopt inclusive education as a policy prescription to address both system failure and individual disadvantage can seem idealistic, if not patronizing and victimizing. On the other hand, the discourse of inclusive education can provide a political space for contesting the wider agenda of social injustice. Here, as for example is the case with the promotion of 'inclusive education' by the member states of UNESCO, there are opportunities for advancing a progressive educational agenda that goes beyond the rhetoric of exhortation and the limitations of policy borrowing from first-world nations.

The globalizing discourse of inclusion

These contrasting agendas are evident in the competing policy frameworks that address issues of internationalization in educational policy. For instance, one of the most significant events of the twenty-first century has been the adoption by the United Nations General Assembly on 13 December 2006 of the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* which came into effect on 3 May 2008. The Convention does not explicitly define disability but it recognizes that 'disability is an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others' (UN, 2006: 1).

In the area of education, Article 24 of the Convention says that 'States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realizing this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an *inclusive education system* at all levels and lifelong learning' (UN, 2006: 16, emphasis added). In calling on states to ensure that 'effective individualized support measures are provided in environments

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that maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion' (UN, 2006: 17), the Convention reinforces the centrality of inclusion in educational debates.

However, other considerations may have an equal if not greater bearing upon policy formulation and implementation in practice. For example, the United Nations *Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities* (United Nations, 1993: 'Rule 6 of 22') recognized that special schools may have to be considered where ordinary schools have not be able to make adequate provisions. The focus on an 'inclusive education system' of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities questions the 'necessity' of a segregated special education system. The tensions between an education system 'consistent with the goal of full inclusion' and a 'deficit approach' to education provision, in which the 'type and severity' of disability becomes the primary measure of access to a regular setting are more than obvious.

These tensions may play out differently in developed and developing countries. For example, the World Bank, which works in conjunction with the United Nations to provide loans to developing countries, has argued in favour of inclusion, justifying this position on the basis of the savings that integrated in-class provision offers compared with the prohibitive cost of segregated special education.

The financial incentives lying behind calls for the introduction of inclusive education are of great importance, since, as Tomlinson (1982: 174) argued 'it certainly will be cheaper to educate children with special needs in ordinary rather than special schools'. It is not only disabled people who are to be included in this category. For the most part, these are children who are experiencing difficulties with learning, rather than children with physical, sensory or learning impairments. The cost-effectiveness aspect of inclusive education is reiterated in the international organizations policy and documents. In UNESCO's (2005) *Guidelines for Inclusion*, the reference to the cost-effectiveness of inclusive education is supplemented with concerns about the privatization of inclusive education which may lead to 'cost-cutting' in areas that are essential if access to education for all is to be achieved.

Yet, increasingly the discourse of special education is being drawn upon to frame discussions and policy concerning educational failure. This illustrates a dilemma, not restricted to developing countries, but acutely experienced in these settings. On the one hand, the need for improved and targeted learning support coupled with the training of teachers, particularly in the mainstream sector, to work effectively with children with a range of special educational needs is very evident. On the other hand, the language of special education can itself impede an analysis of more deep-seated problems in respect of both funding and policy for improving the quality of education for all children.

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The reality is that the goals of equity and equality of opportunity remain distant for many people in the developing world. For example, those stricken by poverty often experience academic deceleration and acquire special educational needs as they pass through the school system, leading to their eventual exclusion from those sections of the school system that offer the greatest prospects for upward social mobility.

Case study

The Eastern Caribbean: a policy case study

The past 50 years has seen significant change in the countries of the Eastern Caribbean states with most of them gaining political independence, mostly from Britain, and thus experiencing tremendous change in their social and economic standing. The economic consequences of the collapse of the banana industry have impacted on family life, with many people of working age leaving the country to earn a living in the USA. This has seen the emergence of 'barrel children'; that is, children who are rolled backwards and forwards between the Caribbean and developed countries, both for socio-economic and family needs. Also, there has been an increase in the number of persons with HIV AIDS, including a growing school-age population with this condition. These countries were not prepared for such rapidly changing social and economic circumstances. One outcome has been an increase of the number of children in the region classified as having special educational needs as this label is conveniently used both to signify the effects of broader social and economic change and as a mechanism for dealing with the social and individual difficulties that arise from the impact of these broader social changes.

Yet, developments in special education and, more recently, inclusion have not been entirely planned and very often aid has been sought from diverse organizations with money tied to the donor policies and priorities of developed countries rather than a sound analysis of the needs of recipient countries. Special educational services and provision have therefore developed in fairly arbitrary ways within these islands.

A view from post-colonial theory

Homi Bhabha (1994) has argued that a view of global cosmopolitanism has emerged founded on ideas of progress that are complicit with neo-liberal forms of governance and free-market forces of competition. It is a cosmopolitanism that celebrates a world of plural cultures as it moves swiftly and selectively from one island of prosperity to another, 'paying conspicuously less attention to the

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persistent inequality and immiseration produced by such unequal and uneven development' (p. xiv). This 'one-nation' globalization is premised upon the assimilation of difference by an overriding imperative of technologically driven 'modernization'. This imperative, which has political and moral as well as economic dimensions, crosses boundaries that are both geographic and cultural. For example, the modernization project of New Labour in the reconstruction of the socio-economic landscape of Britain is at one with the post-colonial project by which developing countries are increasingly incorporated into the globalized world of free-trade and institutional homogeneity under the celebratory slogan of the inclusion of diversity. Yet in a most important sense globalization necessarily begins at home; in other words, with 'the difference within'. It is defined by the boundaries it places around inclusion; by the homogeneity of its view of diversity. Diversity is celebrated where it extends the reach of cultural dominance. Elsewhere, the opportunity to voice a different experience, a different reality, is closed down as is the case with indigenous peoples, for instance in Australia, whose land has been taken from them and whose cultures have been ridiculed, brutalized and reconstituted by colonial fantasies.

Implicit in much of the international policy on inclusion is an assumption that participation in education should be premised on the voices of young people being heard. This assumption, which has come to be accepted wisdom, is one that has arisen in a largely first-world literature. Little attention has been given in this literature on children's voices, a largely European and North American literature, to the ways in which participation is culturally specified through rites of passage and transition, and to the role and meaning of 'voice' in this process. Nor does it have much in common with the idea advocated by anti-colonial writers such as Paulo Freire who argued that colonialism imposed a 'culture of silence' which reinforced political domination and that resistance to colonization required a reclaiming of voice by colonized peoples.

The nature of research and development collaborations between special educators from first-world countries and developing countries, especially where the former are acting as change-agents often takes for granted concepts such as 'equity', 'social justice' and 'human rights', and in doing so abstracts them from the specific historical and cultural traditions of developing countries. Ironically, these concepts, which are introduced as guiding principles of education reform, mask the unequal and dependency promoting relationship between change-oriented development interventions sponsored by outside funding agencies and the recipients of such programmes. Thus, when policies on inclusive education are developed independently from consideration of the broader social context within which they are situated it is unlikely that they will be effective. More importantly, there is also a danger of limiting the very real possibilities for sharing experiences and educational thinking that do exist but which are dependent upon a very different notion of collaboration.

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Summary

Many of the issues which have been identified in this chapter have arisen as a result of a legacy of the economic inequalities which developing countries have to manage in providing educational services. These inequalities are located in:

- the colonial heritage of developing countries;
- the continuing economic disadvantages experienced by developing countries compared to first-world nations;
- the domination in research and policy development of ideas arising out of the developed countries.

More recently, there have been international attempts to raise the profile of inclusive inclusion as a policy priority but the reality for developing countries is often one in which the international rhetoric of inclusion is experienced, ironically, as reinforcing the exclusion of entire peoples from economic and social opportunities.

In the countries of the North the idea of inclusion has frequently been framed almost exclusively by policy on school performance and measurable outcomes.

Retracing the development of inclusion back to the radical beginnings of the inclusion movement may help us to understand the potential of this movement as an educational reform project. As the important observation by Len Barton (2001: 10–11) emphasizes: 'inclusive education is not an end in itself, but a means to an end, that of the realisation of an inclusive society. Thus, those who claim to a commitment to inclusive education are always implicated in challenging discriminatory, exclusionary barriers and contributing to the struggles for an inclusive society'.

We also need to consider how this initial impetus has been reframed by quite different policy objectives within the developed and developing countries of the world and in the relationship between them.

Discussion questions

- Inclusive education is a feel-good idea, but what does it mean?
- Is inclusive education just another way of saying special education?
- Does inclusive education mean the same thing in the world's developing countries as it does in the developed countries of Europe and North America?
- What has been the significance of the history of colonialism, and now globalization, on the development of thinking about 'inclusive education' in the developing world?

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Further reading

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