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## **Poverty, Inclusion and Inclusive Education: exploring the connections**

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### **Abstract**

The world has changed a lot since the term inclusion was first used in relation to education, especially special education. Inclusion and education cannot be part of a conversation without due consideration of issues related to poverty and the international mechanisms which have been touted to eradicate poverty from the planet. Poverty is inextricably linked to many of the world's social ills whether it resides in the slums surrounding the major cities of the richest countries of the world or the countries of the developing world. It is both timely and important to look at the ways in which educational needs have changed and how we might now understand inclusive education. Over the past twenty years inclusion has come to mean much more than the term special education ever suggested and has become a popular idea in education and social policy forums with broader social and political dimensions. As academics and policymakers engage with concepts such as special education, globalisation, education for all and inclusion other terms such as social justice, equity, equal opportunity, human rights and diversity in education, citizenship and social inclusion have crept into the populist international vocabulary as well as the language of academia. In this paper, we will explore various issues that are currently pertinent to inclusive education, especially within the context of Education For All (UNESCO, 1990) and the Millennium Development Goals (United Nations, 2001). We will consider the international, historical and social contexts of inclusive education policies and practices from the 1980s onward. Our discussion uses a range of methods which include documentary analysis of policy and theoretical perspectives as well as examples from both the Northern and the Southern hemispheres. We argue that ideas like inclusion, inclusive education and poverty are multi-dimensional and cannot be considered as isolated events which could be cured or fixed with a mathematical formula or a few recipes. The world cannot realistically address issues related to inclusion and education without exploring the wider inter-connected issues of poverty, debt relief and health for all, but more especially for women.

## **Introduction**

Historically special education was seen to address the needs of some categories of learners. However, special education by definition lacks the broad scope of highlighting and promoting the need for wider participation for all students in educational activities in the world. The term inclusion was introduced to address this need. Over the past twenty years inclusion has come to mean more than the term special education and has become a popular word in education and social policy forums with broader social and political dimensions. As academics and policymakers engage with concepts such as special education, globalisation, education for all and inclusion other terms such as social justice, equity, equal opportunity, human rights and diversity in education, citizenship and social inclusion have crept into the populist international vocabulary as well as the language of academia (Armstrong, Armstrong and Spandagou, 2009).

However, as we have argued elsewhere (Armstrong, Spandagou, Armstrong, 2009) the more popular the term inclusion became, the less there is a shared understanding of what it means. It has become abundantly clear that the term inclusion means different things to different people. Additionally, within the varying educational and bureaucratic contexts of the world, 'inclusion' is continuously being conceptualised and re-conceptualised through the practice of policy makers, administrators, principals and teachers, and other professionals working in different national educational contexts.

Historically, the early calls for inclusion came from different groups and perspectives as a critique of existing and emerging issues in education (Armstrong, Armstrong and Spandagou, 2009). Firstly, parents, teachers and advocates of students with disabilities promoted inclusion as a way of challenging the restrictions to access and participation imposed by existing models of 'mainstreaming' or 'integration'. Secondly, the development of social definitions of disability by disabled and non-disabled activists and theorists influenced the critique of the role of education, and special education in particular, in reproducing the exclusion and oppression of people with disabilities. Thirdly, inclusive education engaged in a critique of the education reform programs that

have been taking place in a number of countries and which introduced market-driven arrangements in schools promoting specific notions of accountability, control, choice and diversity. Fourthly, inclusive education has been linked to development and in particular the provision of educational opportunities for all children within educational systems. The concept of 'inclusion' was therefore developed as a bridge between the less than perfect systems that underpinned special education and what was envisioned to be a new system that would provide hope for the future. From the influential Salamanca Statement in 1994 (UNESCO, 1994) onwards, the work of international organisations has been instrumental in constructing inclusion as an international aim. So, the radicalisation which underpinned a lot of the thinking about inclusive education was a radicalisation which arose from emancipatory thinking and ideals in relation to the contribution of education in promoting change in the world. This represented a significant move away from previous charitable and technicist ideas about the role of special education.

This paper is written in the context of the current global financial crisis (GFC) where the world's wealthiest countries rallied together and accumulated multi-billion dollar packages to bail out ailing financial systems in an effort to jump-start the global economy. This intervention came close on the heels of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (2000), the Education for All (EFA) campaign (1990) and the 'Make Poverty History' campaign championed and spearheaded by the Rock Star, Bono. This comment in no way decries the actions of the wealthiest governments or celebrities but intentionally highlights what is possible and what powerful nations could accomplish at very short notice, when faced with extraordinary circumstances. Though the wealthiest companies have been supported through this meltdown, it is important to note that this crisis will no doubt affect the lives of everyone in this globally inter-connected world. We would also suggest that the same urgency, passion and fervour that were exhibited at the height of the GFC are required to deal with, reverse or even eliminate the global human crisis that is underpinned by poverty.

This paper explores understandings of inclusion and inclusive education in the context of poverty. We discuss the conflicting definitions of poverty and the complex and inter-

twined connections between poverty, inclusion and inclusive education. Traditional approaches to special education focus on individual ability and performance. Inclusive education on the other hand, especially when approached through the lenses of poverty and social exclusion, focuses on the causes and effects of disadvantage. Inclusive education in this sense doesn't simply aim to improve the educational performance of students; it aims to contribute in breaking the circle of poverty and social disadvantage in which individual, communities and societies are locked.

### **Measuring Poverty**

There are several social constructs that are used to define poverty and the measure is known as a global poverty line (GPL). Using some constructs, a person is considered to be poor if their income or consumption level falls below the minimum level deemed to be necessary to meet basic needs. The analysts of most international organizations perceive people to be poor when the level of income required for them to purchase the goods that are necessary for basic human survival falls below a certain level. In this instance, it is the lower level of US\$1.25 per person per day as is set out by the World Bank and can be interpreted as extreme poverty to the point of destitution. This calculation is based on the average of poverty lines of 15 of the poorest countries in the world based on the 2005 International Comparison Program (ICP) expanded data on global purchasing power parities.

The International Comparison Program, which was established in 1968, collects statistics every three to five years on international comparable price levels, economic aggregates in real terms and purchasing power parity estimates. Statistical surveys are collected to obtain prices for a basket of goods and services, after which inter-country comparisons are made. Using this data, policy makers then consider affordability and the price levels of common items of necessity and luxuries. Today the ICP is the largest international data collection initiative covering five regions and 107 countries. This data is combined with the OECD/Eurostat Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) program for 43 countries, thus resulting in a total of approximately 150 benchmark countries. The World Bank organizes the collection of data for the majority of the countries of the world while the

OECD, in collaboration with the European Commission, leads the ICP program in European countries.

Some measures assume that a person is poor if they have an income that is below the lower poverty line of US\$1 per day or below 40% of the mean gross domestic product (GDP) per capita of the country of residence. Based on the ICP program data and the World Bank's interpretation of poverty, while one in every four persons in the developing world or 1.4 billion were living on less than US\$1.25 per day in 2005, almost 2.6 billion lived on less than US\$2.00 per day over that same period. Quite realistically \$2 or less per day guarantees that households will not be able to send their children to school, be properly fed, have quality healthcare or a higher infant survival rate. Using this 2005 measure, reported global poverty would be 40 points higher which would translate into 2.6 billion people; that is approximately 40.2% of the world's population. A poverty line of \$2.50 per day means that 3.14 billion or 48.6 percent of the world's population live on or below that standard while 79.7% or 5.15 billion live on \$10 or less. The latter translates into 95% of the combined populations of developing countries living on less than \$10 per day (Ravallion, Chen and Sangraula, 2008).

According to Pritchett (2006), the idea was to make this lower level so low that it would be indisputable that anyone living in such conditions was indeed poor. He argues that the real question is 'whose poverty is being measured, and to what purposes are the lines being put?' (p. 2). Perhaps, the poverty line needs to be redefined to represent a level of income where developing countries could achieve acceptable levels of achievements of the MDGs (Pritchett, 2006, p.13). Because Pritchett views the notion of poverty as a social construct, he proposes a US\$10 a day standard as an upper bound of the poverty line as a better reflection of the state of the world and which "should truly be at the point at which people are not poor, and deprivation at that level of income should truly be acceptable" (Pritchett, 2006, pp 5-6).

Unfortunately these estimates do not consider sharp increases in food prices when there are shortages for the most vulnerable individuals or groups or increases in the price of

fuel due to embargos and wars or the global financial crisis. While some countries such as China and East Asia have made considerable progress in terms of achieving a better standard of living for more of the population with poverty incidence dropping from 80% to 18% between 1981 and 2005, other areas like sub-Saharan Africa are victims of the worst kind of 'stubborn' poverty. The incidence of 50 percent poverty remains almost constant. The questions for us as educators are: What does living on in poverty mean in terms of education, health and housing? And what does education really achieve? In almost every country in the world, there are indeed people living on the margins. If we look at Indigenous peoples in Australia, for example, the Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS, 2007) has estimated that approximately 2 million people currently live in conditions of poverty.

Other analysts look at poverty and the poverty line in relation to the mean or median income of a country. The European Commission declares that people are poor if their income falls below 50% of the mean of the country in which they reside. Green and Hulme (2005, p. 868) argue that:

The concept of chronic poverty, as characterized by duration, is particularly useful, not so much as a means of identifying the poorest, but for highlighting the outcomes of the entrenched social relations that work to produce the bundle of effects that make up chronic poverty. Chronic poverty has the ability to move the analytic focus of research from correlates of poverty to causes of poverty. By viewing poverty in dynamic terms it helps reveal the social and political processes that make people poor and keep them in poverty.

It can be argued that inclusive education can start to be effective only when approached in a similar dynamic way. However, much of the existing literature on inclusive education and especially on its practical implementation focuses on responding to 'individual needs' of students and ignores the underlying social and political issues at play.

The above quotation is also clearly exemplified in the joint briefing paper written by NGOs for World Debt Day (Jubilee Debt Campaign, 2005, p. 4) entitled “In the Balance” where the authors explain that:

Today, the debts which low-income countries are being expected to repay to the rich world total \$523 billion. Every day, poor countries give over \$100 million in debt service to rich countries and the institutions they control, such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Global Development Finance (The World Bank, 2004) also draws attention to the fact that for every \$1 that low income countries receive in grant aid (excluding technical assistance), they pay back more than \$3 in debt service. This type of ‘stubborn poverty’ keeps countries forever in debt and constantly challenged to achieve education for all.

### **Effects of Poverty**

In trying to understand poverty, one has to examine concepts such as ‘developing’ and ‘developed’ world. Who determines how these labels are defined and applied? It is important to recognize that although a person may not have material wealth this does not necessarily mean that s/he is deprived. For example, people who live on small plots of land in rural parts of some Caribbean islands may not be able to afford trendy clothes or flashy cars but they will be able to enjoy decent meals reaped from the land or even gained as a result of bartering with neighbours. They will have access to clean water and free primary education. This is very different from people who experience life in the slums of those same countries. Moreover, many people living under the poverty line in an industrialized country with a strong economy could be worse off than those living in developing countries on far lower incomes. When people experience hardship and their basic material conditions are challenged through fewer employment opportunities, lower health, poor standards of education and poor housing and living conditions, then relations between people and communities also suffer. There is a tendency towards violence in the home, increasing crime, poorer general health and a decline in education standards and outputs.

All these factors have implications for our understanding of 'development'. For example, development may be understood as being totally concerned with "... creating an environment in which people can develop their full potential and lead productive, creative lives in accord with their needs and interests." (UNDP -website (n.d). <http://hdr.undp.org/en/humandev/>). As Mahbub ul Haq, Founder of the Human Development Report explains:

The basic purpose of development is to enlarge people's choices. In principle, these choices can be infinite and can change over time. People often value achievements that do not show up at all, or not immediately, in income or growth figures: greater access to knowledge, better nutrition and health services, more secure livelihoods, security against crime and physical violence, satisfying leisure hours, political and cultural freedoms and sense of participation in community activities. The objective of development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy and creative lives. (UNDP -website (n.d). <http://hdr.undp.org/en/humandev/>)

Successful development does not necessarily translate into the high GDP of a wealthy country. It can be manifest in many ways such as having a stable government with a thriving economic system; a standard of living that is improving for all citizens where education and health care are within the reach of all and housing is affordable.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP Newsroom, 2009) argues that people from poor countries suffer significantly more than their counterparts from richer countries, not simply in terms of jobs and the loss of income but also in terms of education and health where there is a lower life expectancy, poorer general health, higher infant mortality, lower school enrolment and completion rates. Unfortunately, women and children from the most destitute areas within the lowest income countries are the ones who are the most vulnerable and defenceless. For example, the UNDP has stated that data gathered during previous economic downturns indicate that girls are more likely to be taken out of school. Yet, despite the inclusion of the average child into the education system in wealthy countries such as Australia, Norway, Sweden, the UK and the US this does not mean that those children receive an education appropriate to their

needs. 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 (UNESCO, 1996).

Unfortunately, the majority of theorists from the developed West apply western theories to the entire world without due consideration of the economic situation, cultural heritage and composition and without truly listening to the voices and experiences of those who have experienced colonization as part of their history and have a day to day experience of the challenges of educational and economic development. As Connell (2007: 44) points out there is a 'northernness' to these theories where:

[d]ebates among the colonized are ignored and intellectuals of the colonized societies are unreferenced, and social process is analysed in an ethnographic time warp.

Somehow, there is an arrogance of interpretation where it is assumed that most countries of the world will either experience the world in similar ways or that systems developed and work well in the developed world could easily be replicated and be equally successful in economically, culturally and politically different 'developing systems'.

While setting inclusive education as an international aim has been an unquestionable educational milestone, the acceptance of one vision of 'inclusion', as appropriate for and fitting the needs of all societies and contexts, is problematic. It is problematic in terms of its theorisation, as well as its policy and practice implications. Elsewhere we argue that "there is a theoretical vacuum reflected in the escapism of much of the postmodern writings on inclusion or in the pragmatic watering-down of the underlying idealism of inclusion" (Armstrong, Armstrong and Spandagou, 2009).

In particular in terms of the theorisation of inclusive education as an international imperative, it can be argued that to its broader conception 'inclusive education' is about attempts to increase access and participation in education for all students. Clearly the aims of inclusive education in many countries resonate with previous and current

struggles for access to education. In some cases however, the introduction of the language of inclusion as well as the influence of international organizations in its promotion may distance inclusion from the histories of localised movements for participation in education. Saying that, the rights, experiences and voices of students with disabilities historically have been absent from the 'mainstream' movements for access to education. Inclusive education brings students with disabilities as well as other previously excluded groups to the fore. However, this may result in accepting 'individual difference' as given without considering and challenging social and political causes and mechanisms of exclusion, including poverty.

### **Gender and Poverty**

When discussing the link between poverty and education, issues of gender cannot be ignored. Gender equality must be understood as a crosscutting initiative that pervades the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Millennium Declaration. In fact, three of the four new targets added to the MDGs in 2007 focus more sharply on women viz: *Achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people; Achieve by 2015, universal access to reproductive health; Achieve by 2010, universal access to treatment of HIV/AIDS for all those who need it; Reduce biodiversity loss, achieving by 2010 a significant reduction in the rate of loss* (United Nations, 2008). These global aspirations, though exceedingly important do not specifically target the reduction of violence against women when violence is interwoven with complex social situations such as poverty, lack of gender inequality in education, maternal ill health, child mortality and HIV/AIDS.

Women play an important role in nurturing both the family and the community and in poverty reduction. When women become central to the planning process as legitimate members of the management and accountability process, then there will be a positive marked effect on ensuring that development aid reaches the poorest levels of societies to provide food and basic education and medication. In addition, there will be a reduction in infant and maternal mortality as well as medical support for epidemics like HIV/AIDS malaria and measles. In agrarian societies the support of women is also required for

sound environmental management. Societal challenges like poverty, lack of basic education, community health and well being cannot be disaggregated and examined in isolation from each other. They are all inter-connected and if there is to be a global shift there needs to be an intervention that is multipronged. Policy makers, economists, doctors, teachers, social workers all need to engage in dialogue with each other having the same conversation rather than in silos.

Approximate 65% of the children who do not attend school are girls and 66% of the global citizens who are illiterate are women. The research has shown that women with less education are more likely to experience violence in the home and having secondary education is linked to employment opportunities. However, until there is a critical mass of educated women who can challenge the status quo, the current pioneering women are still at risk from men who feel threatened by this new way of understanding the shifting balance of power.

### **Painting the Australian Picture**

For a wealthy country, Australia does not paint a particularly wholesome picture. At the lowest end of the inequality spectrum lie Indigenous people who have a life expectancy that is 17 years less than the average for non-indigenous people. In 2006, Indigenous students were half as likely to continue to year 12 education, 21 percent were not participating in school education and infant mortality is 3 times higher. The Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales (Saunders, Hill, and Bradbury, 2008) estimates that in 2006, 11.1% of Australians including 420,000 children were living below the poverty line as used by OECD countries, that is, 50% of the median disposable income for all Australian households (or \$281 per person per week). Like every where else in the world, Australia has also been hit by the GFC and increasing food and petrol prices. Daily news casts report on the increasing number of foreclosures on homes and recently agencies like the Salvation Army have been reporting on the increase in the number of homeless people in the country. The same arguments apply here as they do to every where else. When a few children fall through the cracks, the implications for their lives and for society are huge. Children and young people need genuine options and

a foot in the door if their lives are to be meaningful. How can we build a strong society when at least 10% of our population is living in poverty and how do we ensure that learners are engaged when they are living in circumstances where they are hungry, thirsty, sick or physically, emotionally and mentally vulnerable? For schools and teachers that work with students, families and communities that experience disadvantage and marginalisation, one of the dilemmas that inclusive education poses is how to provide the prerequisite in order for students to engage in learning.

### **Inclusive Education and development**

The term Inclusive Education has become synonymous with special education but a review of the world situation, suggests that the definition of inclusive education must be broadened to address not only the needs of those who fall within the different classifications of special educational needs but those who are disenfranchised for any reason. The Final Report of the World Conference on Special Education-Access and Quality (UNESCO, 1994, p.15) offers the following very broad definition that does encompass our current world situation:

The concept of special educational needs will also include, besides disabled people, all those who are experiencing difficulty on a temporary or permanent basis, who are repeating continually their school years, who are forced to work, who live on the streets, who live far from any school, who are extremely poor, who are victims of wars, who suffer abuses, or who are simply out of school, for whatever reason.

This definition reminds us that if people are denied education or the opportunity to learn new things that equip them for life within their community, it is this lack of opportunity that is disabling because their potential is being limited when we propose and support systems that are riddled with inequalities.

Like two sides of a coin, inclusion and exclusion occur simultaneously, all under the label of inclusion and from our perspective, it has become an instrument for managing and accommodating difference. Many of the policies and practices that are named 'inclusive' are not really about including; rather there are more about managing situations,

behaviours and populations. Underdeveloped and developing countries usually have a post-colonial heritage and accessing funding to support future capacity building, enhance the education system generally and provide basic education specifically are important aspects of those countries development plans. This is paramount for countries which have experienced colonialism in a very real way.

Because international trading policies and funding policies are largely determined by the wealthy countries of the North, there is great desire from the developing countries to conform to Western standards. It is clearly a case of the one that pays the piper calls the tune. Fragmentation occurs when countries in the developing world are not able to access sufficient development funds and accept support from any donor or aid agency that makes an offer. There are hundreds of international agencies staffed by people who mean well and want to help, but who go into countries, with different sometimes conflicting goals. This only results in in-house bickering about the efficacy of the different imported models. Interestingly enough when the damage is done in-country, donors rarely remain to sort out the melee. This actually reinforces the disadvantage.

A preferred approach would be to bring the agencies together, to actually engage in dialogue, to have a discourse about what's actually happening, and develop a consensus with the people of the country to provide inter-agency connectivity to provide the type of support that is required. Programs need to be localized and personalized if learning is to be effective for those who are falling through the cracks for whatever reason. Learning must have pathways to somewhere preferably higher levels of education. However, such an approach requires a re-theorisation of the inclusive education project; from one that focuses on policy and practice development in education to one that instigates emancipatory development.

## **Conclusion**

Thinking about inclusion and inclusive education, cannot realistically be addressed without exploring the wider issues of poverty, debt relief and health both in the South and the North. We need to recognise that while countries of the South are usually described as

‘developing’ and may not have as much material wealth as the more developed countries this does not mean that its citizens are deprived and underprivileged. This also means that while the countries of the industrial North are often described as ‘developed’, with stronger economies does not automatically mean that members of their population are not living beneath the poverty line and struggling to survive. The localised experiences of inclusion and exclusion and the contradictions that characterise them need to be recognised as part of the project of theorising inclusive education in relation to poverty and development.

We currently live in an era where governments are providing multi-billion dollar bailout packages for floundering economies with banks, mortgage companies and various industries making the case that these are necessary to ensure that the various country economies survive. What then about education for all, inclusion, diversity, gender and equality of opportunities? Inclusive education has to be considered and understood in terms of the historical, social, cultural, financial and political contexts within each specific country, while offering an opportunity for real educational engagement with the poorest and most disenfranchised groups within society. To achieve this, it is necessary to recognise the relationship between power and knowledge and to acknowledge that power lies in the guises of race, gender, class, and labels of abilities and disabilities. Finding ways to unpack and de-construct these labels and the attendant practices which support their perpetuation in a negative manner, is necessary part of the inclusive education theorisation project that we propose in this paper.

As a starting point, we would suggest that inclusion and education cannot be part of a conversation without due consideration of issues related to poverty and the mechanisms proposed for eradicating poverty from the planet. Poverty can be inextricably linked to the majority of the world’s social ills whether it resides in the slums surrounding the major cities of the richest countries of the world or the countries of the developing world.

Of the 192 member countries of the United Nations who verbally express commitment to the concept of Education for All, more than 80% of the countries of the North and more

than 50% of the countries of the South have written policies on inclusive education. However, these governments have all interpreted inclusion differently, so inclusion policies may not include the gypsies of Eastern Europe or the Indigenous peoples of the US, Australia, Dominica or Guyana or the millions of war refugees scattered around the globe or the poor people who become nomads in their search for jobs and a sense of belonging for themselves and their families. These contradictions in themselves suggest that policies on inclusive education are not be written, stated, understood, or enacted in similar ways.

The peoples of the world will continue having different conversations and may not always agree with each other because of the disparate meanings of development, justice, equality, inclusion and so on. We should remember at this point that international policy and national policies may be very different from what education technocrats, bureaucrats and teachers produce as policy. The need to embed the theorisation of inclusion within broader discussions of justice and poverty requires continued attempts to understand difference and different experiences without losing sight of the complexity of inclusion.

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