

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON INCLUSIVE
EDUCATION VOLUME 19

**READING INCLUSION
DIVERGENTLY:
ARTICULATIONS FROM
AROUND THE WORLD**

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FOREWORD

Globally, the meanings ascribed to inclusive education as a simultaneously pedagogical, social, and political concept are frequently contested, and often complex, yet they must always be contextualized if we are to make sense of them. This is not least because of the complicated relationship of inclusive education to special education, with a long history of community ambivalence, professional dominance, and sociopolitical controversy. The diversity of readings of dynamic conceptualizations of inclusive education and ensuing patterns of practice around the world is the subject of *Reading Inclusion Divergently*. This volume of contributions builds upon dialogue among scholars from diverse cultures and working in different regions, whose contexts of work and study range considerably in their political and pedagogical understandings of inclusive education, equity, and diversity, as of disability and disadvantage. Emphasizing the process of inclusion as well as the dynamics of interpretation, instead of the unidirectional, linear development focus on policy implementation and gaps, the editors and authors position themselves within the broad spectrum of voices of the global inclusion movement that derives its myriad perspectives from academic and policy to practitioner and advocacy-activist communities. The theoretical, methodological, and empirical diversity of these contributions reflects contrasting concepts and institutionalizations of special and inclusive education worldwide; an important undertaking as the rhetoric threatens to become increasingly separated from local school realities.

While special and inclusive education fundamentally reflect societal and educational change, these have also affected change in identifying differences in student bodies and the resulting pedagogical responses. During ongoing educational expansion, from contrasting starting points, schooling has changed quantitatively and qualitatively. Those who participate in special and inclusive education, from students and families to teachers and professionals, have also transformed education and society, especially with regard to understandings of dis/ability. This influence has been increasingly visible in the classifications and categories of dis/ability, and in the organizational forms, from original asylums and special schools and classes established so long ago to today's classrooms that (aspire to) valorize student diversity, which has always been a central challenge of teaching. Yet the (necessary?) existence of such segregated and stigmatizing settings is not everywhere similarly contested, despite the global norm of inclusive education mandated in human rights charters over the past decades. Indeed, such settings are still taken for granted in many contexts – or even bolstered, paradoxically, under the banner of inclusion.

Today, widespread recognition of the importance of education for public and private goods such as equity, emancipation, and participation galvanizes contemporary debates. If special education successfully provided learning opportunities to children previously excluded from schooling completely, in many countries the goal has forcefully shifted to inclusive education, yet there has also been backlash against this idea(l). The paradigm shift has certainly not been universally completed, as many chapters in this volume emphasize, no matter which world region we explore, especially due to widespread disadvantages and institutionalized discrimination that remains endemic. Yet the contributions here not only critique policy designs and multilevel reforms, proposed and ongoing, but mainly provide rich understandings of inclusion and of older and nascent forms of difference in schooling – and the dilemmas that follow. In so doing, these texts generate multidimensional perspectives on what inclusive education is becoming.

Ideally, inclusive settings support all children, regardless of their characteristics, who attend neighborhood schools and are guided in their individual learning processes to reach their learning goals in diverse classrooms. Yet in much of the world, even the most basic supports and services for disadvantaged students or children with disabilities are (completely) lacking, with impairment, poverty, and educational and social exclusion intertwined. Universally, children and youth need support to achieve their learning goals; albeit to varying degrees and at different times – and the responses to these needs are similarly diverse. Traditionally, special education has provided additional support for the heterogeneous group of learners perceived as having ‘special educational needs’ or labeled and grouped in innumerable categories, mainly defined by clinical, legal, and educational professions. The academic discourse of disability studies in education points out forcefully the danger of these often deficit-oriented categories and classifications and the legitimated, though questionable, diagnostics that especially clinical professions have often applied, pushing pedagogical considerations to the background. Attempting to make sense of global similarities as well as persistent cross-national and intercultural differences in special and inclusive education requires different approaches, as these contributions emphasize. Comparative and international education research, more than ever, should take on the challenge of explaining variation within and between national contexts in ‘inclusive education’ – and the resulting consequences for students and social groups. Thus, this volume’s contributions provide welcome additions to the literature.

Structured in several sections, *Reading Inclusion Divergently* begins with chapters aiming to understand inclusion as a project devoted to achieving equity and attaining social justice in divergent contexts affected by cultural, politico-legal, and socioeconomic factors. Here, challenges to democracy, rampant ableism, and persistent educational and social inequalities underscore the necessity of education reforms embedded in broader social and political responses, especially to secure human rights. Analyses of such change necessarily embrace history, often long-term colonial and conflict-ridden trajectories that are at once local, national, and global. Inclusive schooling must acknowledge and

respond to these legacies, whether in the existing structures and materials or the processes and practices, such as diagnostics and classification, that reproduce power, stratification, and inequity. Disability studies, and the global disability movement more generally, offer important lessons as they emphasize the necessity of participatory and emancipatory approaches across the disciplines and fields, including the arts.

Other readings offer critical interrogations of inclusive practices in diverse local contexts and in so doing deepen our knowledge of the range of struggles facing inclusion initiatives, from teachers' discriminatory practices to associations and other corporate groups' roles and influences in maintaining the status quo to the subversion of inclusive goals via narrow or contradictory interpretations of inclusion. Everywhere, education systems require transformation to be fully inclusive, but how to define and reach that goal is an urgent undertaking; one that remains contentious.

Epistemologically and methodologically, the assembled analyses of inclusive education are varied in their approaches to complex and shifting conceptualizations. By contrast, the contributions together clearly mark the importance of transnational and transcultural research, whether viewed from a bird's-eye or participatory face-to-face perspective. Here, collaboration, including joint interpretation across boundaries – cultural, disciplinary, epistemological, and methodological – is essential to develop shared understandings and valid reconstructions across contexts. Bringing together voices from the Global North and Global South and at various levels of analysis, this book facilitates a rich and important dialogue, showing pathways to fuller understandings of the worldwide discourses and dialectics of inclusive education.

Justin J.W. Powell

REFERENCE

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