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Inclusive Education: International Policy and Practice

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<u>**Book Review**</u>

This book critically discusses the inclusive education movement. It calls into question the meaning of 'inclusion' itself by adopting an international perspective. This is not the first book to adopt such a perspective. However, what sets this book apart from the rest is its balanced examination of inclusive education in both the developed countries of the North (consisting largely of the former colonial powers) and the developing countries of the South (typically, the former colonies). At the heart of such examination is a sustained analysis of the complex and competing concepts of inclusive education that operate in the North, and the tensions that emerge when such concepts (with related policies and practices) are decontextualised and exported to the South. This leads to a sobering account of the colossal differences in economic and social opportunities in different parts of the world, and how these differences relate to the meaning and purpose of inclusion for different communities.

The ten chapters of the book are divided into four parts. The first three parts present the main content, whilst the final part provides brief conclusions and personal reflections. The chapters are written in a way that support the development of critical thinking about the subject matter, and lend themselves to both independent study and seminar group work. Each chapter contains passages written to guide reflection and offers opportunity for readers to explore relevant case studies. In addition, each chapter concludes with a concise summary, a list of key discussion questions, and a reading list for those who wish to pursue the topics discussed in more detail. The language of the text is neither overly simplistic nor convoluted and as such should appeal to students, practitioners and academics alike.

The main content of the book can be summarised in the following way.

In the first part of the book the authors explore the historical, social and theoretical context of inclusive education. They examine the central ideas of inclusion and how these ideas relate to the system of special education that emerged in the developed world at the end of the nineteenth century. The authors also discuss the broader debate about social justice, the rights of disabled people and the 'education for all' movement that gained ground in the late twentieth century.

In the second part of the book the authors explore the development of inclusion policy in the countries of the North and the South. They examine the internationalisation of inclusive education, particularly through the activities of intergovernmental agencies (i.e. their declarations of world targets). The impact of globalisation on education systems in the developing world is also analysed. The authors explain that whilst the recent policies of international funding agencies have led to financial relief for some, the majority of countries in the developing world still desperately struggle with a combination of poverty, political unrest, conflict, and poor healthcare. It is argued that until local contexts are taken into consideration the international goal of inclusive education will remain a mere ideal.

In the third part of the book the authors look at the translation of policy into practice. The authors discuss how educators in the developed world have made positive changes to practice. However, it is argued that government policy limits the progress of inclusion by situating itself in a 'children at risk' discourse which rests upon an uncritical view of normality, individual deficit, and the assimilation of those who are outside the 'mainstream'. The authors also describe the upsurge of inclusion interventions in the developing world and how the meaning of inclusion for the developing countries is ambiguous, contested, and typically influenced by perspectives of the developed countries. Drawing evidence from case study examples, the authors demonstrate how home-grown initiatives that work with, rather than against, local contexts can lead to more empowering processes of change.

In the final part of the book the authors conclude that whilst the theory, policy and practice of the inclusive education movement have in many ways been an illusion, the idea of inclusion is still worth fighting for.

This book makes an important contribution to the field by challenging those complacent with the developed world view of inclusive education. The authors demonstrate not only that the meaning of inclusion is highly contested, but also that the notion fails as a decontextualised driver for change in post-colonial countries. The circumstances experienced by children in the developing world are alien to many commentators from the North. As such, the kind of questions raised by the authors of this book are poignantly novel (e.g. what does inclusion mean for child soldiers, the 75 million children without access to schools, or the 1 billion people who do not have enough food to eat?) Such questions force the reader to reflect upon basic human rights and the abuse of such rights by those in economic, political and military power. It is through such reflection that we begin to rediscover the ideal that originally motivated the inclusive education movement: '[...] a belief in the possibility of fair and just relationships between people' (p. 138). This book is written with the hope that such a belief will one day prevail around the world.

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