

Changing Paradigms and Future Directions for Implementing Inclusive Education in Developing Countries

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This paper reviews how the international trend to adopting an inclusive approach to education is impacting upon developing countries. Like all regions, developing countries are unique in their requirements. They thus require policy and practices that not only adopt the international Conventions but that also reflect their uniqueness and provide a methodology for implementing inclusion that is regionally and locally effective. Conflicting issues of providing equity while maintaining greater accountability are especially challenging for developing countries with their enormous diversity of students, support, access, and options. The impact on teachers, the role of the principal, competing educational systems, and a reluctance to move away from firmly entrenched pedagogies and curricula also influence the development of inclusion. An examination of future directions for inclusive education considers how developing countries might respond to these challenges to advance an inclusive educational approach that ensures better equity and opportunity for all learners.

Keywords: developing countries, inclusion, policy, equity, accountability, disability, teachers.

Introduction

The movement towards an inclusive approach to education has been embedded within the principles of human rights, the promotion of social justice, the provision of quality education, and the right to a basic education for all, together with equality of opportunity (Kim & Lindeberg, 2012). This has led to a change in schooling from a segregated dual system of education towards, in most regions, the desire to offer a more inclusive approach. Such a change in philosophy has resulted in new models of education, that are more complex and often require difficult changes in the way schools function and in the expectations for teachers (Forlin, 2012). Even when teachers accept the philosophy of inclusion they frequently report a strong reluctance to implement it and they are particularly concerned when the level of support needed for individual children increases (Woolfson & Brady, 2009).

Inclusive education requires generalist teachers to be able to cater for the needs of the most diverse student populations academically, socially, and culturally (Rose, 2010) and for school leaders to be accepting of and committed to the philosophy (Kibria, 2005). School populations world-wide include students with special educational needs such as a disability

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or learning difficulty but they also have learners with an enormous range of other needs that can impact on their capacity to engage with the regular curriculum and pedagogies, both academically and / or socially. These can include among others, students from different socio economic backgrounds, racial minorities, asylum seekers, refugees, those in poverty, and those who have mental health issues caused by internal or external influences, with many youngsters being completely disenfranchised with school (Forlin, 2012).

In developing countries the move towards an inclusive educational system that caters for the needs of children with disabilities is often impacted by the challenges faced to provide some form of basic education for all children. The 2010 EFA Global Monitoring Report (UNESCO) notes that general access to education in developing countries is still extremely limited with 30% or more of young adults having fewer than four years of education, with this being 50% or more in eleven of the sub-Saharan African countries. It further highlights that 44% of out-of-school children in developing countries are unlikely ever to enroll in school. It is also acknowledged by Croft (2010) that many children with disabilities continue to be denied access to even basic education in these regions. Access to education is even more problematic in rural and remote areas of developing countries where according to Charema (2010), “Schools in rural areas and remote places where infrastructure is less developed, work under difficult conditions with a shortage of resources and lack of support”(p. 89). Further, people with disabilities within rural communities are often defined as the poorest with no access to any services including rehabilitation or education (Shrestha, Shrestha, & Deepak, 2009).

In a range of developing countries, for example, in Costa Rica (Stough, 2003) and throughout the sub African continent (Charema, 2010), the ideology of inclusive education has become the focus for providing education for large numbers of children who have previously been unable to access schooling (UNESCO, 2010). Even so, many countries lack the capacity to implement an effective education for all approach due to insufficient funding, support, or knowledge, and a continued reliance on international lending agencies (Armstrong, Armstrong & Spandagou, 2010). Consequently, education systems in developing countries have embraced the move towards inclusion in varied ways, with some governments developing policy or legislation to support this (Forlin, 2011; Kibria, 2005). In almost all regions systems continue to offer different placement options for children with special learning needs that may, when available, include full or part inclusion, to education within segregated special schools (Forlin, 2010). Thus, while the philosophy of inclusion tends to be embraced by governments, implementation is far from being adopted globally.

Inclusive education

Inclusion is seen by many as the most equitable and encompassing method for educating all children (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006). An international definition of inclusion provided as the Salamanca Conference Resolution, an outcome of the *Return to Salamanca* conference (2009) stated that:

We understand inclusive education to be a process where mainstream schools and early year’s settings are transformed so that all children/students are supported to meet their academic and social potential and which involves removing barriers in environment, communication, curriculum, teaching, socialisation and assessment at all levels.

(Inclusion International, 2009)

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Developing countries, though, face many challenges as they engage with the process of implementing inclusive education (Gronlund, Lim, & Larsson, 2010). This is not, however, unique to these countries as many of the primary barriers they experience have been reported as similar to other more developed countries (Stough, 2003). Internationally access to mainstream environments has improved for many children, nevertheless, a lack of resources to enable teachers to develop the appropriate mind set or dispositions towards inclusion, or insufficient training, has been considered an impediment to enabling full inclusion in many developing countries (Charema, 2010; Watson, 2009).

Students with disabilities continue to experience exclusion from any form of education in too many regions, which is entrenched within a failure by society to recognize their capabilities and rights (Adera & Asimeng - Boahene, 2012). As indicated by the 2003 Census of Individuals with Disabilities in India, over 90% of learners with disabilities in India remained unserved (Kalyanpur, 2008). In particular, Kalyanpur reported that fewer services were received by specific groups, such as children with mental retardation, those in rural areas, and girls/women, and that the problem of identification may have contributed to this, proposing that: "...the problem of identification and labelling, of establishing incontrovertibly who are the disabled, suggest(s) that one reason for the large numbers of children with disabilities being unserved is that they have never been identified" (p.249).

Children with disabilities may be excluded from education systems either by default or by design (McConkey & Bradley, 2010). In addition, many children will leave school early either due to poverty, distance, or an inappropriate curriculum. In some developing countries which have experienced major conflicts, poverty, and many uncertainties, such as South Africa (Ngcobo, & Muthukrishna, 2011), Bangladesh (Kibria, 2005), and India (Kalyanpur, 2008) among others, inclusion has been viewed as a means of re-addressing past educational inequalities (Charema, 2010). It has also been seen as a way to providing education for previously excluded learners without the need to build expensive and difficult to staff and maintain separate special schools. There are, nevertheless, still countries where inclusive education is not considered a priority, or where they are challenged by a shortage of teachers, inadequate resources, oversized classes and a national curriculum that is inflexible and didactic, as they struggle to implement education reform that will enable all learners to access schooling (Kalyanpur, 2008a; Sharma, Forlin, Guang-xue, & Deppeler, 2013).

Equity v accountability

The issue of equity has been a major force internationally underpinning the movement towards a more inclusive educational system (Forlin, 2012). Through this approach, policy makers and governments have endeavoured to adopt a range of practices that will further inclusion. At the same time, though, government education policies focus on greater accountability, assessment, and improved outcomes. Government and educational systems in developing countries, like their counterparts in more established systems, would seem to be currently in a dilemma regarding how to proceed with inclusion while attempting to address or in many cases redress these two conflicting spheres of influence that are in constant flux with each other. To enable equity while maintaining accountability through an examination biased system requires sensitive and difficult decisions which rely heavily on the role of teachers to implement.

Defining an equitable approach

Definitions of equity, like those of inclusive education, vary broadly with a focus on identification and solution. While inclusive education has been led by international proactive rights groups and supported by parents, implementation in almost all regions has been a political decision. Such decisions are increasingly made away from educators who have tended not to be consulted or involved in the development of inclusive policy (Forlin, 2012a). Some would argue that commitments to equity are being undermined by the emphasis on the economic goals of education (e.g. Reid, 2011). Few decision makers have any educational background and in addition, governments are increasingly turning to entrepreneurs to provide business style solutions for educational problems.

As a means to ensuring equity many systems have adopted a social justice and ethics-based approach to provide support for all learners, espousing the rights based international conventions of access and opportunity. These systems have developed policy and, in some regions, legislation that guarantees the right to education for all children. In systems such as Costa Rica and Macau, for example, this process is embedded within equal opportunity legislation (Stough, 2003; Forlin, 2011), or in Disability Welfare Acts such as in Bangladesh (Kibria, 2005), or in other documents such as the Education White Paper 6 in South Africa (Ngcobo, & Muthukrishna, 2011). In these instances, schools are legally obliged to accept and teach children with disabilities.

In other systems, while they might espouse an inclusive educational approach in policy, this is not entrenched in law and parents do not have the final say in where their children are educated, as schools may refuse to accept some children for an inclusive schooling approach e.g. in China (Xu, 2012). Many school systems grapple with this distinction and even though they are increasingly being challenged to adopt a more inclusive approach, pressure from within schools themselves, teaching unions, and communities, often impact on the inclusivity of individual schools (Ngcobo & Muthukrishna, 2011).

The impact of private schooling

Maintaining equity in education in developing countries is fraught with many other new challenges. For example, an increasing trend throughout the world is the very noticeably strong movement in the past decade towards the establishment of private, non-government schools and also local independent government schools which are considered to be stand-alone schools (Walford & Srivastava, 2007). While such private schools have previously been associated with elitism and privilege, in some regions such as India, China, and Kenya, low fee private schools have flourished where government schools, especially for poor families, are considered dysfunctional, or where no other schooling is available (Walford & Srivastava, 2007). In countries such as Laos, almost 30% of enrolled students attend unregistered private schools (Rose & Adelabu, 2007). There has simultaneously been a strong movement in many developing countries such as China for more elite schools to cater for the needs of wealthier parents who look to access better quality international education for their children (Xu, 2012).

In particular, there has been an explosion of the number of these elite schools in developing countries such as Asia, especially China and Hong Kong, the Middle East including the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, and Thailand. This poses a number of challenges for educational systems where government schools are competing for students. The biggest concern in regard to the inclusion movement and the need to ensure equity of education for all learners, however, is the ability of private schools to be highly selective in

offering places to students. Unlike government schools in regions where it is legislated that schools must accept all children who wish to enroll in them, there is no such requirement for private schools. Indeed, by definition in their prospectus the elite private schools are highly exclusive as the fees are generally prohibitive to many parents and places are only offered after intensive selection almost always involving personal interviews. As the specific role of elite independent schools is to provide education which is grounded on achieving high examination results, and their existence is predicated on a financial model, there is also no incentive for them to accommodate the needs of learners who require additional support where this may be more costly and where the students may lower school standards on examination results. Thus, teachers will not be encouraged to be inclusive and the focus of education will be on an elitist examination oriented system.

Monitoring accountability

Opposing equity is the major issue of accountability. In all regions there is increasing pressure being placed on schools and school systems for greater accountability in improving the academic outcomes for students and ensuring that they achieve state, national, or federal standards. Within highly competitive systems schools have found great difficulty in balancing the inclusion of students with high support needs with the need for students to attain predetermined standards in literacy, numeracy, and science. A regime of target setting has resulted in an accountability culture that has raised tensions for schools (Reid, 2011). As schools strive to become more inclusive they are still required to achieve inflexible standards.

In many instances, especially in developing countries, teachers are judged on the results of their students, so there is little incentive for them to spend additional time with students who are unlikely to achieve good results (Forlin, 2012). In addition, a willingness to offer places to students who demand higher levels of support may be compromised, thus limiting the options for students with special educational needs to attend a school of their choice. Yet a review of research undertaken by Jordan, Glenn, and McGhie-Richmond (2010), concluded that:

Despite competing professional demands and variable resources, some teachers are able to cope with both high achievement standards and inclusive practices by espousing a belief system and adopting a series of instructional practices that are effective for all their students (p. 264).

Considerable recognition is given in most regions to success in internationally comparable assessment scores and high stakes tests such as PISA. Even national assessments which are benchmarked to standards cause schools to become very focused on measurement and comparative results. According to a recent Australian report it is suggested that while there are many possible purposes for education in schools, very few are given priority when there are such high expectations for national testing (Reid, Cranston, Keating, & Mulford, 2011). These authors further suggest that a government's commitment to choice and the promotion of independent competitive schools that compete within education markets is contradictory to goals of equity and the public purposes of education.

To ensure that schools are meeting the expectations of governments, a range of monitoring approaches have been implemented. The enormous variation in accountability for the education of students with special educational needs is, nevertheless, apparent in many systems (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007; Lamb, 2009), with differences in procedures varying between and within

countries and districts. In regions where inclusive education has become fairly well established, system wide accountability is generally formalised through the use of external school inspectors whose role is to directly review provision for students with special education needs. In the UK, for example, the *Framework for School Inspection* (Office for Standards in Education, 2009) recommends that school inspections should focus on three essential elements. In order to better meet the needs of parents of children with SEN, schools should provide parents with appropriate information to enable them to make informed decisions about the effectiveness of the schools they want their children to attend, or are already attending. In addition, the government should, through their accountability framework, ensure that minimum standards are being met. Thirdly, school inspectors should assist in promoting the improvement of schools and the education system as a whole.

In order to achieve successful evaluation and ensure liability at all levels, the *Lamb Inquiry* (2009) in the UK made many recommendations based around school accountability for the education of students with special educational needs. One of these was directly related to the need for training in special education and disability to be given to a wide range of people involved in all aspects of education for potentially vulnerable learners. In many developing countries, however, accountability at a system level is not as well defined. Culpability frequently relies on local responses to change and can be heavily influenced by parents and school staffs within individual schools as seen, for example, in South Africa (Ngcobo & Muthukrishna, 2011).

Lack of research

One of the major issues associated with implementing inclusion within developing countries is the lack of local research that identifies not only the challenges, but more especially provides potential local solutions for how to overcome them (Walker, 2010). There has been little research on the causes of inequities or on the potential effectiveness or otherwise of borrowed ideas for establishing interventions, especially in developing countries (Reid, 2011). There is, though, a wealth of research internationally focusing on the importance of inclusion and the expectation that all regions should adopt an inclusive approach to education (e.g. Inclusion International, 2009; Kim & Lindeberg, 2012; McConkey, & Bradley, 2010; Rose, 2010; UNESCO, 2010). Within regions which have well established inclusive practices e.g. the US (Gerber, 2012), there is a plethora of research proposing strategies and procedures for implementation. Many of these ideas, however, would be difficult to implement in developing countries where resources are limited, there is a lack of suitable trained support staff, and commitment to inclusion is invariably not as strong (Xu, 2012).

Much of the existing research in developing countries focuses on the perspectives of teachers in regard to their involvement, attitudes, and self-efficacy with inclusive education (Sharma et al., 2013; Sharma, Forlin, & Loreman, 2008). Administrator perspectives of services for the inclusion of young children with disabilities in regular preschool classrooms in Beijing in China, for example, revealed a range of issues that concern them (Bi, & Roberts, 2011). Uncertainty regarding the meaning of inclusive education, capacity for resourcing, and the benefits for both the children with and without disabilities have all been raised as apprehensions. Administrators were further concerned about the potential negative attitudes of teachers and how teachers were going to be able to include students with disabilities within their regular preschool classrooms. Similar concerns were noted in a South African rural school where although the admission of learners with disabilities was well intentioned the

“... deficit thinking and the pathologising of the lived experiences of disabled learners shaped teachers’ understandings of inclusion” (Ngcobo & Muthukrishna, 2011, p. 360), resulting in the children being required to adjust and fit the classroom; rather than the teacher expecting to alter their teaching to accommodate them. Ngcobo and Muthukrishna also raised concerns about the pervasive practice of homogenising children with disabilities, thus allocating expectations and behavior to all children with special learning needs as being the same. In other developing countries, such as India, children with disabilities are frequently included in regular schools through a sense of philanthropy based on notions of care and charity (Singal, 2008). Whilst entry into mainstream schools is, thus, facilitated for these students, Singal reports there is little opportunity for them to participate in the curriculum or culture of the schools.

According to the findings of an investigation in the developing island of Tobago, regarding the progress of students with disabilities, a number of variables were identified as significant predictors for academic success (Paul, 2011). While there were no significant predictor variables found for students without disabilities; parental involvement and support, instruction, student engagement, and support for and difficulty with school work, were all found to be significant predictors for academic achievement for students with disabilities. Further, the significant predictors of employment for youths with disabilities were found to be parent expectations, teachers' levels of education, youths' school experiences and the school program. Many of these predictors are likely to be present in other developing countries and would form a basis for greater research to identify exactly what regional concerns are so they may better be addressed.

Moving forward

How can developing countries proceed with implementing inclusion and what is needed for them to ensure success? In particular, the question remains as to how they can respond positively and timely to the challenges they face and advance an inclusive educational approach that ensures better equity and opportunity for all learners. In response to being signatories to international Conventions, governments are required to give assurances that disability and diversity are being addressed, especially within an inclusive educational domain (Donnelly & Watkins, 2011). Even in developed countries such as Australia “It is difficult to develop sophisticated policy approaches to address complex equity issues when education discourse is simplified” (Reid, 2011, p. 4). To sustain long term change it requires policy processes that are:

- Based on a clear and articulated concept of equity.
- Thorough and systematic, and recognize the complexities involved in achieving better educational outcomes for ‘equity groups’.
- Founded on research and inquiry, and an appreciation of the different contexts in which educational practice operates.
- Trialed and evaluated before being spread widely.
- Wary about reinforcing the very inequities that they are designed to address.

Reid (2011, p. 4)

Of key importance to enabling effective inclusion in developing countries is the significance of responding to local context by adopting an inclusive approach that meets a

country's unique needs and demands (Sharma et al., 2013). Pather (2008) proposes that developing countries need to establish more sustainable and context-appropriate policies and practices in order to enable more effective inclusion. In particular, a planned and concerted effort is needed at a national level (Kibria, 2005), that considers both rural and urban contexts, with varying localized needs (Charema, 2010).

Responding to cultural diversity

Various approaches have been adopted by developing countries as they attempt to respond to cultural diversity. In order to help raise the status of people with disabilities and as a means of promoting their rights to equal opportunities, Disability Equality Training (DET) has been employed by some development agencies (Harris & Enfield, 2003). This approach aims to promote an understanding of disability and improve capacity building of people with disabilities from a social model perspective. A large project in 2005, organised as a joint venture by the Japan International Cooperation Agency and the Department of Social Welfare in Malaysia, trained 41 people with disabilities from 10 developing countries (Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, Maldives, & Afghanistan) in DET (Kenji, 2009). Two specific advantages were noted as an outcome of this program, namely, disability education for equality to non-disabled people and empowerment practice for people with disabilities across the regions involved in the training.

In regard to how to promote greater inclusion in education, in Costa Rica, for example, they have capitalized on the existing special school network of teachers by promulgating four service models that extend services to regular schools by providing consulting teachers, educational assistant teams, itinerant teachers and resource centres (Stough, 2003). In Bangladesh and in Nepal they have established rural self-help groups linked to Community-Based Rehabilitation programmes to support the inclusion of children with disabilities in local schools. In Bangladesh the extensive networking and collaboration between education and special welfare government departments, disability focused NGOs, and mainstream development agencies, has been a way of promoting the inclusion of children with disabilities in local schools (Fefoame, Mulligan, & Haque, 2012). In Nepal, a participatory survey on poverty and disability was used as a stimulus for recognizing the lack of access to services by people with disabilities from poor rural areas as a means of promoting the establishment through women's self-help groups of community groups for people with disabilities (Shrestha, Shrestha, & Deepak, 2009). In India, alternative institutions to traditional providers of education have flourished where the community functions as an entrepreneur by adopting a 'not for profit model' with external funding support (Kalyanpur, 2008).

The use of assistive technologies, as proposed by Gronlund et al. (2010), is also considered as part of the equation for supporting a region to achieve inclusion. Use of the internet to access support, materials, and training can help to overcome the isolation and access issues found by many developing countries. Yet Gronlund et al. (2010) highlight a range of obstacles for many developing countries at school and national level with access to the network, indicating that if assistive technologies are to be effective then a national perspective is required. They posit that such an approach would need to adopt a systematic method by addressing five management challenges, namely, the formation and maintenance of professional networks: identification and sustainment of knowledge and expertise; funding management; coordination among different government departments, and implementation, maintenance, and monitoring of a national program. They further suggest that governments

need to initiate an incentives-based constructivist approach to ensure consistent and effective use of technologies throughout the region for supporting inclusion.

Teacher education for inclusion

It would seem immutable that teacher education is the epitome of establishing more effective and inclusive schooling for all learners. Without effectual and proficient teachers appropriate pedagogy and instruction is unlikely to be provided that can accommodate the needs of all learners. Similarly, without a positive mindset towards inclusion and a genuine willingness to differentiate the curriculum to meet students' diverse needs, inclusion is unlikely to become anything more than rhetoric. According to Armstrong et al. (2010), reports from the majority of developing countries identify serious problems in teacher education and pedagogy within schools. Clearly, then, a major focus of moving forward must be much greater emphasis on preparing teachers for an inclusive approach.

To enact an inclusive approach the principal is a key player in enabling a positive outcome for all (Sharma & Desai, 2010). The teachers and other staff are also critical to the successful implementation and sustainability of an inclusive approach (Ngcobo & Muthukrishna, 2011). Of vital importance, therefore, is the need for teachers who are better trained to provide inclusive practices for learners with diverse needs (Forlin, 2012a; Kibria, 2005). The lack of suitably qualified or trained teachers continues to be a major concern in many regions, contributing to the challenges faced by countries endeavouring to implement inclusion (Charema, 2010; Forlin, 2010; Stough, 2003). Preparation of teachers for inclusion requires appropriate and effective training to be available both prior to and during the establishment of inclusion (Sharma et al., 2013).

Teacher education courses must be related to the practicality of implementation, rather than simply focusing on the theoretical underpinnings of the paradigm, or government policy that dictates the direction for change (Forlin, 2012). Course content should also take greater account of the opinion of principals and teachers and the approaches that they have found useful and manageable in supporting inclusion. In particular, in developing countries where information about inclusion is starting to be implemented as part of teacher training, teacher educators also require up-skilling before being able to prepare teachers for inclusive education. A system wide training of teacher educators is also essential as adopted, for example, by Vietnam (Forlin, & Dinh, 2010).

Conclusion

Inclusive education is a complex issue, especially as it has now broadened to reflect the right to include all learners with diverse needs to access education within their chosen school environment. Policies for promoting inclusion are often difficult to enact in developing countries and may be unrealistic in their expectations if based on international creeds without due consideration for local contexts. Issues of providing equity while maintaining greater accountability are challenging when basic educational premises of well-established pedagogies and curricula are reluctant to change. To ensure that inclusive educational approaches actually address the needs of learners and that implementation ideas through policy development are manageable and practicable, a proactive systemic approach is needed that is supplemented by local input and involvement.

Policy needs to be firmly embedded and informed by local research that addresses the specific needs of a region by considering city and rural situations, fiscal constraints, support structures, and the capabilities of those who are to implement it. To enact an inclusive approach requires appropriate preparation of all stakeholders. This particularly applies to the training of staff at all levels from the system to the classroom. To simply adopt the wording from international declarations into local policies, without considering the implications for implementation that will vary enormously based on regional needs, will not produce an effective inclusive approach to education. Developing countries, like all regions, are unique in their requirements and thus they require policy that reflects this and above all else is manageable by those who are going to be required to implement it.

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