

Foreword

Across the globe, inclusive education has been accorded high acceptability and is seen as the hallmark of service provision for all children, particularly those with disabilities. Nearly two decades since the Salamanca Statement, when inclusive education was proposed as being central to the development of an inclusive society, it has been endorsed by various international agencies and national governments.

Inclusive education in countries of the South, over the recent years, has become an ideal standard. It is argued to be a panacea for bringing about reforms in the broader education system, and has been promoted through arguments of human rights and economic viability. This book underlines the perennial significance of a critical, questioning approach towards inclusive education, particularly in developing contexts. It accents the merits in contextualizing the various debates and concerns in the current discourse.

Discussions in this book are sensitive to the consequences of inclusive education as a global travelling policy and practice. Indiscriminate policy transference has significant intended and unintended consequences, especially when the realities of educational governance, resourcing and broader socio-cultural dynamics are different.

Building on robust evidence from the field gathered in Guatemala and Malawi, the book challenges a monolithic understanding of inclusive education. Undertaking a nuanced multi-layered analysis of the education system, the authors vividly portray the diversity and complexity of local contexts in which international and national policies are enacted. A key strength of this book is its engagement with and critical analysis of diverse stakeholder perspectives. Based on perceptions gathered from government officials, school-based professionals and, most importantly, students and their parents, the deliberations in this book reflect a robust empirical examination of inclusive education in developing contexts. Such in-depth and systematic engagement with local realities is much needed in the current discourse on inclusive education.

The various authors note how the creation of inclusive schools must begin with engaging local stakeholders: Their histories and biographies, their view of situated needs and priorities, and their appreciation of the enabling and constraining influences on efforts towards making education systems more inclusive of diversity. Findings from the book remind us that inclusion is an on-going process involving reflexivity and negotiation. It is a process which is embedded in and shaped by unique existing material conditions, social relations, and interpersonal actions. Implementation is complex and success depends on the extent to which

the agency and capabilities of different stakeholders is harnessed, supported and optimized.

This book also provides support for a growing argument that inclusive education must be regarded as a series of continua rather than a single absolute with only one international configuration. Efforts towards inclusion of all children should be supported through a range of pedagogical and structural practices. It is not simply about up-skilling teachers, but also about providing support in terms of human and learning resources across different sectors.

Finally, this book makes an important contribution to upholding the value of plurality in discourses and acknowledges the range of possible responses to the complex questions posed by efforts towards inclusive education: Foreclosing debate and making diverse practices invisible does not always provide the most effective solutions. It reaffirms the vision of inclusion, whilst noting the real challenges (and opportunities) available in different national contexts. Fundamentally, it upholds the vision that education systems can shape the development of an inclusive society and support the participation of all children in the common enterprise of learning to become who they want to be. However, in order to do so, we need to be continually reflective of underlying tensions and ambiguities and, most importantly, to be open to re-envisioning inclusive education in ways that are respectful of local solutions, ethics and values.

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