

Editorial: Inclusive education in the Global South: can we turn promises into actions?

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Inclusive education: the era of international promises?

Inclusive education (IE) became a top global priority with the international commitment to *ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030*, as stated in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) (UN, 2015). Initially preoccupied solely with the placement of children with disabilities in mainstream schools, the international journey towards IE began with the historic Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994) and continued with several other agreements, notably, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006). Over the years, there have been endless debates about the meaning and remit of IE, which, as a result, has been broadened in international definitions, to include all learners, not only those with disabilities (UNESCO, 2020). Currently, across the Global North (GN) and Global South (GS), the dominant discourse views IE as every child's human right to quality education (Kamenopoulou, 2020).

With less than a decade remaining for the global goal for education to be met, everything seems to be in place (at least on paper): international policies that are in turn slowly but steadily translated into national legislation; and a commonly accepted rights-based rhetoric. Moreover, research on IE is being produced at a remarkable rate with numerous books, articles, projects, and initiatives exploring the best ways of promoting the IE agenda within different contexts (see Ainscow et al., 2019; Ainscow, 2020; Taneja-Johansson & Singal, 2021). Despite the popularity of the idea of IE and the progress made so far in relevant policy and research, plenty of evidence clearly shows that in reality, there is still a long way to go for countries to make their education systems inclusive of all learners, and that huge inequalities remain widespread worldwide. Indeed, a recent Global Education Monitoring (GEM) report specifically focused on the state of IE around the world, concluding that millions of children globally are still out of school, with girls, the poorest and those with disabilities being at highest risk for exclusion, due to stigma, stereotypes and discrimination (UNESCO, 2020). Amongst the latter, certain groups are impacted the most, such as those with intellectual, sensory and physical disabilities, who continue to face barriers to high quality education. It therefore seems to be the case that

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we live in the era of international promises, which nations, around the world, across the South and North, struggle to translate into actions.

Inclusive education in the Global South: lost in translation?

Research suggests that one of the biggest challenges in the journey towards IE is that of translating international agreements into national policies and practices, and this tension between the ‘global’ and the ‘local’ is particularly the case for GS contexts (Kamenopoulou, 2020; Sharma, 2020; Kalyanpur, 2022). This is not surprising, because international frameworks based on human rights are led from the North and reflect its values, theoretical positions, and realities, whereas GS spaces face complex realities such as ‘post-colonialist structures and oppression, extreme poverty and inequality, conflict, displacement and immigration, pandemics and the consequences of climate change, to name but a few’ (Kamenopoulou, 2018a; p.1). Importing, IE discourses on the GS without consideration of the particular needs of these contexts, has led to a persistent and superficial focus on children with disabilities and their placement in mainstream schools in many parts of the GS (see for example, Kamenopoulou, 2018b; Moreno Angarita, et al., 2023; Karisa et al., 2021). However, these multifaceted spaces have very different realities with a plethora of intersections between various forms of disadvantage, such as gender, poverty, age, race, class, and disability, that lead to perpetuated educational and social exclusion. Hence the understanding of the notions of rights, (dis)ability and inclusion remains fluid and varies greatly across cultures and chronological periods with relevant policy and practice shaped by several local factors, for example, historical, economic, sociocultural and geopolitical (Kamenopoulou, 2018a; 2020).

For instance, faced with abject poverty, some parents of children with disabilities in Kenya are reported to have been more concerned about their children getting an education that leads to real life economic benefits rather than worrying about where that education should take place; whether at a mainstream or special school or at home (Karisa et al., 2021). In other words, according to these parents, a good education system should be judged by the usefulness of the knowledge and skills it imparts for the learners to address their lived economic challenges. More basically, where that education takes place is not a prioritised consideration. In addition, due to the profound disparities in the enrolment of children with disabilities in schools in the GS, IE is often understood as putting children with disabilities in school and the understanding of IE as moving children from segregated to mainstream schools may be more applicable to GN contexts, where disparities in the school enrolment of children with disabilities in general are less glaring (Karisa et al., 2023). Accordingly, paying attention to specific contextual realities when thinking about IE within the GS is crucial (Kalyanpur, 2011; Kamenopoulou, 2018a). Grech sums this up eloquently:

In the overriding presence of poverty and deprivation, rights more often than not run the risk of being utopian, and inattention to local contexts, political economies, histories

and cultures may make them contextually insignificant (2011: 92).

Thinking critically about inclusive education in the Global South: why do we need to?

Importantly, the 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2020) highlighted that we lack data on IE from across the GS, and particularly from certain regions, like Latin America and the Caribbean. As a result, we know very little about how children from various vulnerable groups experience education in these complex and heterogeneous spaces. However, we do not just urgently need more research focusing on the South, but we must ensure this research is done critically, because of how the interpretation and operationalisation of IE varies depending on the local context. In mainstream IE literature, there is limited critical work in relation to GS contexts (Kamenopoulou, 2018a). The field is dominated by research led by Northern researchers, and reflects Northern values and theoretical frameworks, so much so that IE can be described as a ‘neo-colonial’ project imposed on the South by the North (Walton, 2018), a project ‘anchored to colonial frameworks of understanding and approaching human differences’ (Rao and Kalyanpur, 2020:1830). Grech describes this problem in relation to the field of disability and development in particular: ‘There is too little reflection on methods, approaches and positionality. This includes increasingly field-distant and isolated ‘professionals’ sending unknowing research assistants unfamiliar with the community [...] with a piece of paper drafted miles away’ (2015:15). The result is that these Northern-led efforts are limited to ‘making the Global South fit into their dominant perspectives as opposed to learning about this complex and hybrid space in its own right, including its emergent disability perspectives and theory’ (Grech, 2015:11). It seems that IE has become a Northern-led discursive metanarrative itself, even used as a benchmark, against which to criticise and even penalise other initiatives that do not fit or even contradict the dominant narrative.

Given how important the role of local contexts is in shaping the understanding and operationalisation of IE, it is possible to question the usefulness or Northern ‘experts’ on inclusion, who ‘scurry the world for meetings, research and consultancy’ (Grech, 2015: 13). The global IE development agenda must pay more attention to local contexts and cultures; beliefs about and constructions of disability and difference; and the understanding of education, its validity and perceived usefulness in context. More critical theoretical and research literature on IE that is not *about* but *from* the Global South, particularly that related to intersectional dimensions, is urgently needed, as pointed out recently by some authors (see Bešić, 2020). We need more evidence on the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion operating within these complex spaces, and we need nuanced and culturally-sensitive research on IE and how it faces up to historical and geopolitical specificities and heterogeneities. We can no longer afford uncritically celebrating IE in global fora without consideration of local realities or any reflection on researcher positionality or the power relations between researchers and research participants.

This special issue: what can we learn from the South?

The aim of this special issue is to bring together researchers, academics, practitioners, advocates and activists and to open up a safe space for critical reflection. In putting this special issue together, we wanted to share examples of critical thinking about and from the South to a global audience. The articles selected focus on contexts seldom discussed in the dominant literature, namely, Afghanistan, Argentina, Colombia, Kenya, Uganda, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). More importantly, they are the products of equitable South-North research collaborations and ethical co-productions of research with local participants, including in-depth reflections on researcher positionality and consideration of each local context's particular characteristics. As a result, this special issue provides a rich and much needed snapshot of inclusion in and exclusion from education in the GS, grounded on the experiences of those living in it, whose voices are often ignored or silenced in mainstream IE narratives and research.

The first article in the special issue, by Hayes, presents an ethnographic study about the Colombian Escuela Nueva (EN) model, originally designed to meet the needs of children living in rural and remote areas, exploring the extent to which elements of this model can be useful in supporting the inclusion of children with disabilities. The uniqueness of this article lies in its focus on the voices of local and uniquely disadvantaged children with and without disabilities, as well as the development of creative participatory methods for listening to those voices. During a nine-month long fieldwork period in rural and remote parts of Colombia's mountainous regions, the researcher conducted work with fifty-three children from five EN schools, including twenty-six children with disabilities. The study sheds light on the children's experiences of inclusion and difference and shows strategies that researchers can use to sensitively and ethically work with children from extremely disadvantaged backgrounds. More importantly, as the author reflects, it highlights that when researching disability and inclusion, it is crucial to gain a rich understanding of not only the ways in which disability and difference are understood within a given local context, but also the ways in which intersecting aspects of this context impact upon children.

The second article by Brundle, explores how occupational therapists and special education teachers in Uganda understand disability-inclusive education, focusing on their lived experiences, as well as on how these are interpreted by the researcher during the process of data collection. Based on semi-structured interviews with six practitioners, the research offers a much-needed critical reflection of how the author, an outsider, who trained as an occupational therapist and a researcher in the North, understands the experiences and views of local practitioners from this GS context. The research, moreover, clearly highlights the tensions between international policies led by the North and the actual experiences and understandings of those implementing them through their practice in the GS, an area on which more critical work is urgently needed.

The next article by Wickenden et al. reports on a qualitative project that is part of a larger intervention aimed at developing and piloting a model of disability-inclusive Early Childhood Development and Education (ECDE) in Kenya. What is interesting about this project is that it is a genuine North-South collaboration, in which international researchers worked collaboratively with local Non-Governmental Organisations and a Kenyan researcher to co-develop the research approach with nine local researchers with disabilities, who in turn ran focus groups with parents of children with disabilities, teachers in ECDE classes and children with disabilities from two districts in Kenya. This is an original and culturally sensitive research that centres the voices of local people and provides contextually relevant findings regarding the local understandings of disability, attitudes to inclusion and the role of contextual barriers, such as poverty and lack of resources.

The fourth article, by Iqtadar and colleagues, presents a qualitative study on an extremely under-researched topic, namely, the inclusion in education of children and especially girls with disabilities in Afghanistan, a context of poverty, negative cultural attitudes, and gender discrimination and segregation. The findings, based on in-depth interviews with three local actors who set up a pioneering inclusive school in Kabul, provide much needed knowledge about how similar contexts can approach the implementation of IE, given limited resources, lack of government support, and negative societal attitudes. It moreover highlights the role that intersecting identities play in determining the success of inclusion, specifically the interplay between disability and gender that puts girls with disabilities at an extreme disadvantage and at high risk of exclusion from education in many parts of the world.

Garces-Bacsal et al. in the fifth article in this special issue, discuss how teachers in UAE use culturally responsive teaching practices with ‘students of determination’ as per the terminology used in the local context, to describe children with special educational needs and/or disabilities. The researchers conducted a survey and interviews with twenty-four teachers, to explore their culturally responsive practices and to trial the Culturally Responsive Teaching Self-Efficacy (CRTSE) scale within this particular context. The particular strength of this study is its focus on culturally responsive inclusive education practices in relation to children with disabilities in the UEA. The latter country has set out ambitious strategies regarding IE, but has very particular characteristics, such as the largest population of immigrant students worldwide and a teacher and student population that is ethnically and linguistically diverse. The study highlights the need for culturally diverse teaching practices and for specific teacher training on this area, particularly in relation to those students with disabilities.

The sixth and final paper in the special issue by Figueroa, is a ‘voice from the field’ article from Argentina, which makes an important contribution to our understanding of IE in the GS, by looking at other groups of vulnerable children, other than those with disabilities. The paper takes us to the northwest of Patagonia, in the Argentinian city and province of Neuquén that

shares its western border with Chile. It looks at a pioneering model of Mental Health (MH) care developed by a local Institution and based on pedagogical practices, such as building community and fostering critical MH awareness. Drawing on observations and interviews with staff and past patients, the author argues that this educational model of MH care could provide a blueprint from the GS for other countries to reconceptualise MH as an educational outcome. It can also help provide the opportunity for IE to support the well-being of all students, including those with MH difficulties, who continue to be pulled out of school to receive treatment in many contexts around the world.

Overall, these papers highlight some crucial common themes regarding the current and future state of IE within the GS. The studies from Colombia, India and Kenya illustrate the key role of local factors acting as barriers to IE, for example conditions of extreme poverty and limited or no recourses. The studies from Afghanistan, Colombia, and Uganda highlight how local cultures and societies with historically negative attitudes to disability and difference are another important factor. Other contextual issues laid out in the special issue include the divide between private and government-funded education, and the challenges of meeting the needs of multilingual student populations, as is the case for example, in the UAE and Colombia. As a result of these contextual factors, access to quality education remains a struggle for many families, because of economic, linguistic, cultural, societal and other barriers. The studies presented here show that it is crucial to engage with the local context and the knowledge of its people, in order to address the current power imbalances between the GS and the GN in knowledge production and sharing.

As IE emigrates southwards, it seems that international promises will remain empty promises, unless we urgently turn our attention towards the particular characteristics of different GS spaces and places, and unless the North is willing to critically engage with and learn from the South. Indeed, studies in this special issue directly ask the timely and necessary question: what can the GS teach the GN in this common journey towards IE? Simply put: what is the value of locally developed models for addressing difference and disadvantage, equity and inclusion? We conclude this editorial by stressing that the GN has been leading international IE development for decades, and that moving forward, we must flip the narrative and ensure that international IE development is grounded on genuinely equitable South-North partnerships and culturally-sensitive and ethical research that centres the experiences of the people living in the GS, whose voices have so far remained marginalised and excluded.

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