REVIEW ESSAY

Inclusive Education

LEVAN LIM & REBECCA IRELAND
Fred and Eleanor Schonell Special Education Research Centre, The University of Queensland, Brisbane Qld 4072, Australia

Working Towards Inclusive Education: Social Contexts
PETER MITTLER
London: David Fulton Publishers, 2000
£16.00, 212 pp.
ISBN 1-853-46698-0

Learning and Inclusion: The Cleves School Experience
PRISCILLA ALDERSON (Ed.)
Written by staff and pupils of the Cleves School, Newham, London
London: David Fulton Publishers, 1999
£13.00, 96 pp.
ISBN 1-853-46609-3

The practice and rhetoric of inclusive education or inclusion has become a significant part of educational reforms in many countries around the world over the past decade or so. Inclusive education has been acclaimed as a force for renewing schools and “the way” to building more inclusive and equitable societies. The notion of schools as educating communities where students learn the values, attitudes, and skills to support the inclusion of all citizens in society is a powerful rationale and impetus for transforming education to be more relevant to a changing world that is increasingly characterised by global interdependence and greater human diversity. The future of the world is intimately dependent on nations and individuals working together to create and realise desirable futures. Hence, the nexus between education and future societies has never been so critical. The promise of inclusive education, strengthened by the foresight of a better future for everyone and the hindsight of past practices that have failed to promote full membership of individuals with disabilities in society, reinforces this relationship between education and the future.

The prominence of inclusive education as an educational agenda is widely evident in both practice and rhetoric. A proliferation of information and knowledge can be found on the internet as well as in journals and books. In the print world there are many texts, written by both special and regular educators, with an inclusive focus on catering to the diverse needs of all children. Most of these texts advocate for and describe inclusive philosophies, concepts, and practices that support the educational...
needs of each child, whether with special needs or not, within regular classes alongside typically developing peers. Being included educationally and socially has become a hallmark of quality education, and many texts elaborate on processes and practices to facilitate inclusion, such as curriculum, assessment, strategies, partnership with parents, the roles of professionals, and school change.

Considering the ease with which modern technology and travel have allowed the sharing of printed materials in the age of global interconnectedness, it is to be expected that a number of texts or internet-based information on inclusive education will eventually (if it has not already happened) be dispersed to the four corners of the earth. The plethora of current texts on inclusion (mainly from the West) are undeniably useful to the many countries they will reach but their impact will be limited if perspectives on inclusion are not encouraged to be “situated” within local conditions and circumstances. Indeed, it is rare to find a book placing or contextualising inclusive education within broader social and international contexts that not only allows a critical appraisal of the influence of these broader contexts on the prospects of inclusive education but also invigorates the meaning, agenda, and method of inclusion as it is currently and commonly known.

Peter Mittler’s new book *Working Towards Inclusive Education: Social Context* is such a book, a timely rarity among the extant literature on inclusive education because this book exemplifies the importance of situating inclusive education within local, national, and global contexts. Although there is a strong recognition of inclusive education as a global agenda in the professional literature, there is a lack of texts in the current market that provide a detailed description and critical commentary of inclusion issues pertinent to a particular societal context while breathing an international focus and flavour into inclusive education as it is embraced and indigenised by various countries. Furthermore, Mittler’s book is unique in that, through its vigilant attention to the ubiquitous realities of poor and socially disadvantaged children and families in the UK as well as worldwide, the meaning and agenda of inclusive education is set against a much broader backdrop than that provided by most other current texts.

First and foremost, in addition to clarifying premises and concepts of inclusive education within a wider scope of needs (e.g., poverty), a large portion of the book’s content is clearly situated within the UK context with comprehensive information provided on specific policies, proposals, and practices that relate to inclusion. Readers interested in the state and underpinnings of inclusive education in the UK will find invaluable and detailed information in this book. We appreciate the meticulous care and level of detail which Mittler uses in explicating the context of inclusion in the UK. These details highlight the complex dialectical relationship of local responses and practices with inclusion as a global agenda and concept.

Mittler’s portrayal of inclusive education in the UK with concurrent information across international contexts organised around key topics makes the text especially useful for viewing inclusive education as a universal philosophy and practice that can be adopted and indigenised by local cultures and conditions. We were pleasantly surprised with descriptions of inclusive education in the so-called developing countries where the (re)combination of existing forms and practices of cultures with
inclusive principles and practices has led to new forms and meanings of inclusion. For example, Mittler mentions the case of Lesotho, an African country which has welcomed inclusive education not only as an educational route to reach as many children as possible, but also as a sustainable school practice that builds upon the inclusiveness of its culture. The revelation that inclusion can be successful in class sizes of between 50 to 100 children is mind-boggling yet suggestive of the “resilience” of the concept of inclusion in its interpretation and “doability” in various cultural contexts. Considering that most Western-based texts strongly suggest that inclusion happens best in small classes, these successful cross-cultural examples of inclusive practices defy conventional Western wisdom and knowledge about inclusion and strongly suggest the significance of the cultural context as a mediator in redefining and reinterpreting different forms and practices of inclusion.

What predisposed the teachers of such large classes in Lesotho to be “naturally inclusive” (p. 27) is an interesting question which leads to Mittler’s perspective that the so-called developing countries have much to teach the richer and developed countries about inclusive education:

There are classrooms with up to 100 children in many parts of the world that are inclusive because each lesson and each activity seems naturally created to ensure that all the children can take part. By the same token, one can find classes with two adults and 20 children in which a few children are literally and metaphorically at the margins, not taking part in the lesson and isolated from other children. (p. 177)

We found Mittler’s newest work to be an informative and exciting book to read. This book is a definite contribution to the existing range of inclusion texts through its unique and invaluable focus on the broader social contexts and ramifications of educational policies and practices that affect the learning and development of children both within the UK and internationally.

We found the next book Learning and Inclusion: The Cleves School Experience, edited by Priscilla Alderson and written by staff and pupils of the Cleves School, Newham, London, to be a perfect companion to Mittler’s book. What came across strongly and clearly in Mittler’s text, especially in relation to his descriptions and discussions on policies, proposals, and practices affecting inclusive education in the UK, was the refutation of the simplistic notion that schools alone can work on inclusion without simultaneously referencing with and exploring ways in which families and local communities can be involved in efforts to change schools. To plan effectively and economically for inclusion and diverse student populations, local educational authorities and schools are challenged to pay more attention to addressing whole school issues in partnership with families and local communities. These challenges are not easy because schools are being stretched in ways that are opposite and even contradictory to traditional practices and policies in order to meet multiple expectations from diverse stakeholders.

The Cleves School Experience showcases how a particular school with a diverse student population in the UK responded to the specific challenges faced by schools in the UK context discussed in Mittler’s book. Many refreshing and creative ideas
and experiences implemented on a whole school level in partnership with parents and the local community in order to foster an inclusive culture, are presented in an easy to read format and style. We are certain that other schools not just in the UK, but around the world will find useful ideas, practices, and examples in this book that they can adapt and develop.

Inclusion is about reaching and educating all children while meeting the needs of individuals. In reading the Cleves School Experience, the principles, processes, and practices of inclusion are clearly described in four main chapters that cover: building an inclusive community school; active student participation through differentiated learning and group work; peer relationships and friendships; and enjoying learning and growing in the school. Besides these more substantial chapters, there is a short introduction and conclusion chapter as well as appendices containing principles and policies relevant to the school. We like the many details included in this book that affect the running and inclusive atmosphere of the school, such as the furniture arrangements, class scheduling, and peer interaction. The anecdotal statements of the children, parents, and teachers are helpful in illustrating the meanings constructed within the school that promote the inclusion of diverse learners.

In summary, we thoroughly enjoyed reviewing these two books, especially since they complimented each other in the “breadth and depth” of learning more about the social and global contexts that affect inclusion and how one exemplary school has refined its inclusive practices to reflect the realities of these broader contexts.