

The Possibility Of A ‘Southern Theory’ Of Inclusive Education In ‘An Other Tongue’

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Introduction

This conceptual paper is an experiment in establishing intercultural theoretical dialogue across linguistic barriers on the topic of inclusive education. Though there are some critics of inclusive education, over the past couple of decades converging academic debates and policy documents suggests that probably inclusive education is a good idea to implement in schools for a more tolerant inclusive society. This paper begins with brief discussion of the established historic trajectory of academic theoretical debates and policy documents on inclusive education. Thereafter, the discussion focuses on scholars, who have been studying the implementation of inclusive education in the developing world. These scholars suggest the need to contextualize the meaning of inclusive education for the developing postcolonial countries, since the concept is often rejected without much conceptual reflection, research and understanding as a hegemonic knowledge from the North transferred to the South through policy documents from IGOs. Moving beyond this North-South binary power relationship involved in generating theory and its application, this paper suggests the possibility of Southern theorizing of the concept within the Indian context.

Academic debates and theorising of Inclusive Education

Much of the early academic theoretical debates on inclusive education within the scholarly community are known to have emerged in developed economies of the North. The Scandinavian countries along with the United States, Canada and England are considered as pioneers in the field. They comprise the first generation/wave of inclusive Education. This first generation/wave of inclusive education was supposedly followed by the second generation/wave of inclusive education by postcolonial countries of the South in Asia, Africa and Latin America with very different historical trajectories because of their colonial histories and legacy as theorized by Kozleski, Artiles & Waitoller (2011) The position of Australasia is quite ambivalent in such theorizing of the historic trajectory of the concept.

¹ Here I am drawing on the idea of Southern Theory from Raewyn Connell (2007) as suggested by Armstrong, A., Armstrong, D., Spandagou (2010) to contextualize theoretical understanding about inclusive education.

² The phrase “An Other Tongue” was borrowed by Mignolo (2000) from Alfred Arteaga’s “An Other Tongue: Nation and Ethnicity in the Linguistic Borderlands” (1994) to suggest conceptual thinking in “other” or subaltern languages among ethnic communities.

The idea of “social inclusion” was often used interchangeably with the word “integration” in some of the early literature on the topic. (Pijl, Meijer & Hegarty, 1997; Loreman, Deppler & Harvey, 2011) It became popular particularly in the era following the World War II with increasing labour force mobility and increase in social and cultural diversity. Following social movements from marginalised groups, policymakers began to realize the value of inclusive education for social cohesion. Beginning in the 1960s, diverse social and political movements in these countries by social minorities, including the feminist movement, civil rights movement of the Black community in the US, movement of persons with disabilities and pressure group from some parents and activists led to the emergence of the public discourse on inclusive education. Despite its multiple meanings and interpretations, theoretically academic scholars of inclusive education/schooling consider it as a utopia, an ideal which is hypothetically capable of creating an inclusive society helping to curb prejudice and discrimination against social minorities. It is supposed to help create a more tolerant and accepting society based on the principles of social justice, equity and human rights. (Barton 1997, Slee 2006)

Booth and Ainscow (2000) identified three major areas for an inclusive school system- inclusive school culture, inclusive school policy and inclusive schooling practice. Though in an attempt to standardize the implementation of inclusive education, Booth and Ainscow (2000) also designed an index of inclusion to measure levels of social inclusion in schools, there is no global consensus so far about the definition of inclusive education as such scholars, policy-makers; school administrators and educators have interpreted the idea in diverse ways. However, Slee (2006) has critiqued this process by citing what Edward Said (2000) wrote in “Traveling Theory Revisited” (p.436):

... The first time a human experience is recorded and then given theoretical formulation, its force comes from being directly connected to and organically provoked by real historical circumstances. Later versions of the theory cannot replicate its original power; because the situation has quieted down and changed, the theory is degraded and subdued, made into a relatively tame academic substitute for the real thing, whose purpose in the work I analyzed was political change.

(Said 2000 as cited in Slee 2006, p.113)

Kozleski, Artiles & Waitoller (2011) has also critiqued this process of dilution as the concept of “inclusive education” which developed out of people’s experience of marginalization seeking social justice and equity has now been usurped by “conservatives, liberals and radicals alike”.

(p.1) So, they emphasize the need to take equity as a necessary prism “to identify and give voice to the experiences and lives of people who live at the margins of social institutions and, in doing so, make visible power-laden polycultural discourses that construct differences”. (p.2)

Global Design of Inclusive Education

The policy discourse on inclusive education began since the world declaration of “Education for All” (EFA) in 1990 during the Jomtien World Conference recalling the universal declaration of education as basic human right. Since then countries around the world have set up their regional EFA offices and have struggled to balance expansion with the quality of education delivered. Following the EFA declaration, during the Salamanca World Conference in 1994 on “Special Needs Education: Access and Quality”, UNESCO coined a definition of inclusive education:

Inclusive education is based on the right of all learners to a quality education that meets basic learning needs and enriches lives. Focusing particularly on vulnerable and marginalized groups, it seeks to develop the full potential of every individual. The ultimate goal of inclusive education is to end all forms of discrimination and foster social cohesion. (UNESCO)

Moreover, it is believed that inclusive schools “are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the *efficiency* and ultimately the *cost-effectiveness* of the entire education system.” (UNESCO, 1994, p. ix)

The idea of inclusive education is now no longer limited to developed economies of North America, Europe and Australasia, even developing postcolonial nation-states must now make accommodations to implement it following these global policy mandates by UNESCO as extensively argued by Armstrong A, Armstrong D, Spandagou (2009). However, there is a rising debate among scholars about the problematic of its implementation both in the global North and the global South. Scholars argue that neoliberal policies for economic growth fostering competition in education, *cost-effectiveness* and *efficiency* (as it is evident from the second quote above) often works against the values of social inclusion of the marginalized and vulnerable. Moreover, the inheritance of competition-based colonial systems, postcolonial social imaginary

and assertion of identity politics in the global South runs contrary to the values of social inclusion and cooperation for a reconciled cosmopolitan future. Drawing on a range of critical sociological studies of education policy for two decades in England and Wales, and Soudien's (1998) study in South Africa; Barton & Slee (1999) argued how the market discourse of "competition" and "selection" were in effect contrary to the values of inclusion, not just in England but also in a postcolonial context like South Africa. They argued that inclusive education for all needs to pay attention to issues of identity, recognition and redistribution.

Inclusive Education and its Multiple Meanings

From the above discussion it is evident that the academic theoretical understanding of the concept of "inclusive education" grew out of social movements in the Northern/ developed economies and was later transferred to the Southern/ postcolonial developing economies through individual human rights-based definitions and policy documents of IGOs like the UNESCO. However,

What is meant by 'Inclusion'?

The meaning of 'inclusion' is by no means clear and perhaps conveniently blurs the edges of social policy with a feel-good rhetoric that no one could be opposed to. What does it really mean to have an education system that is 'inclusive'? Who is thought to be in need of inclusion and why? If education should be inclusive, then what practices is it contesting, what common values is it advocating, and by what criteria should its successes be judged?

Armstrong, A., Armstrong, D., Spandagou (2010, p.5)

The above quote suggests there is no clear definition of the concept of "inclusion" and "inclusive education." As discussed in the earlier section, some academic scholars might argue that this blurring of the "edges of social policy with a feel-good rhetoric" like inclusive education has perhaps led to dilution of the theory and misappropriation of the concept by political groups of people with vested interests, which can often run contrary to the earlier mission of social justice, equity and human rights.

However, taking the suggestion of scholars like Armstrong, A., Armstrong, D., Spandagou (2010) and Singal & Jeffrey (2011), this paper would like to argue that this blurring of definition is probably good opportunity for contextual meaning-making and theorizing of "inclusive education", since what is meant by "inclusion", "who" is to be included "where" and

“how” is context specific. As Barton & Slee (1999) suggested, issues of identity, recognition and redistribution needs to be taken into account within the historical contexts of the country or the region. Rizvi (2011) would probably suggest, depending on the context successful implementation of such an idea would require student diversity to be accepted not just as an exception, but as a norm for a more socially inclusive schooling environment. The marginalized and vulnerable populations of every society are in need of social inclusion. Since the idea of inclusion contests exclusion of certain groups of people, probably it is first necessary to evaluate which groups or individuals are excluded within that specific context and what practices have been excluding them from equal participation in the schooling process in order to formulate the “who” , “where” and “how” of inclusion.

Postcolonial critique: Provincializing Inclusive Education

Though some scholars like Singal (2008, 2006) argue that probably it is important to generate contextual meaning and understanding of the concept of inclusive education, she also argues her case accepting the premise that inclusive education is an international concept which is hard to practice within the Indian context and it needs contextual meaning-making for successful implementation. As Johansson (2014) has argued citing Bhattacharya (2010) from a prominent Indian journal that within the postcolonial context inclusive education is “a much abused term and is often rejected too easily without much research” (p.11) Since the rhetoric of “inclusive education” emerged in the national policy documents following the generation of global discourse after UN declaration and policy documents, the critical scholarly discussion on the theoretical conception of inclusive education by most Indian scholars as reviewed by Johansson (2014) appear to be taking a postcolonial critical approach like Chakrabarty (2007) had taken. They appear to be “Provincializing Inclusive Education” as a Northern/Western concept developed within specific socio-cultural, geopolitical and historical context of Northern/Western countries, which is being inappropriately imposed on developing countries in the global South as a hegemonic agenda of “neocolonialism in education” through policy documents. (Johansson, 2014)

Beyond Provincializing Inclusive Education

The problem with such postcolonial critique of the concept of inclusive education because of various practical handicaps for implementation, is that these scholars do not look

beyond their specific context and do not take into account the fact that successful implementation of inclusive education is a global problem. Even the economically developed western nations are struggling to successfully implement this abstract philosophical ideal. Within the emerging literature on inclusive education from the developing postcolonial world, scholars appear to be running into a theoretical impasse of being trapped in orientalist cultural nationalism as Kamat (2004) argues by citing Leela Gandhi's critical review of postcolonial literature. Hence, contextual meaning-making or conceptual thinking about inclusive education is perhaps most crucial for successful implementation of any inclusive education policy and program within these postcolonial countries.

Moreover, it is to be noted here that, neither the Northern conceptual thinking about inclusive education nor the Southern postcolonial critique of the concept take into account the possibility that such thinking and practices of social inclusion might have been thought about and practiced in an "other" language/tongue as Mignolo (2000) would probably argue, elsewhere in the global South in concurrence or even prior to such movement in the global North. As Raweyn Connell (2007) has argued, "debates among the colonised are ignored, the intellectuals of colonised societies are unreferenced, and social process is analysed in an ethnographic time-wrap." (p.44) However, it is to be also noted that Mignolo (1993, p.129-31) argued, "the Third World produces not only "cultures" to be studied by anthropologists and ethnohistorians but also intellectuals who generate theories and reflect on their own culture and history."

The existing linear theorizing of the historical trajectory and development of "inclusive education" as a concept does not take into account subalternised indigenous philosophical traditions like "Ubuntu" in Africa, which in essence stands for a society and world of inclusiveness and equality. Philosophically speaking, "Ubuntu" is very similar to the philosophical ideals driving inclusive education for an inclusive society. However, a linear development historicist thinking prevalent in academic debates does not take such alternative possibilities of similar thinking in other languages and cultures into account. Though Soudien's (1998) and Pather's (2006) studies suggest that, within the South African context it is necessary to also consider the history of exclusion during the colonial experience. Similar argument can be forwarded for other countries and cultures too.

Inclusive Education and “Subaltern Knowledge”³

Taking a cultural historicist perspective Singal & Jeffrey (2011) have argued that the values of social inclusion were embedded within the conception of modern Indian nation-state as it is evident from its constitutional ideals, which drew inspiration from several social movements for democratic citizenship rights in Europe and America as well as social movements within India. It is to be noted here that the chairperson of the drafting committee of the postcolonial Indian constitution, B.R. Ambedkar came from an indigenous Hindu dalit⁴ background. Despite his socially marginalized background, he attracted help from various people because of his academic brilliance and intellect to become a great scholar, who went to pursue higher studies in Europe and the US. He strove for equal social rights for Dalits, women and other socially downtrodden sections of Indian society by embedding values of equality and freedom within the constitution. It can be argued here that even before the formation of such educated constituent assembly; the very struggle for freedom against colonial rule and domination brought diverse groups of native indigenous population together to claim self-rule or “swaraj”.

However, while most other freedom fighters sought to fight for freedom politically by seeking territorial decolonization of the land, Rabindranath Tagore’s educational project sought to free the minds of the people. Tagore is mostly considered as the first Non-European to become a Nobel Laureate poet. Though he was well-versed in English, most of his educational writings in Bengali remained obscure for long. Lately scholars have started engaging with his educational writings, now available also in English translation. (Dasgupta 1998, 2009; O’Connell, 2003, 2010; Nussbaum, 2006, Bhattacharya, 2009; Ghosh, Naseem, Vijn, 2010; Guha, 2013) He is popularly known as the “myriad-minded man” because of the large volume of his literary artistic production and has almost become like a “cult-figure” within contemporary Bengali society as critiqued by scholars like Radice (2010). However, it is to be noted here that Tagore’s inclusive educational experiments were unpopular during his times and they remained towards the outer-fringes of the larger Indian society even within postcolonial India. As Radice (2010) has rightly observed, his experimental school in Shantiniketan has a chequered history.

³ term borrowed from Mignolo (2000)

⁴ Untouchable Social outcast

However, this paper argues that critical scholarly engagement with subalternized educational ideas and experiments of Tagore offers the possibility of bridging the gap in Southern theoretical understanding of inclusive education within the colonial and postcolonial Indian context for analytic (ideological), as well as hermeneutic (affective historical) engagement with issues of exclusion and inclusive education within the Indian context. Tagore's educational ideas and experiments provide a fertile ground for Southern Theorising of inclusive education, since his ideas and experiments were born out of the colonial experience and sought to connect education with the experiences of people within their local community. It also provides an opportunity for enhancing broader theoretical understanding of inclusive education in general, since Tagore's philosophical vision of education also aimed for reconciliation across colonial racial and cultural barriers through education.

Though Tagore strongly critiqued British Imperialism and capitalist colonial exploitation of India, as a philosopher and poet he appreciated literatures and cultures of the west. He also appreciated western liberal humanism and found similarities with Sanskrit Upanishadic tradition, which appreciates unity in diversity. Hence, in his essay "A Poet's School" (1926) he wrote:

The minds of the children today are almost deliberately made incapable of understanding other people with different languages and customs. The result is that, later, they hurt one another out of ignorance and suffer from the worst form of the blindness of the age....I have tried to save our children from such aberrations, and here the help of friends from the West, with their sympathetic hearts, has been of the greatest service.

- (Tagore 1926 as cited in Dasgupta 2009, p.83)

As an idealist philosopher, he sought to decolonize the mind from all kinds of parochial thinking through education for a more equal, just and sustainable society. Tagore's inclusive educational experiment at his school in rural tribal Shantiniketan was an attempt to bridge not just rising socioeconomic inequality within the native Indian society during colonial India. His socially inclusive school also aimed to bridge social divide across gender, race, ethnicity, tribe, caste and religion with a conscious pedagogy to educate the heart and the mind.

(3000 words)

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