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Suzanne Carrington, Donna Tangen & Denise Beutel

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INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education in the Asia Indo-Pacific region

Suzanne Carrington, Donna Tangen and Denise Beutel ⬤

Faculty of Education, Office of Education Research, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

The *International Journal of Inclusive Education* provides a meeting place for people to engage in dialogue about inclusive education, with the aim of dismantling forms of exclusion that people experience across education sectors. We, as researchers, work in partnership with teams of international educators and researchers and acknowledge that local interpretations of inclusive education are influenced and intersected by 'racial, class, caste, sexuality and gender identities, knowledge systems, cultures, ethnicities, and abilities' (Kozleski, Artiles, and Waitoller 2014, 231). We hope to deepen a shared understanding of how progress towards more inclusive education is enacted in cultural, historical, economic, geographical, and political contexts to progress greater equity in education.

In this special edition we take as our focus the growing uptake of inclusive education in the less developed countries of the Asia Indo-Pacific region as a fundamental right of all learners (United Nations 2016). Nations in this region often feel obliged to turn their focus to inclusive education in response to the many treaties and declarations supporting human rights and inclusion, such as the Sustainable Development Goals 2015–2030 (United Nations, n.d.), UNESCO led meetings in Jomtien, Salamanca, and Dakar, and the World Bank initiative to sponsor inclusive education as an international priority (World Bank 2017). In addition, developed nations feel duty-bound to support inclusive education in a variety of formats including providing financial aid and/or professional and expert consultants to less developed nations to achieve these goals. These considerations are important reference points for this special issue as they demonstrate that while there may be common goals for supporting inclusive education, there is a need for different approaches in local contexts that are influenced by how a country is situated in its economic, social, and educational development. Kozleski, Artiles, and Waitoller (2014, 232) remind us that the notion of inclusive education is 'embedded in larger cultural historical contexts such as how the purpose and meaning of schooling is defined and by whom'.

A common belief that underpins the collaboration of countries to support inclusive education is that education can change society and that individuals' participation in inclusive education can have a transformative effect (Apple 2013). The ideal that education changes lives is at the forefront of our work and our conversations and partnerships with our international colleagues in this special issue confirms our commitment to progressing the inclusive education agenda. As we work together towards a more inclusive approach to education, we consider how people around the world are both alike and different (Dewey 1976). Dewey's ideas help us to understand the value of mutual relationships between

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CONTACT Suzanne Carrington ✉ sx.carrington@qut.edu.au 🖃 Faculty of Education, Office of Education Research, Queensland University of Technology, Victoria Park Road, Kelvin Grove, Brisbane, QLD 4059, Australia

individuals and their communities and reinforce the inherent dignity and autonomy of individuals in local contexts.

We are aware that in reporting on the projects in this special issue, some of the authors, including ourselves, are part of the legion of technical advisers and consultants working in countries that are often dependent on donor aid (Riddell 2007). The so-called experts can at times think that they know what is best for the country and what is best for the less experienced local staff (Yates 2018). This divide can create a separation between 'expert' and 'local' knowledge and an intellectual distance between donor and recipient (Kothari 2005, 428). Perceptions may exist that the inclusive policy agenda is borrowed and largely driven by foreign aid and international policies (McDonald and Tufue-Dolgoy 2013; Sharma, Loreman, and Macanawai 2016) rather than being developed in partnership with local stakeholders. We contend that while the fundamental principles of inclusive education are international in origin, they are also often consistent with local imperatives that support greater equity in education for marginalised groups of children.

The language and definitions around inclusive education vary depending on the local context and the language used by international 'experts' providing donor aid. Kozleski, Artiles, and Waitoller (2014) highlight the intertwining roles that culture, history, and context play in the daily practices of inclusive education, while Walton (2016, 48) describes the meaning of inclusive education as being 'in a constant state of evolution' and that 'inclusive education must be articulated within the possibilities and constraints of particular contexts'. The papers in this special issue acknowledge the influences of local contexts in the advancement of inclusive education initiatives in the Asia Indo-Pacific region.

Attention towards the growth in inclusive education in the Asia Indo-Pacific region is not new. In an earlier special edition of this journal (Lim and Thaver 2014, 975), the development of inclusion in this region was described, indicating the 'complex and content-dependent' factors that need to be taken into consideration. We extend this previous work by sharing reports about inclusive education initiatives and practice in local contexts in the Asia Indo-Pacific Region. This special edition of the *International Journal of Inclusive Education* brings together a series of articles from the Asia Indo-Pacific region, namely Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Kiribati, the Pacific Islands, and Macao and a paper that considers factors in relation to Australian Aid support for the countries of Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. These articles will make an important contribution to the international literature about inclusive education. Each article is co-authored by researchers working in various roles in the seven countries and provide a platform for sharing development of inclusive policy and practice in the local contexts (Deppeler 2012) of the Asia Indo-Pacific region.

Three papers in this special edition are focused on the Indo-Pacific region. In the first article, Begum and her colleagues investigate the challenges of implementing inclusive education initiatives in Bangladesh – a country of diversity, both geographically and cultural-linguistically. Bangladesh has many geographically isolated communities and the implementation of inclusive practices is met with challenges related to remoteness, language, and resources, but also to issues such as hunger and starvation, climate conditions such as floods, and human trafficking. Many Bangladeshi children attend school infrequently, or not at all, as a result of experiencing one, or several, of these challenges. Begum and her colleagues consider how, as a signatory to international and local policies

on providing education for all children, the country of Bangladesh tries to enact the requirements of these policies under such adverse conditions. While both government and NGO initiatives are in place in Bangladesh, there is currently a lack of a unified educational system, coordination, cooperation, and integration. However, Begum and her colleagues express optimism in areas such as teacher training in inclusive education, the use of multi-lingual educational materials, and the increasing awareness and acceptance of inclusive education in Bangladesh. They provide recommendations that can be enacted at both local and national levels which, with the assistance of dedicated and passionate educators, can further inclusive educational practices in the rural communities of Bangladesh.

The second article considers one aspect of inclusion mentioned in Begum et al.'s paper, that of multilingual considerations in the context of social divide in Sri Lankan schools. In this paper, Wijesekera and colleagues investigate the use of bilingual education as a method of inclusive education in Sri Lanka – a post-war ethnically-divided country. The Sri Lankan public school system is ethnically segregated into Sinhala medium schools and Tamil medium schools. As social inclusivity is now promoted in the nation's educational goals, Wijesekera and her colleagues analyse the practices of two Sri Lankan bilingual education teachers who are promoting social cohesion through their work. In their classrooms, the students came from diverse linguistic backgrounds; however, the use of the English language neutralised the power disequilibrium between the Sinhala and Tamil languages. Feelings of solidarity and interdependence have been promoted, along with a sense of respect for the diverse languages of others. Methods such as this create a supraethnic identity, creating an environment of solidarity and mutual respect despite diverse ethnolinguistic differences.

The third paper by Subba and colleagues focuses on inclusive education in Bhutan. The Kingdom of Bhutan has recently started to include students with special education needs in its schooling system. While committed to various international agendas around inclusive education, Bhutan has also instigated its own unique strategies to provide these students with equitable learning environments. In this paper, Subba and his colleagues invited Bhutanese principals to express their views on the implementation of inclusive practices in their schools to date. The findings are divided into two broad categories: the current status of inclusion; and, their thoughts on inclusion in Bhutan in the future. Although the principals described a range of barriers to providing inclusive learning environments, they also expressed optimism towards the future of inclusion in their schools and in Bhutan in general. While there is still work to be done to clarify and refine Bhutan's inclusive education policies, the future looks promising, with increased awareness and committed, dedicated leadership and dedicated educators.

Two articles in this special edition are focused on inclusive education in the Pacific Island region. The first article by Sharma and his colleagues identifies barriers to implementing inclusive education in the island countries of the Pacific. These island countries present unique challenges geographically, and are diverse in language, culture, and religion. While some progress has been made regarding implementing inclusive education initiatives, there are still issues which need to be addressed. In this paper, Sharma and his colleagues consider the voices of researchers with extensive experience working in the Pacific context. Data were categorised and analysed at three levels – micro (classroom or school level), meso (village and community level), and macro (systems, regional, or

national level). Barriers to inclusive education are identified at each level, and the authors then propose strategies for each barrier that might provide more culturally sensitive approaches to the implementation of inclusive education in these countries. Issues regarding policy, engagement of stakeholders, teacher preparedness, collaboration, and attitudinal barriers need to be acknowledged and addressed so that progress towards sustainable inclusive education can be made.

The second article considers inclusion in the island nation of Kiribati. In this paper, Yates and his colleagues investigate foreign aid and the theme of 'ownership' in the context of the Pacific island nation of Kiribati. Initiatives such as the implementation of inclusive education practices in less developed nations such as Kiribati rely on the provision of foreign aid for funding and direction. Yates and his colleagues investigate the perceptions of local stakeholders regarding Kiribati's dependency on foreign aid and local ownership of inclusive education initiatives. Participants described challenges to inclusion; however, they indicated strong support for inclusive education principles. They felt that inclusive education initiatives would be affected if foreign aid funding were to be reduced, indicating a dependency on the provision of foreign aid support. To achieve sustainability in this area, there needs to be continued development of local ownership of inclusive education initiatives and commitment by the Government of Kiribati which includes budgetary support.

The sixth article has a focus on how teachers in Macao are approaching the implementation of inclusion. Local and international laws and policy requiring the provision of inclusive education are affecting many countries, some of which are challenged to meet these conditions. In Macao, proposed changes to legislation will impact schools and teachers, with private schools being required to accept students with special education needs despite having not catered for them previously. In this paper, Monteiro and her colleagues use a mixed methods approach to consider private school teachers' perceptions of efficacy in meeting the educational needs of these students. Teachers' perceptions of their efficacy for dealing with disruptive behaviour, collaborating with parents and paraprofessionals, and providing inclusive instruction were analysed. Monteiro and her colleagues found that the teachers felt they were largely unprepared to teach students with special education needs. These results have implications for teacher education in Macao as teachers will require skills in classroom management, curriculum differentiation, and effective collaboration. In addition, individual schools will need strategical planning around roles and responsibilities of stakeholders, establishing communication and information sharing procedures, and documenting a whole-school approach to collaboration. These changes will be necessary to support private school teachers' preparedness to respond to the demands of providing inclusive learning environments.

The final paper in this special edition reviews an Australian Aid funded programme with participants from Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. As indicated in Yate's paper on inclusion in Kiribati, foreign aid is often provided to less developed countries to assist in the implementation of national priorities such as inclusive education. In this paper, Beutel and colleagues investigate an Australian Awards in South and West Asia Short Course programme that provided a short course in inclusive education to educators from Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. The programme provided an opportunity for participants to share knowledge and to then apply it to their local context. The programme included a 2-week component for the participants in Australia, where they visited

schools, attended workshops, and shared and reflected on their knowledge of inclusive practices and principles. Participants were required to prepare and present a 'return to work' plan which they would enact on return to their home country. Following their time in Australia, participants were supported through online discussions, and then a follow-up workshop in Nepal six months after their Australian experience. The programme, described and analysed by Beutel and her colleagues, is an example of a long-term approach to implementing inclusive education practices in less developed countries using foreign aid programmes.

These seven research papers illustrate how the various relationships and shared commitment between individuals and communities can support the work in each country in progressing and sustaining inclusive education. The rich details presented about the cultural, historical, economic, geographical, and political contexts in these papers add to our depth of understanding of the importance of acknowledging the local contexts that should underpin understanding of and the development of inclusive education in different countries. By reading and sharing these stories, we understand the moral equality concept (Dewey 1976) that encourages us to consider how people around the world are both alike and different. We also recognise how learning about the challenges and successes of working in various cultural and geographical contexts increases a broader global understanding of how we can respect, protect, and fulfil the right of all learners to education.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Suzanne Carrington is a Professor and Assistant Dean (Research) in the Faculty of Education, Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Australia. Suzanne's areas of expertise are in inclusive education, disability, and teacher preparation for inclusive schools. She has engaged in research to inform policy and practice in Australian and international education contexts, more recently extending this research to the South Pacific and Asia. She has broad knowledge of education research, and her publication list provides evidence of extensive collaboration with education, health, and medical research.

Donna Tangen is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Early Childhood and Inclusive Education, Faculty of Education, QUT. Donna has been involved in various projects to support and promote social justice in education and has participated in many Australian short-term programmes on inclusive education in the Indo-Pacific region. She was also a team member on a Study Overseas Short-term Mobility Program (funded by the Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education; New Colombo Plan) where QUT students were provided with an intercultural study abroad experience through engagement with Malaysian peers in Malaysia. Donna's research interests include transnational and international pre-service teacher training, internationalisation in Higher Education, and inclusive education with a particular focus on culture and language.

Denise Beutel is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education, QUT. She is the Course Coordinator for the Bachelor of Education (Secondary) and her research interests include pre-service teacher education, preservice teacher resilience, professional learning of teachers and mentoring in educational contexts.

ORCID

Denise Beutel 🔘 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5044-836X

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