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WORKING TOGETHER TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION ON ANOTHER CONTINENT

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The words we use and our understanding of sustainability are interpreted through our own world view. In this article the author describes how attendance at an international conference exposed how the meaning of a key sustainability issue can be transformed when viewed through different world views.

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In April this year, I was fortunate enough to be invited to share at the first International Conference on Research in Special Education in Lahore, Pakistan. What follows is an account of this journey and a comparative analysis of what the term 'inclusion' means in two very different cultures. By working together and sharing a common language, we can work sustainably to support one another to create a fully inclusive education system.

BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

Just over 18 months ago, I attended the London International Conference in Education. This was a very multicultural conference, with participants (mostly researchers) from all over the globe. While I was there, I ran a workshop on global issues in education with participants from 11 other nations. One workshop participant was Dr Humaro Bano, director of Special Education at Punjab University in Pakistan. After the workshop, she and I talked about our common interest in disability and inclusive education. We spoke about possibly visiting one another "one day" in our respective countries.

Little did I know that just 18 months later, at the end of April this year (2018), thanks to the generosity of the Otago Polytechnic Contestable Fund and Punjab University, my husband Ian and I would end up travelling to Lahore, where I had been invited to be a keynote speaker at the first International Conference on Research in Special Education. As it was their first conference in special education, I felt it was an immense privilege to attend. It took 16 hours to reach Lahore – 13,000 kilometres from New Zealand – by plane. Due to security concerns, very few Westerners travel there at present. Even our cricket team declined to go!



Figure 1. Dr Humara Bano and I at the Education Centre, Punjab.

We arrived at 12.30am and were met by three staff from the Special Education Department with a massive bunch of flowers, which were given to me in front of all those waiting at the airport. As the plane was late, the staff had been faithfully waiting for over an hour and a half!

The conference was held in the Law Auditorium on the old Punjab University campus, the oldest university campus in Lahore. The weather at that time of the year was unseasonably warm, even for the Pakistanis. Despite it being spring, temperatures in the outside tent at lunchtime were as high as 55 degrees, and we quickly retreated to the air conditioning in the auditorium.

The conference was hosted over three days, with five international keynote speakers (two virtual and three in person) and around 250 attendees. The keynotes came from various places, mainly international universities: one from Virginia in the United States, one from Mauritius, one virtual speaker from London, another virtual speaker from UNESCO in Tralee and myself from a New Zealand polytechnic. Each of us brought a different message. My presentation was centred on how to become a competent researcher in special education, using my current Masters in Professional Practice (MPP) research project as an example (Fogarty-Perry, 2018). The theme of this study is: Strategies that create resilience in families who have children with physical disabilities.

OUTLINE OF PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

Listening to the range of speakers – from Karachi, Islamabad, government departments and various aid agencies – who presented, I felt initially that Pakistani schools were in a similar position to New Zealand. They talked about 'inclusion' and children with special needs attending their schools. I was asked to chair some sessions at the conference and on hearing students' research findings, I was most impressed by the high standard of their work in terms of both process and results. Most of the students who study in the Department of Special Education at Punjab University are already trained teachers studying for Masters and doctorates of education.



Figure 2. A group of students, who studied for Masters and Doctorates in Special Education, and I at the conference in Lahore

However, on the second evening of the conference I realised that while we were both talking about inclusion, our definitions of this term were very different. At the World Conference on Special Needs in Education held in Salamanca in 1994, attendees came up with a guiding principle of inclusion at all levels of education by stressing “the rights of ALL children to benefit from an education without discrimination, implicitly or explicitly” (Salamanca Statement, 1994).

During a discussion with a special education teacher at the conference dinner was, he told me that in the province of Punjab alone (where Lahore is situated) there were 257 special schools and 63% of girls (particularly in rural areas) do not attend school. I realised that while we were both talking about inclusion, we meant very different things by it. Len Barton has described “inclusion as the participation of all children and young people and the removal of all forms of exclusionary practice” (cited by Armstrong, 2003, p. 3). In New Zealand, we have closed all but a handful of special schools and have been working from 1996, since the inception of the Special Education 2000 policy, towards providing mainstream educational opportunities for all children. This means that almost all children in New Zealand schools attend their regular local school. While we still have issues in these schools about best practice and how well these children are included, the fact that most children are actually attending their local school means that we can focus on getting effective inclusive practice right.

In Pakistan on the other hand, special education is funded through a charity model – special schools do not receive government funding. Much of these schools' time is spent making items such as crafts to sell in order to keep the schools in operation. One of the local speakers at the conference was a medical doctor who devoted his time to setting up micro-investment companies which raised money for these schools.

While my wish was to continue to work long-term with my friends from Pakistan in a collaborative and sustainable way, the challenge for me as the conference came to an end was to find a way of ‘bridging the language gap’ and developing a shared understanding of what inclusion means. In highlighting the principles of sustainable practice in New Zealand, Sustainable Tertiary Education in New Zealand (STENZ) point to the need to look for “common elements and shared understandings.” (STENZ, ND) The United Nations also reiterates the need for “shared language” in their sustainable development goals.

With these principles in mind, I tried to work out how I could illustrate the differences in our approaches to inclusion in a non-offensive way, so that we can continue to work together in the future and learn from each other. The answer came from an unexpected source, one of the virtual keynote speakers, Catherine Carty (UNESCO chair manager), in her address. While referring to a different context of inclusion, participation in sport, she described a “continuum of inclusivity” which covered special, integrated and inclusive practices. She discussed five modalities on this inclusivity spectrum:

- a) Separate activity – performed separately in different times and spaces
- b) Parallel activity – the same sorts of activities on the same site, but in separate spaces
- c) Reverse activity – where people with disabilities and non-disabled are included in the disability activities together
- d) Modified activity – designed for all, with specific adaptations related to space, tasks, equipment and teaching
- e) Open activity – everyone does the same tasks, with few or no adaptations (Carty, 2018).

Convinced of the need to foster dialogue about the quality of education provision for all students as a key goal in order to work sustainably and long-term between New Zealand and Pakistan, I could immediately see how these principles could apply to our different contexts, and also globally. My opportunity to raise this new definition came in the final plenary session, where I was chairperson. I was able to share this idea of a continuum of inclusive practice in education with attendees, firstly by defining the stages and then by comparing an example involving two regions: one where there are only a handful of special schools and the other where there are hundreds.



Figure 3. The Hospitality Inn doorman and armed security guard were happy to have their photo taken with me in the hotel foyer

Although the proportion of students attending their regular local schools needs to be worked out based on the population of the two regions, by invoking the notion of a continuum we can develop a shared definition of what inclusion is in education and how we can move closer towards it. In both of our nations we are on a journey – something that became clear at the end of the conference when further plans for continued partnering through joint publications, peer-review of marking, and a possible return visit to New Zealand by staff of the special education department from Punjab University were discussed. In the final session, permission was given by the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan – one of the funding bodies – to host this conference annually – a decision that departmental staff were thrilled about.

For my husband Ian and I, this was a wonderful, immersive week spent in a totally different culture and we felt very fortunate to have been given this opportunity. I suggested that next year, the conference organisers may wish to have their own students with disabilities as keynote speakers, as they have people with the necessary lived experience right there on campus. One of my team joked that I may have just done myself out of a job! If we are invited back (a possibility which was mentioned at one stage), we would definitely go and would encourage others to visit Lahore, too. While there is a strong military presence there, at no time did we feel unsafe and we took the opportunity to explore the shops and city on our own when we had time.

In terms of sustainable practice, developing a shared language and clear goals, as well as fostering trusting relationships and sharing experiences, are key objectives, particularly when it comes to working globally with others in the same field of practice. The end goals are to enhance best practice in education, a commitment to inclusion and supporting students' right to education. We can do this by creating solutions together and working with other nations which are at different stages on their respective journeys.

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