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Book Review

Education and the Working Class: Is There Hope for an Inclusive Approach?

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By **Sigamoney Manicka Naicker**
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This book makes a great contribution to the ever-evolving dialogue on inclusive education. Even though the subject of the book was triggered by the author's experiences in a particular province in South Africa, the issues he raises are relatable nationally and in other countries with a high population of working-class families. Related questions have been asked elsewhere to explain how and why working-class kids get working-class jobs. Naicker's book questions the usual stance on academic underperformance as a product of individual effort and ability, while placing blame on learners, their families, and teachers for failure. The problem of school failure, as mapped out in the book, is largely due to the failure of the education system to respond to a wide range of systemic inadequacies, the presence of which contributes to a vicious cycle of disadvantage to the already overlooked and marginalised working-class populations. The book therefore questions the neglect of the plight of many children who are living in township and farming communities that are poverty- and crime-ridden, and are exposed to many risk factors for school dropout. Significantly, it proposes commitment and a deepened social justice model to educational planning.

This highly accessible book consists of a useful introduction and a theoretical framework that precede five chapters describing and critiquing key debates associated with inclusive education. The introduction boldly asserts that the education system is captured by a middle-class narrative and bureaucracy that continually evades the question of what inclusion means to the poor working-class children whose plight cannot be attributed to the heavy medical narrative of diagnosis and support. The theoretical framework fuses ideas from John Dewey and Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital to explain why more middle-class children succeed, and fewer working-class children perform well in schools. In essence, children with higher socio-economic status are often exposed to more cultural capital, which gives them advantages in social, economic, and educational spheres.

Chapter One titled, "The Reading for Meaning Conundrum," spotlights a reigning narrative that South African children have extremely low reading abilities compared to children from the rest of the world. The

central argument is that the literacy and exclusion problems cannot be solved by focusing on technical changes that do not confront the problem of inequality and nor make structural, organisational, and programmatic changes. The chapter further laments the absence of a theoretically grounded approach to curriculum development that is buttressed by Bernsteinian concepts of classification and framing.

Situated on the realities of several African countries, Chapter Two deals with the theory and practice of inclusive education. The central message is that many African countries have largely modelled their approaches to inclusion on developed countries and in the process, ignored the lived realities of poverty and other risk factors. Naicker proposes that "the underlying principle of inclusive education is to examine what existing barriers prevent students from learning and to address those barriers in planning rather than psychologising failure" (p. 29).

Chapter Three traces how special education has permeated the development of inclusive education in South Africa from 1863 to 1998. Notably, advanced education policy developments since 1994 have not created systemic change that is not overshadowed by special education principles. The chapter concludes with a list of sequential steps for a comprehensive needs assessment that could provide useful data to education stakeholders for developing and implementing "an alternative pedagogy that fosters inclusivity, equity, and quality learning experiences for all students" (p. 66).

Against the background of a poor education system response to the plight of children from poor communities, Chapter Four interrogates more directly the competency, or lack thereof, of the bureaucracy in implementing complex change and paradigm shift. Naicker draws from several scholars who have contributed to the study of bureaucracy to suggest a shift in focus. Such a shift should be infused with "equity advocacy, systems thinking, collaboration, cultural competence, data literacy, resource management, transparent communication, innovation, and continuous learning to effectively address the diverse needs of all students and communities" (p. 81).

The concluding chapter, Chapter Five, argues for a new theoretical framework based on addressing inequality. The framework consists of a 3-point approach with a focus on (1) a problem defined towards social justice, (2) understanding key barriers to learning and development, and (3) overcoming barriers to learning and development.

In closing the book, Naicker outlines a set of inherited oppressive legacies that should be addressed to ensure an inclusive approach for all the children, especially those from working-class families. These include historical legacies, global power dynamics, educational curricula, economic disparities, global media influence, educational elitism, and political power dynamics. In addition, he reminds his readership that education is about fostering love and humanity. How can an education system claim inclusivity when the treatment of a majority of children reflects deeply held beliefs that are devoid of love and humanism?