



Who Speaks for Inclusion? Communication, Collaboration, and Educational Access in the Global South

Professor Juan Bornman

Education is widely affirmed as a fundamental human right, yet for many learners with severe communication disabilities—particularly in the global South—this right remains conditional, fragile, or entirely inaccessible. For learners who cannot easily speak for themselves, exclusion is rarely accidental; it is produced through systems that equate inclusion with placement rather than participation. Drawing on more than three decades of research, this keynote advances a rights-based conceptualisation of communication as both a basic human need and a human right, and interrogates why inclusive education policies so often fail to result in inclusive educational experiences.

Framed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and informed by the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health, this keynote engages critically with global South scholarship to expose persistent policy-practice gaps. It argues that inclusion has too frequently been reduced to a compliance-driven, “tick-box” exercise, rather than understood as an attitudinal, relational, and ethical commitment. The keynote foregrounds inclusion as a collective responsibility, requiring sustained collaboration among teachers, therapists, parents, school leaders, and communities.

Importantly, inclusion is positioned as extending beyond schooling to participation in family life, healthcare, social and spiritual contexts, and later access to higher education and employment. This keynote seeks to unsettle comfortable narratives, challenge entrenched assumptions, and inspire renewed action towards inclusive education as a shared human obligation.