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# Beyond Convictions: Interrogating Culture, History, and Power in Inclusive Education

## OF LEGACIES AND CONVICTIONS

The inclusive schools movement is a cornerstone of contemporary education reform. The basic premise of inclusive school communities is that schools are about belonging, nurturing, and educating all children and youth, regardless of their differences in culture, gender, language, ability, class, and ethnicity (Ferguson, Kozleski, & Smith, 2003; Saldana & Waxman, 1997). Despite its broad focus, inclusive education in the United States and other nations tends to concentrate on students with disabilities and special needs (Artiles, Kozleski, Dorn, & Christensen, in press). Thus, inclusive education is a prominent area of policy, research, and practice in special education. The definition of inclusive education varies from the transformation of educational systems to placement in general education classrooms (Artiles et al., in press).

The most visible narrative about inclusive education in the U.S. is about access to general education programs. Indeed, the most public discourse about special education addresses continued progress towards increasing access to the general education curriculum and environments for students with disabilities. Nationally, special education services are provided to more than 200,000 infants and toddlers and their families and more than 6 million children and youths with disabilities (Schiller, O'Reilly,

& Fiore, 2006). Since 1994, the number of students with disabilities served in general education classrooms has increased gradually from about 46% to about 52%. Students with disabilities in general and those with high-incidence disabilities in particular (i.e., learning disabilities, mild mental retardation, emotional/behavioral disorders, and speech and language impairments), are more likely to be served in general education. Yet, almost half of students with high incidence disabilities continue to be educated in specialized settings for a substantial portion of the school day.

In addition, the progress made towards greater access is not distributed uniformly across the country or across subgroups of this population. For example, of the top 10 states that educate a majority of students with disabilities in general education, the percentages vary from 70% to 61% (NIUSI, 2006). The five states with the lowest percent of disabled students in general education range from 9.5% to 44.3%. Thus, the range is extreme, though the national average is 52%. In addition, access to general education is limited for students with multiple disabilities. Between 2003 and 2005, students with multiple disabilities were more likely to be pulled out for services more than 60% of the day (NIUSI, 2006).

Ethnicity further complicates the special education story. The disproportionate representation of

ethnic minority students has been an enduring problem (National Research Council [NRC], 2002). We recently mapped the placement of over one million students in eight different school systems (see http://nccrest.eddata.net /cities/). These data suggest that students who are Latino(a) or African American are more than three times as likely to be placed in more restrictive environments as their White counterparts. Not only does geography seem to shape placement, but student ethnicity plays a key factor.

We have learned through our research and technical assistance work that educators struggle between a narrow inclusion focus (e.g., tracking only placement patterns in certain settings) and achieving systemic change. The complexities of geography, cultural historical practices, and interpretations of policy that maintain local customs and practices populate special education inclusion narratives and enculturate generations of educators. Equity dilemmas arise as educators grapple with these issues and struggle to implement inclusive education programs (Ferguson et al., 2003).

The purpose of this article is to examine critically current thinking about inclusive education so that reform efforts transcend the narrow contemporary emphasis on program placement. More important, although we have made progress in theorizing inclusion, there are several core

convictions in inclusive education that must be examined critically to improve future reform and research efforts. For this purpose, we discuss three core issues: (a) the cultural–historical dimension of inclusive education; (b) the nature of community and participation; and (c) the need for a transformative agenda in inclusive education.

## WHO? WHERE? WITH WHAT CONSEQUENCES? THE CULTURAL–HISTORICAL DIMENSION OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

The bulk of the inclusive education scholarship has neglected fundamental questions about the cultural history of education and its link to larger ideological struggles that have shaped differential access and opportunities for various groups in society. These questions include, *Who* benefits from inclusion? *Where* are these students included? *What* are the consequences of *who* benefits and *where* inclusion is enacted?

Although a sizable amount of scholarship has been produced on inclusive education, it has ignored the fact that poor ethnic and linguistic minority students are overrepresented in special education (Artiles, 2003). This is not an accidental omission, since most of the research in this (and other related) field(s) is colorblind (Arzubiaga, Artiles, King, & Harris-Murri, 2006). For instance, the latest NRC (2002) report acknowledged that the impact of special education interventions on minority students cannot be discerned because studies did not provide information about the ethnic or socioeconomic backgrounds of students. Categorical cultural markers

(e.g., ethnicity, social class) and cultural practices or processes tend to be neglected in inclusion work (Kalambouka, Farrell, Dyson, & Kaplan, 2005). How do entire systems create (to borrow from Giddens) "absent others" (as cited in Escobar, 2001, p. 12) despite the fact that such individuals constitute a majority in those institutional contexts? These patterns are linked to larger ideological and cultural forces that erase the centrality of race and racism in the organization of institutions and the conduct of quotidian and formal activities.

Unfortunately, it is a fact that a disproportionate number of African American and American Indian students are placed in special education (NRC, 2002). English language learners (ELLs) are also overrepresented in districts with a high enrollment of this population (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005). It is important to bear in mind that several analytical considerations and structural forces mediate the shape and magnitude of overrepresentation—e.g., level of analysis (national, state, district, school), percentage of minority enrollment, availability of alternative programs such as bilingual education, and district size mediate minority placement patterns (Artiles, Trent, & Palmer, 2004). Despite these caveats, several compelling findings are emerging in recent research. Evidence suggests that *who* is placed in special education is related to restrictiveness of placement decisions (*where*) and shapes access to related services, interventions, and programs (*with what consequences?*). To illustrate, African American students are placed in more segregated special education programs—i.e., they are

removed from the general education classroom for a longer period of the school day—than their White counterparts with the same disability (Fierros & Conroy, 2002). African American students also have a higher probability of being placed in emotional/behavioral disorders programs in low-poverty schools, and they tend to be designated as requiring more intensive services (which justifies segregated placement), though they receive fewer related services (e.g., speech, occupational, and physical therapy) than their White peers (Oswald, Coutinho, & Best, 2002; Parrish, 2002). Funding is another structural factor that perpetuates inequitable conditions. Parrish (2002) concluded that "funding systems based on category of disability are particularly prone to troubling patterns of minority overrepresentation and resource distribution. These systems appear much more likely to show over-representation of minority students into the disability category mental retardation, while at the same time providing greater special education funding to districts enrolling the lowest percentages of minority students" (p. 33). Given these trends, it is surprising that the inclusion literature has neglected questions such as, Are ethnic and linguistic minorities being included? How? Are there equity concerns in inclusive programs related to access to and participation in programmatic resources? What are some foreseeable consequences of these practices for the educational future of various student subgroups in inclusive schools?

Key indicators of program impact include drop-out and graduation rates. Unfortunately, higher drop-out and lower grad-

uation rates are reported for students with disabilities (Heubert, 2002). Although it is difficult to access data on the impact of accountability policies and practices for this population, Heubert reported significant gaps in the test scores on state graduation tests between disabled and non-disabled students. Long-term outcomes for students with disabilities have improved over time but still need considerable progress. For instance, once diagnosed as having a disability, the chances for students to exit special education are minimal. On the other hand, access to college for this population has improved considerably in recent years, particularly for students with learning disabilities (LD), the largest group in special education. However, the vast majority of LD individuals attending college are White middle class students (Reid & McKnight, 2006). Hence, it is critical to raise the question, who benefits from special education? (Brantlinger, 2006).

We argue inclusive education research and practice must be examined in the larger context of cultural histories and practices related to how our society treats *difference*. We cannot afford to ignore that two central perceptual categories of *difference* in American life—race and disability—intersect in systematic ways. It is necessary to recognize, therefore, the role power has played in constructing these forms of *difference* throughout history (Ferri & Connor, 2005). The evidence on minority placement outlined in this section makes visible the workings of power. As Gutiérrez (2006) explained, in "a stratified society, differences are never just differences; they will always be interpreted and ranked according

to dominant cultural values and norms" (p. 509). The emphasis on tracking the number of students from various (racial, ability) groups placed in distinct (inclusive or segregated) programs is leading the education field to mathematize a rather complex and historically charged social problem (Tate, Ladson-Billings, & Grant, 1996).

We suggest future inclusive education work must not focus on *access and participation in general education for students with disabilities,* but rather on *access, participation, and outcomes for students who have endured marginalization due to ethnic identity and ability level in educational systems fraught with inequitable structural and social conditions.* It is critical that future work is contextualized around these cultural–historical conditions, particularly at a time when such conditions are becoming even more complicated due to the accountability movement and globalization.

Indeed, schools are now serving students who traverse cultural and linguistic borders more fluidly than ever. Many of these children and youngsters are immigrant students who move back and forth between national territories, nationality labels, and identity markers, depending on settings, months of the year, and even social situations. These students and their families maintain cultural practices from "back home" while they build hybrid cultural practices in their new U.S. homes (Suárez-Orozco, 2001). The challenge for educators today is to understand "How do people construct narratives and practices of home in a world of movement?" (Escobar, 2001, p. 9). In this globalization era of rapid technological change, immigrant and nonimmigrant stu-

dents inhabit contexts in which time and space have been compressed. Interestingly, schools and other social institutions are forcing this generation of students to fit in binary categories—e.g., able/disabled, adequate progress/inadequate progress, minority/majority, black/white, ELL/English proficient. However, ethnographic evidence suggests children's and youngsters' interpretation of their daily experiences defy a categorical world; they live and perform race, ability, gender, and other "kinds of people" in more continuous and ambiguous ways (Collins, 2003; Pollock, 2004).

To conclude, inclusive education must be grounded in a deeper understanding of the students served by schools nowadays and be critically aware of the cultural–historical legacies of (dis)advantage that permeate schools and other social institutions. An important first task in addressing these challenges is to analyze critically the assumptions of community and participation that inform inclusive education.

## INTERROGATING THE NATURE OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: CHALLENGES OF COMMUNITY AND PARTICIPATION

The inclusive education literature, particularly the work that focuses on whole-school approaches, is based on the notion of community of learning that stresses a social practice paradigm of learning (Artiles et al., in press).[1] This work is based on the assumption that schools can

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1. There is a substantial amount of inclusion research in which psychological models of student learning are used and the classroom is the unit of analysis.

be transformed into communities in which differences are respected and celebrated, the curriculum transformed to address the needs of all learners, policies and practices framed to be inclusive of all families, and professional development designed to address systematically the diverse needs of learners. Inclusive education is concerned with increasing *access, acceptance, participation,* and *achievement* of *all* students, particularly learners from vulnerable groups (Kalambouka et al., 2005). In practice, however, the inclusive education literature has focused on students with special needs and disabilities (Artiles et al., in press).

This view of inclusion suggests an innocent perspective on difference. Although some scholars acknowledge conflict and tension as part of life in inclusive school communities, not enough attention has been paid to this facet of communities. For the most part, a prototypical inclusive community is deemed to be cohesive and harmonious—i.e., personnel commit to a shared view of inclusive education, and resources and efforts are devoted to engineer inclusive school cultures. Race, class, gender, language, and power issues tend to be ignored in this literature. Thus, it is not surprising that tensions and struggles over these contentious and historically charged sources of difference are invisible in this work. Although conflict arises around ability issues, and some scholars acknowledge it (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006), the truth is that a disproportionate number of students with disabilities in the U.S. (and apparently in other regions of the world) are poor and members of minority groups (Artiles & Bal,

in preparation). For these reasons, it is necessary to challenge inclusion's prevailing assumptions about community. Such critique must strive to understand the contentious processes of identity formation that comprise life in any community and the struggles over the definition of the end point of a community.

## Contentious Processes of Identity Formation: Shifting Locations and Positionings

An aspect neglected in the whole-school inclusive education literature is that participants engage in the construction of identity projects as they participate in a community of practice. Communities of practice define normative ways of belonging that require participants to embrace particular identities that signal membership. However, it is critical to remember communities do not contain monolithic cultures. Participants build alliances and affiliations with disparate subgroups within a community. Sometimes, as Hodges (1998) reminds us, people dis-identify with a community's core practices, and it is feasible that such individuals do not openly resist participation. For this reason, Hodges distinguishes between participation and identification—e.g., one could *participate* in a community's practices without necessarily identifying with the community's way of belonging. A contemporary example is the teacher that participates in accountability practices (e.g., use of high-stakes tests to gauge student learning) without identifying with such practices. Another example is the English Language Learner that participates in English-only classroom routines, but does not

identify with a community that forbids the use of her first language to learn. In this sense, individuals sometimes participate in communities without identifying as they struggle with alternative and changing identities.

The dilemmas created by dis-identification also induce individuals to grapple with shifting locations and positions. Depending on how they participate, individuals might occupy locations at the center or periphery of communities. Nonetheless, locations and positions are not static or categorical notions. Roth, Hwang, Goulart, and Lee (2005) explain that definitions of center-margin are relational; thus, it is important to identify the perspective or reference points from which these positions are defined. For instance, low-income African American students attending high-income schools might engage in discursive practice (e.g., Ebonics) and use dress codes that are at the center of their ethnic or peer communities but are on the margins of the school community practices. In such cases, these students would be "centered in the margin" (Roth et al., 2005, p. 40); this notion compels us to account for multiple perspectives in defining a center and its margins. Roth et al. (2005) explain, "A student's participation is both marginal, with respect to the legitimate practices in the classroom, and central with respect to his or her experience and learning" (p. 40). They propose a dialectical view of participation in which "actions always constitute margin and center at the same time" (p. 48).

The intense identity work that is done in communities of practice and the attendant shifting of positions and locations

have important implications for future inclusive education work. Examples of questions to address include: Under what conditions are ethnic and linguistic minority students "centered in the margins" in inclusive schools? How are inclusive education processes and outcomes affected by minority students' shifting locations and positionings? Whose centers and margins are used to define membership and create exclusions in the midst of inclusive schools?

## Defining the End Point of a Community: Complicating Enculturation

Work on inclusive education emphasizes the building of cohesive cultures around values and practices that respect diversity. It seems as though this scholarship identifies a clearly defined and static end point for inclusive communities—i.e., participants are expected to embrace a community's normative practices and become enculturated as a means to arrive at the end point of the community. However, we explained above that such process is not always smooth or safe because people construct alternative identities across time and settings. We extend this criticism here to argue that even when individuals engage with a community's normative practices, they do not merely reproduce such practices. If this were the case, cultures would not change over time. Contemporary work on culture theory envisions dialectical tensions in the dimensions of culture so that people *reproduce* and *produce* culture simultaneously (Artiles, 2003; Roth et al., 2005).

Considering that a sizable proportion of students in inclusive programs will be members of minority groups, it is possible that

these students might not identify fully with the dominant school culture. This might be due to the longstanding history of tensions between minority groups and the dominant society. Social psychologists, anthropologists, and sociologists have documented for decades how institutional distrust, perceptions of stereotypes, and resistance can mediate the performance of ethnic and linguistic minority people in educational contexts (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Erickson, 1975; Rist, 2000). Although minority students might participate and get enculturated to some aspects of inclusive school cultures, it is also possible that these individuals participate in ways that challenge, subvert, or change the sanctioned practices of inclusive schools. Future inclusive education work will need to open an analytic space to document how inclusive communities are both reproduced and transformed, particularly by students who occupy marginal locations and positions in the hierarchical constellation of status in American society.

## INCLUSION INTO WHAT? A TRANSFORMATIVE AGENDA

Inclusive education, then, is neither static nor finite. It should include discourse spaces in which processes and outcomes are critically examined on an ongoing basis. Given the inequitable conditions in which inclusive education is carried out, a key question to answer is, inclusion into what? (Erickson, 1996) To what extent are inclusive education communities mindful of oppression? U.S. inclusive schools are located in a society that is stratified along racial, economic, and gender lines. How do these inequities leak into inclusive communities? Does

the inclusive education movement expect learners to assimilate to mainstream institutions and practices? Should the systematic inequities and barriers built into institutions as well as the social rules and practices be questioned as part of inclusive education? Our response is that inclusive education must infuse a critical transformative agenda into its project that interrogates and aims to change historical inequities.

From this perspective, inclusive education must have intellectual, moral, and political aims (West, 1999). Inclusive education efforts, then, "dare to recast, redefine and revise the very notion of . . . 'mainstream,' 'margins,' 'difference,' 'otherness' " (West, 1999, p. 139). As classroom cultures and the curriculum are negotiated and as students enter inclusive contexts, attention must always be given to the margins. If inclusive education is concerned with access, participation, and the achievement of outcomes for students whose identities have been constructed under oppressive conditions, then continued vigilance and action are needed to ensure that students who are thrust to the margins are brought into the school community. This is a challenging task because of the ubiquity and invisibility of racial oppression. As Mills (1997) explains,

*. . . the most important political system of recent global history— the system of domination by which white people have historically ruled over (. . .) nonwhite people is not seen as a political system at all. It is just taken for granted; it is the background against which other systems, which we are to see as political, are highlighted (pp. 1–2). [Mills goes on to argue that] racism [or global white*

*supremacy] is itself a political system, a particular power structure of formal or informal rule, socioeconomic privilege, and norms for the differential distribution of material wealth and opportunities, benefits and burdens, rights and duties. (p. 3; emphases in original)*

Moreover, the inclusive context itself churns as practitioners critique the curriculum canon. Rather than viewing this process as additive, the process of inclusive education requires a transformation in curriculum and pedagogy, since the very point of view that anchors the curriculum shifts from a generalized, dominant culture perspective to a pluralistic and cosmopolitan one (Banks & Banks, 2005). This means a core practice in inclusive education should be to make visible the blindness, silences, and exclusions that have permeated the histories and educational experiences of marginalized groups (West, 1999).

A transformative agenda for inclusive education complicates the work of practitioners and requires a third eye that focuses on the angles, boundaries, and intersections of cultural categories and practices. This critical lens focuses on which students are benefiting from the way things are and what can be done to ensure that *all* students benefit. Transformative inclusive schools invest systemic, sustained programmatic attention to professional learning, the use of data-driven decision making, and school capacity development (Schiller et al., 2006). Moreover, the work of these schools is linked to the broader network of institutions that are connected to its mission. For example, a transformative agenda might entail the development of district-level policy and tools related to issuing guidelines, allocating resources, and supporting professional development and training. If more benefit is achieved by access, then what could happen if we transformed the fundamental assumptions that undergird the organization of the curriculum, the distribution of students with teachers, and the measurement of accomplishment? We suggest that three principles operate in the transformative space of an inclusive educational context.

## Access and Meaningful Participation

Access creates the opportunity for learning to occur, and it also makes boundaries within the context permeable through shared discourse, activity, and apprenticeship. Access provides scaffolds between and among students and the content. Where learning is conceived of sets of increasingly complex skill acquisition and application, notions about what constitutes knowledge tends to be narrow and procedural rather than broad and metacognitive. In inclusive educational contexts, the relationships between students and content may be best conceived of as mapping the terrain of a content area (Greeno, 1991). The interaction between and among teachers and students is crucial in helping students develop, practice, use, and construct knowledge in informal situations. In this kind of classroom, opportunities to learn are facilitated by a sense of shared aspirations, supportive relationships between and among students and teachers, a community focus on local complexities, the development of tools for inquiry, and other features of a community linked together in purposeful learning.

## Praxis

In inclusive education contexts, praxis—the coupling of critical reflection and action—can be conceptualized as catalytic, communicative, and interactive. That is, research interacts with practice in ways that generate new forms of knowledge about teaching and learning because the act of creating access for those who have been excluded changes the learning environment from a reproductive and assimilative context to a generative and inventive one. But, without continued communication that makes public our historical and contemporary practices, inclusive praxis runs the danger of becoming as calcified as previous routines and patterns. Inclusive praxis requires naming and discussing current practices and engaging in ongoing inquiry to ensure that the process of inclusivity continues to guide and shape the work of the school community. Thus, inclusive praxis is also interactive. It generates new praxis through systems of feedback and discourse.

## Authenticity

Finally, inclusive educational contexts provide authentic processes to assess and make meaning of student learning when we are responsive to the lives and needs of students and reflect on appropriate action. The notion of responsiveness suggests a deep knowledge of content on the part of teachers that allows multiple points of access to help students make meaning and connect their lives to the content being explored. It also suggests that students from the beginning of their formal education have the capacity to inform and expand on what is already known. Thus, knowledge itself is in the process of transformation.

## CONCLUSION

Inclusive education is a laudable concept and an ambitious reform movement that promises to enhance access, participation, and outcomes for *all* students. The most comprehensive version of inclusive education relies on whole-school models in which the metaphor of communities of practice guides design, implementation, and evaluation efforts. We have provided a critical outline of the idea of communities of practice and discussed three aspects that need further study and theoretical development. Attention to these issues is imperative in order for inclusive education to live up to its potential.

First, inclusive education is purportedly concerned with students deemed *different* by educational systems; however, this work has focused mostly on *ability* differences at the expense of other key dimensions of the majority of these students' existence—e.g., oppression and exclusion by virtue of their race, language, class, gender, and the status of their complex cultural practices that defy static categorical markers. Hence, inclusive schools must not ignore the ubiquity of enduring legacies of racial oppression and stratification in U.S. society. Any version of inclusive education that ignores this fact cannot have legitimacy and authenticity in the eyes of minority students and their families. Second, inclusive education research and practice should take into account the complex processes of identity formation and change that take place in the life of communities of practice. Similarly, the work individuals do to forge identities that signal membership in these communities is not always done with one center or core set of practices in mind; that is, notions of center and margin in communities are moving targets and are defined from multiple perspectives. Inclusive schools that incorporate these insights are nonexistent. And finally, inclusive education advocates must always be clear about what they ask students and their families. For individuals who inhabit marginal positions due to social class, language, gender, and race, though, questions will arise: *Inclusion into what? Do I want to be included in a system that is fraught with systematic barriers for certain groups?* A transformative inclusive education apprentices practitioners, students, and families to become Critical Organic Catalysts (West, 1999)—that is, people who stay "attuned to the best of what the mainstream has to offer—its paradigms, viewpoints, and methods—yet maintain a grounding in affirming and enabling subcultures of criticism" (p. 136).

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## JAMES MOFFETT AWARD

NCTE's Conference on English Education, in conjunction with the National Writing Project, offers this grant to support teacher research projects inspired by the scholarship of James Moffett. All K–12 classroom educators who teach at least three hours or three classes per day are eligible to apply for the grant. Moffett Award winners receive a certificate, a monetary award (up to $1,000) to be used toward implementation of the proposed project, and a copy of James Moffett's last book, *The Universal Schoolhouse.* Proposals will be judged on such criteria as the strength of the connection to James Moffett's scholarship and the perceived value and feasibility of the research. **The deadline for nominations for the 2007 Moffett Award is May 1, 2007.** Winners will be notified in July 2007 and announced at the 2007 NCTE Annual Convention in New York City. Submit nominations to the James Moffett Award, Kristen McGowan, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096. For more information, go to http://www.ncte.org /groups/cee/awards/moffett/108836.htm.