The Complexities of Systems Change in Creating Equity for Students With Disabilities in Urban Schools

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RUNNING HEAD: How Policy and Systems Change Impact Urban Schools

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Students with Disabilities in Urban Schools

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Abstract

This article explores the role of school improvement and systems change in urban schools through the lens of educational equity policy initiatives. By analyzing specific sets of national, state, and local education data, we examine the interaction between structural changes in American public education, collective, professional narratives about children, and their impacts on the work of schools. Using elements of a framework for systemic change, we examine local practice in urban classrooms, schools, and districts. Along with lessons learned from school improvement and technical assistance activities, these perspectives provide a scaffold for looking at how local activity arenas respond to federal and state policy and how the complexities of local practice could inform the next generation of policy initiatives. We take the stance that education policy should be designed to build the capacity of urban schools to provide high quality instruction, improve opportunities to learn, produce evidence of student accomplishment, and demonstrate positive post-school student outcomes.

The Role of Policy and Systems Change in Creating Equitable Opportunities for Students with

Disabilities in Urban Schools

Any discussion of urban education and urban community must occur with clarity about the underlying assumptions that value some conditions and perspectives while marginalizing others. What urban reality is being observed, dissected, and improved? In the eyes of Jonathan Kozol (2005), it is the reality of structural and economic inequalities that conscribe some children to disadvantage while describing the same children as having richly developed powers of observation, a variety of intellectual, social, and artistic capacities, and a network of relationships that sustain them over time, despite the poverty of the institutional settings that are designed to educate them. Poverty, in particular, is linked to poor school outcomes and, as family circumstance improves, children's performance in school appears to improve as well (Berliner, 2006). And yet, children and families who live in a context of economic poverty have amazing sets of assets that are rarely recognized or built upon in the school curriculum (Lewis et al., 2008). Little consideration is given to the social networks and connections that exist within urban neighborhoods and communities (Harry, 2008). This deficit views translates into observations of what children cannot do, rather than understandings of the assets they bring with them to school (Gonzàlez, Moll, & Amati, 2005). Further, the historical legacies of racism, the differential treatment of immigrants and English language learners (adults as well as children) intersect with poverty in complex ways that continue to confound public educational policies and practices. As Anthony demonstrates (2008), risk and protective factors are nested within cultural histories, psychosocial development, families, and neighborhoods, producing very different outcomes for children who grow up in *similar* but not the *same* circumstances. So, urban educators, students and families are confronted with disconcerting and competing realities.

Artiles (1998) challenged the binary debate that frames explanations for why students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are over-represented in programs such as special education as either the result of the detrimental effects of certain socio-demographic and economic factors (i e., poverty) or structural bias. Instead, Artiles and Dyson (2005) propose a scaffold for exploring the intersections of structure, sociology, and economics within systems. They propose several dimensions within systems that require analysis: the *participant, cultural, regulative, interpretive, instrumental, and outcomes* dimensions. Because of the interplay between power differentials and regulative functions, community cultures fluctuate between friction and cohesion. Indeed, people use their agency to navigate situations and interactions applying the regulative rules of their cultural communities, but also improvising or using their cultural toolkits in innovative ways. This view of systems offers a multidimensional perspective in which activities are mediated through several continuously operating exchanges that transform policy in unanticipated ways. This perspective has particular merit as we examine urban educational practices and policies.

So, what do we mean when we say urban? Jean Anyon (1997) defines urban education as those schools and systems that provide schooling for students in inner corridor, densely populated communities in which vast disparities in commerce, population density, transportation, socioeconomic status, and sociocultural backgrounds characterize the lives of people who live there. This article is about these schools where children, families, teachers and administrators reproduce the very social contexts that they simultaneously try to improve, escape, change, tolerate, and ignore (e.g, Willis, 1977). In the *Color of School Reform,* Henig Hula, Orr and Pedescleaux (1999) describe urban education as the place where contested identity politics, sociopolitical agendas, and economic stratification conspire from within and outside school

systems to prevent potential reforms from gaining traction and crush the hope of the people who

have chosen to work within the system. As Dixson and Rousseau (2005) suggest, "we are still

not saved." Indeed, the use of critical race theory (Ladsen-Billings & Tate, 1995) to explore the

notion of cultural capital as a property right marked a watershed in the ways in which race, class,

and culture were viewed by many researchers. Rather than view race as a variable within a

research study or project, a critical view of race suggests that the current condition of schooling

is connected to a historical legacy of exclusion and inclusion that is a logical progression of a

normative view of contexts (Minow, 1990). The normative view necessitates a particular vantage

point upon which normalcy is constructed. When that normative view is what Glass (2008) calls

the "hyper consuming mainstream US population driven by a desire for comfort and security,"

what constitutes dis/ability and dis/advantage must be called into question.

Based on data from the 2004-2005 school year, more than a third of all public school

students in the US attend school in urban environments (Garofano &Sable, 2008). The 100

largest public school systems are predominantly urban and, with specific exceptions, schools

inside their boundaries continue to post large performance gaps between students who are Black,

White, and Hispanic. And, as has been noted, the majority populations in many of the largest

cities are Black and Hispanic (Lewis et al., 2008). However, these gaps seem to be closing

somewhat in the elementary grades as reported by the Education Trust (Haycock, 2008). Ed

Trust data also show that secondary student performance remains unchanged with large gaps

between racial and ethnic groups on measures of student learning as well as measures of access

to rich curriculum through advanced placement and gifted and talented classes. Graduation and

drop out markers are similarly grim with the dropout rate for students from Hispanic

backgrounds almost double that of their White counterparts. These data are brief reminders of

the equity issues that remain so troubling, particularly within urban schools and systems (Skrla et al, 2004). As Noguera (2003) points out, while impressive attempts to reform the nation's public schools have been engaged over the last 15 years, the impact on urban schools has been negligible.

In this article, we examine a legacy of policies that have promised equity and equal opportunity but in their implementation have fallen short for a variety of political, economic, and conceptual reasons (Beachum, et.al, 2008). We go on to use a conceptual framework for examining the work of students, teachers, and schools to organize an analysis of reform efforts that the National Institute for Urban School Improvement (NIUSI) has engaged with partner districts. Central to this work has been our efforts to help schools reconceptualize their core work as learning for, in and about practice that is designed for inclusivity (Artiles, Kozleski, Dorn & Christensen, 2007; Hubbard, Mehan, & Stein, 2006). Through networks of schools within school systems, we have engaged school teams in (a) learning more about their own practice using participatory action research, (b) participating in a set of linked learning opportunities that explore both how teams work together and for what purposes, (c) designing and implementing change initiatives focused on issues that emerged from their own needs analyses, and (d) provided tools for them to change practice over time. We describe this work in some detail, provide case descriptions of local work, summarizing the results and interpreting them against a conceptual framework grounded in activity theory designed to support increasingly inclusive practices.

A Legacy of Education Policies

There is little doubt that public policy has the capacity to transform the educational landscape. From the inception of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 with explicit language in Title VI

prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of race, color, or national origin in programs or

activities receiving federal monies to Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act to No

Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004),

public policy has had a profound impact on the ways in which generations of students and their

teachers have come together to learn. Further, these laws have spawned collective ideas about

where and how children should be educated and with whom. However, much nuance is omitted

from this assertion since the explicit and implicit intentions of these policies continue to be

contested.

Brown v. Board of Education

Consider the analyses of *Brown v. Board of Education* on the fiftieth anniversary of that

Supreme Court verdict. As Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum (2005) discussed, the Brown

decision was both a high water mark in the civil rights movement and the first time that the Court

vacillated in ensuring that a constitutional right was immediately implemented upon court ruling.

On May 17, 1954, a unanimous Supreme Court invalidated state laws requiring or permitting

racial segregation in public primary and secondary schools. Explicitly, *Brown* symbolized the

way in which courts can address fundamental wrongs in the struggle for racial justice (Smith &

Kozleski, 2006). In doing so, the *Brown* decision fueled the civil rights movement, leading to the

end of officially and explicitly sanctioned racial segregation. Conversely, *Brown* backlash also

mobilized white segregationists to oppose African-American efforts for equality with radically

increased vigor as African-American Southerners petitioned for school integration, boycotted

segregated municipal buses, and attempted to desegregate all-White public universities.

However, subsequent Supreme Court judgments also eroded *Brown*'s effectiveness by

upholding racial divisions coinciding with urban and suburban boundaries, thus accepting racial

divisions that emerge from housing availability (Wu, 2004). Furthermore, some school districts used several strategies to circumvent school desegregation, and some may have re-segregated students by using special education placements (Fierros & Conroy, 2002). Thus, each policy or ruling provides opportunities to position and/or advantage different perspectives and agendas. Further, as reform is enacted, it is vital to continue to strive to understand what groups or individuals are being advantaged and for what purpose (Varenne & McDermott, 1998).

NCLB

While *Brown* offers an example of how policy can be reframed through the courts, education laws also provide examples of how the landscape of schools can be changed through powerful, prescriptive legislation. Perhaps the one that US readers are most familiar with is NCLB. In five years, the work of schools across the country was transformed by stringent accountability measures in which annual yearly progress of schools was measured by standards-based assessments of student achievement (Nichols & Berliner, 2005). By tying funding and support to this single measure, the work of schools was changed in profound ways (Nichols & Berliner, 2007).   However, as assessments of the effectiveness of this policy have begun to emerge, these changes have had many unanticipated results. For instance, Phil Schlecty (2008) notes that the galvanizing property of local leadership for community schools has been eroded by using single measure tests to determine what is success and what is not.

NCLB's impact can be traced through the trajectory of change that has characterized some districts. From early attempts to figure out what the rules were and how to be successful in both following and succeeding within them, principals and central administrators sought external expertise even as lawyers and advocates were trying to understand what the law and its regulations permitted and proscribed. Some schools and school systems became early adopters,

either because they thought the rules advantaged the work they were already doing or they perceived that the law provided external validation for reform they wanted to accomplish. Once the rules became clearer, more districts and schools began to engage, both to avoid sanction and gain resources. As the terrain felt more stable, schools began to figure out where the flexibility lay, where the accountability was weak, and where they could co-exist both complying with and circumventing mandates or rules that didn't seem to fit or meet their goals. In school districts with fragile and under-resourced infrastructures, the demand for rapid change coupled with the demands of underserved groups of students meant that many districts had difficulty meeting NCLB targets, reducing their access to the very resources needed to improve results.

While systems shifted their patterns of compliance, urban schools in particular struggled to meet the external deadlines. Given the current trajectory of improvement for Black students based on the last five years of performance data, Lewis and colleagues (2008) suggest that it will take 45 years for the achievement gap to close. In the meantime, districts continue to identify, place, and discipline their Black students at much higher rates than their White counterparts (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005).

IDEA 2004

In the reauthorization of IDEA 2004, new mandates for states to measure the degree to which local education agencies or school systems were over- or under-identifying students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds played out in similar patterns. Using the terminology of disproportionality (Donovan & Cross, 2002), IDEA 2004 ensured that districts and states develop strategies to reduce disproportionality where it was found. Early adopter states had existing infrastructures that allowed them to use data from districts to measure disproportionality in the identification, placement, and discipline for students with disabilities.

Data from the US Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP),

analyzed by the National Center for Culturally Responsive Systems (NCCRESt.org, 2007),

provide a snapshot of how regional differences played out in these data.

Figures 1 through 3 illustrate regional differences in the ways in which Black students are

identified for special education services using data from the 2004-2005 academic year. Figure 1

shows the risk for Black students identified for special education in the category of learning

disabilities. The dark states have the highest disproportionality, using a measure of risk that is a

ratio of two ratios. The numerator is the number of students from a particular ethnic group in

special education over all the students enrolled from that particular group. The denominator is a

ratio of all of the students in special education over all the students enrolled in that system (Skiba

et al, 2008). Notice that two areas of the U.S. seem to identify students using this category at a

higher rate than other states: Pacific Coast states (except Oregon) and some states in the upper

Midwest (excluding North Dakota). Then, Figure 2 shows the same risk calculation for Black

students but identified for the intellectual disabilities (IDEA 2004 uses the term mental

retardation) category. The highest risk for this category of special education appears in the

Southeastern states: North and South Carolina and Florida with slightly lower risk for Georgia,

Alabama, and Mississippi. Notice that these states have lowest risk for identifying students who

are Black in the category of learning disabilities. Figure 3 shows disproportionality for emotional

disturbance with the northern tier of Midwestern and Northwestern states indicating the greatest

risk. Montana and Wyoming are blank because their risk data are so much higher than other

states that including their risk, it was not possible to show the variation in the other states. In

Figure 3 the greatest degree of risk has shifted once again to the upper Midwest and Western

States. Noticeably, this category is less used in Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and Nevada.

These variations are an example of the ways in which federal policy plays out regionally and locally because of sociocultural historical patterns, state policies, and local practices. Such variation suggests that policy alone is insufficient to make the kind of fundamental changes in the assumptions and values that are constructed locally. We suggest that local context transforms distal policies and finds ways to legitimize local practice using new forms and language. So, while we have evidence of changing practice, the question is to what degree have federal policies (a) transformed opportunities to learn, (b) mobilized movement between social and economic strata within the US, and (c) destabilized notions of dominant and marginalized groups and membership within those groups. If such agendas are to have national traction across the 90,000 public schools in the United States, mediating the process of implementation so that transformational change can occur is critical.

Levin and Fullan (2008) assert that sustained improvement in student outcomes occurs when the conditions for sustained learning about teaching and learning practices occurs across classrooms. The conditions for this circumstance happen when a system of learning is supported locally and distally with transparent goals, networks of engagement, and a focus on building the human and fiscal capacity of the system. But it also essentializes *features* of large scale change that are complicated on the ground, among and between people where individual and group differences are masked by the official rhetoric while ambition, altruism, cultural assumptions, and a host of other variables play out between teachers and students, among teachers and other school professionals, and between teachers and families (Bell, 1992; Harry, 2008).

The concept of organizational learning in which collective outcomes, processes, discourse patterns, and differentiated roles are negotiated in action offers a way to conceptualize and guide school transformation (Cole, 1996; Gallego et al., 2001). Policy sets the conditions for the possibility of such transformation; mediating tools for change are critical for implementation. For some time, the federal Department of Education has invested in technical assistance centers that are dedicated to providing such mediation. In the next section, we begin to explore those notions through the experiences of a federally funded technical assistance center, supported to help make local translations of federal policy.

<p style="text-align:center">The National Institute for Urban School Improvement</p>

While comprehensive school reform initiatives flowered in the nineties, few of those initiatives focused on bringing special education services into the mix. And, fewer still focused per se on urban schools. OSEP funded a technical assistance center, called the National Institute for Urban School Improvement (NIUSI) designed to target assistance to urban school systems across the country to improve access to general education for students with disabilities. NIUSI's mission was to build the capacity of urban schools and systems to serve students in inclusive classrooms and schools. This was complicated because two separate dialogues were being engaged in special education: disproportionality with its perspectives on the troubling numbers of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds being inappropriately placed in special education and inclusion with its focus on social justice and pushing back into the general education system (Artiles, 2003). And, an important question being raised was "inclusion into what?" (Erikson, 1996).

As has been noted in other studies, despite growing consensus around definitions, inclusive education models and practices have little similarity from context to context beyond

surface markers (Kozleski, Artiles, Fletcher, & Engelbrecht, 2007). This is shaped in part by the significant heterogeneity of the sociocultural contexts in which the idea of inclusive education is enacted (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007). Similarly to the ways in which disproportionality seems to play out against regional differences, so inclusive education has experienced different levels of engagement depending on state and local context. There has been little discourse about the impact of these local and regional differences on principles, policies, or practices of inclusive education. Further, the impact of these universal mandates on how families and children from indigenous and minority cultures and experiences negotiated schooling remained unexamined.

In 1997, when NIUSI was initially funded, most urban school systems in the country served students with disabilities in clustered programs that pulled students with disabilities out of their home schools and bussed them to center programs for students with disabilities. Clustering of students meant that districts could provide onsite specialized services such as physical and occupational therapies, speech/language, mental health support, and other specialized therapies. This practice was widespread throughout the country despite relatively poor results for students in terms of meeting curriculum standards, social networking, and opportunities for participation in school activities. In New York City, for example, District 75 was designed to offer such services as a separate system and did so for about 22,000 students in the city.

In spite of data from the first National Longitudinal Transition Study (Wagner et al, 1993), small qualitative studies, and examples of inclusive education systems in a few parts of the country that demonstrated the widespread benefits of inclusive education, special education services were conceptualized and delivered apart (for the most part) for students with disabilities. Data from the 1997-98 school year, reported by state to the US Department of Education, show that about 48% of all students with disabilities ($n = 6$ million) were educated in general education

classrooms. However, in urban school systems, this percentage was as low as 10% of the special education population. In a comparison between the '96-'97 and '06-'07 academic years, in three disability categories used in federal statute to identify students with disabilities (learning disability, emotional disturbance, and mental retardation), states reported modest improvements in the percentage of students served in general education settings more than 80% of the time for students with learning disabilities (from 24 states to 33 states) and for students with emotional disabilities (from 3 states to 7 states) (see Table 1). But, for students with mental retardation labels, only one state reported serving those students in general education more than 80% of the time as opposed to two states reporting serving students with MR in general education classrooms in 1996-1997. This comparison is somewhat compromised by changes in the ways in which data are reported to the U. S. Department of Education. In the '96-'97 academic year, states were reporting percentages of students served in general education classrooms while in '06-'07, states were reporting the percentage of students served in general education more than 80% of the time. However, it does suggest that some states are progressing in some categories while the vast majority of states have remained relatively static in the ways in which they provide special education services.

The Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS), a study of over 11,000 school-age students funded by the OSEP, suggests that continued concern about where a student with disabilities is educated is important. The SEELS data indicate that overall, students with disabilities who spend more time in general education classrooms tend to be absent less, perform closer to grade level than their peers in pull-out settings, and have higher achievement test scores (Blackorby, et al., 2005). This finding was corroborated by the second National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS-2) which found that secondary students with disabilities who take more

general education classes have lower GPAs than their peers in pull-out academic settings, but

score closer to grade level than their peers in math and science even when disability

classification is taken into consideration (Wagner, et al. 2003). In spite of these findings, as the

OSEP study of State and Local Implementation and Impact of IDEA (SLIIDEA) indicates,

progress towards more and more robust, effective instruction in the general education

environment seems to be hampered by a lack of systemic, sustained programmatic attention to

teacher education, professional learning, the use of data driven decision-making, and school

capacity development (Schiller et al., 2006). In a longitudinal evaluation of progress in seven

school systems Schiller et al. (2006) found that the majority of the systems they studied relied on

the individual expertise of teachers rather than district-level policy tools related to issuing

guidelines, allocating resources, and supporting professional development and training.

Class action suits on behalf of students with disabilities were settled in Chicago and Los

Angeles requiring massive effort to redesign services for students with disabilities to ensure their

access to general education classrooms and curriculum. More recently, several other class action

suits have been settled for states (e.g., Pennsylvania and Connecticut) and other cities (e.g., San

Francisco). Against this backdrop, NIUSI began its work by creating a conceptual framework to

help school systems, administrators, practitioners, and families understand the complexity of

change that was required to make principled, structural, and practice changes in large, urban

bureaucracies.

The Systemic Change Framework

The Systemic Change Framework (Ferguson, Kozleski, & Smith, 2003; Shanklin,

Kozleski, Meagher, Sands, Joseph & Wyman, 2003) visually represents the varying levels of

effort that combine to impact student achievement and learning (see Figure 4). Because of our

focus on inclusive education, the framework is designed to bring together the work of

practitioners into a unified system of teaching and learning in which the learning contexts for

students are organized in ways that engage the students at the margins as well as those in

mainstream. In doing this work, we seek to reduce the number of students inappropriately placed

in special education and enhance curricular frameworks and assessments so that learning can be

individualized within the context of classroom communities. The Systemic Change Framework

provides a common language among school professionals whose specialization often creates

barriers to common interests. Further, since these elements describe the work of teaching for

students with and without disabilities, schools can integrate inclusionary practices with other

reform goals to form a coherent approach to change and renew educational processes. Five levels

of the framework are interconnected, as represented by the white lines that delineate levels and

efforts.

Most would agree that at the heart of schooling are students, conceptualized not only by

their individual set of psychological characteristics, but also by the interplay between those

characteristics and the cultural histories that serve as the cultural lens through which the student

views and interacts with the world (Cole, 1996). Students expend effort as they seek to make

meaning of schooling experiences. This effort recognizes the dynamic nature of learning as a

cultural practice that is inhibited or accelerated by individual and institutional responses.

Therefore, the inner circle of the framework represents student learning and student effort. The

next layer consists of professional elements that affect student effort and learning. How learning

environments are established and maintained rests on the skills and creativity of teachers and

other educators. These efforts include: learning standards, teaching design and practices, family

participation in teaching & learning, group practice, and learning assessment. The next layer

contains school-level elements. It is here that structures and processes are established to frame and support the work of educators and students. Six elements identify this level: governance and leadership, structure and use of time, resource development and allocation, school/community relations, culture of change and improvement, and physical environment and facilities. In some cases, how these elements function is dependent on district effort and support. The next level identifies the systemic elements at the district-level. At this level, seven elements emerge, and each of these is conceived as important to the district's efforts for supporting what schools do: student services, inquiry on schools and schooling, organizational supports, resource development and allocation, systemic infrastructure, culture of renewal and improvement, and district/community partnerships. State law, regulation, and technical assistance shape the work of school systems as does the education policies of the U.S. Department of Education.

This nested view of schooling and the work of educators guided our practice during the 11 years that NIUSI was funded. In the systems that we partnered with, our work focused on bringing coherence to the district, school, and classroom levels of practice. In doing so, we developed a set of tools for shaping the structural, cultural, and learning work of school organizations. Here we explore the results of that work in order to better understand how policy and systems changes influence and change fundamental assumptions about teaching and learning and the activity arenas we call classrooms.

<div align="center">Cases</div>

Our Data

We have created brief descriptions here that summarize some of the data that we collected over the past 11 years to understand more completely the ways in which systemic change occurs and doesn't as a result of technical assistance efforts such as the one in which

NIUSI has been involved. These are not intended to be comprehensive case studies but samples of the ways in which district contexts differ vastly from one another because of state and local conditions. In the 10 districts that NIUSI worked with over the last 10 years, districts committed to working with project staff and spent between three and five years in collaborative work focused on changing processes at the district, school, and classroom level. In each district, at least 10 schools were identified for participation in our project work. Depending on the district, schools were asked to volunteer or were selected to participate. Commitment to the work varied based on this initial process. Schools that self-selected were led by school teams that included eager principals and interested school professionals. This was true in all districts, although in at least two districts where participation was mandated, and commitment to the work increased over time, as the building teams perceived that their participation produced change that they valued in their buildings.

For these case studies, NIUSI staff collected weekly field notes from phone conversations, visits to the school system, and workshops. These field notes were organized into quarterly reports that highlighted features of the work that were being conducted at each of the Systemic Change Framework levels. Quarterly case notes were the source for annual reports on each system. A set of interviews, classroom observations, and focus groups were conducted in 2007 that clarified and expanded our understanding of inclusive education reform in these districts and provide some of the data reported here. These interviews were independently coded and a set of themes was developed in collaboration with all the coders (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Inter-rater reliability was achieved by having more than one trained staff person code each of the interviews. These districts also supplied individual student record data coded to prevent identification of any student that were then used to develop Google maps of the school systems,

highlighting placement and over-representation status at individual school levels. The resulting

maps can be viewed on http://nccrest.eddata.net/city1/index.php. All of these data sources were

used in cases below, in which we have changed the names of the districts and the people

mentioned to protect their anonymity. The kind of data available varies since districts provide

very different kinds of data, depending on state data requirements and their individual

infrastructures.

A Small Urban District

Some highly urban states have many, small, separate school systems, some of which may

serve one large city. Such is the case with this district. This small urban district on the East Coast

served about 4, 223 students in 2005-06 and reported a slightly declining enrollment trend over a

four year period. Its population is diverse with almost half of its students identifying as Black

(49.2%). More than a third of the district's student population is White, and almost 10%

identified as Hispanic. Asian American and American Indian students comprise less than 5% of

the total student body (4.6%). About a quarter of the student population qualified for

free/reduced-price meals and less than 5% of the students spoke languages other than English at

home. Special education comprises about 12 percent of the student body. The risk for Black

students to be identified for special education service is 1.25 times that of White students. That

risk is elevated for Hispanic students as well at around 1.4 times that of White students.

However, over a three year period of time, these data have decreased from risk more than twice

as likely for both Black and Hispanic students to the results reported here.

About 90% of the district's staff is White and about 69% have master's degrees or above.

Class sizes ranged from an average of 14.5 students per classroom in kindergarten to almost 20

students per classroom in high school. With the exception of Grade 7, aggregated student

performance on the reading portion of the state's accountability assessment, aggregated student performance in reading, writing, and math was below the state average. The gap varied from less than one percentage point in the lower grades to as much as 10 points on one of the exams in the 8th grade. One middle school was identified as needing improvement based on adequate yearly progress measures based on 2006 data.

With strong leadership in the district and the township as a whole, the district has engaged the challenge of becoming multicultural not only demographically but within the social and political patterns that shape organizations and community politics. This context provides a backdrop for conscious practice on the part of teachers to address the needs of their students by changing shifting norms for behavior while maintaining academic standards. School district personnel at the system-level announced to school building principals and special education staff and teachers that students with disabilities were to be placed in the general education classroom and that special education services such as accommodations for reading and assessment were to be within the general education classroom. The district then offered a series of workshops to teach these skills.

The district's special education director commented, "We should be doing this anyway (003, p. 4)." Thus, an external pressure created an opportunity for district leadership to install changes in the special education services that are more in line with their values and beliefs about inclusive education. It was apparent that staff, families, and community members were concerned and deeply involved in understanding how practice intersects with issues like disproportionality. One teacher talked about her experience:

> And for the most part, I don't know why, but it seems that African-American students, or students of color, have a harder time learning in classrooms with, well, just period, just learning in classrooms. The classroom setting itself seems to be harder and whether that's a cultural thing I don't know. I don't know (A005, p. 3).

Another teacher selected a chapter from the autobiography of the U.S. comedian, Dick Gregory, who achieved some degree of public recognition during the civil rights movement in the sixties and seventies. In his autobiography, he traces the roots of his commitment to civil rights. One anecdote is devoted to his first conscious experience of racism, an encounter in elementary school. Students in the class we observed have read the excerpt, *Not Poor, Just Broke*, from Gregory's autobiography and engaged in small groups about the room, answered a set of questions on a handout the teacher had prepared. The questions included the following: Why did Gregory interpret this experience as racism? What evidence is provided that might have led him to make that conclusion? What do you think the teacher's intent was in this situation? What in the text makes you think that? Have you ever experienced or witnessed a similar situation? What do you think that the group could have done in this situation?

Students in the small groups were closely reading the text, offering support from the text for their interpretation. Other students were note-taking for discussion that would occur later. There was dialogue, contention, and resolution occurring. On close observation, there were some students in the room who were unable to locate their evidence. It seemed that they could not read the text. Their fellow students helped them out. The teacher was observed coaching the small groups to organize their evidence. Periodically, the teacher looked up from her small group discussions to check on the group as a whole. The students were engaged in the task. There was obvious intensity and focus. Our guide told us, as we left the classroom, which students in the classroom had identified disabilities. Observations like this, where students with various skill levels were engaged in the tasks and supporting one another, were made in several of the classrooms in that building, on that hallway.

Later, we interviewed the teacher about her feelings and judgment about the success of

the inclusive mandate. She told us that she enjoyed having students with different learning

abilities and skill levels in the room:

> I actually teach an inclusion class so I have special ed children within my classroom but I
> don't even look at it that way. ….they're all children and they all learn the way they learn
> and I have to try to reach every one of these children in the way that they're going to
> learn. I look at them all as learners and that I've just got to take them from one place to
> another and I think a lot of it has to do with expectations (p. 3, A004).

In a focus group with the mayor, the director of the local chamber of commerce, two

ministers of local churches, and the police chief, the participants revealed that all but two of them

had graduated from the local high school. This generational connection between the school and

local leaders created a powerful sense of ownership over the direction of the school district and a

close scrutiny of the current superintendent of schools. Over a significant period of time, local

residents remained and maintained their sense of concern and stewardship over the role of the

public schools in their community.

The decreases in the district's disproportionality data are influenced most heavily by its

attention to building a common understanding of cultural responsiveness that is bolstered by

focused professional learning about instruction and learning materials. To do this well requires

new choices in curriculum materials, new patterns of classroom management, and careful

attention to student performance so that shifts in practice are made as teachers test out new

routines and processes. Further, intensive work with multidisciplinary teams of practitioners

focused on pre-referral to special education that provides technical assistance to classroom

teachers has shifted attention from student deficits to instructional improvement. There is much

left to be done in the district and scores of classrooms in which traditional teaching continues to

dominate. However, it is evident that changes in disproportionality can be attributed in part to

becoming more culturally responsive as a district. This progress seems to have occurred because

leaders at multiple levels of the system involved themselves and others in *understanding* the

ways in which their own values, beliefs and practices contributed to the organization's cultures

and habits. Through understanding, they became more conscious of their daily actions and

changed practices as a result of that reflection.

A Southern Big City School District

This district serves more than 120,000 students. The district city schools employ 16,500

people, including about 8,000 teachers. More than half the teachers are Black, another 48% are

White. About 87% of the students are Black, another 9% are White. The remaining 4% are

predominantly Hispanic. About 14% of the students in the district are identified for special

education services. The risk for being identified for special education services is almost twice as

great for Black students than all others. These risk data also suggest that White students in

predominantly Black schools have a higher risk than White students in predominantly White

schools.

For the most part students with disabilities are served in separate classrooms and separate

schools, although through NIUSI and the leadership of the previous superintendent, the system

as a whole made a commitment to reorganizing its services to serve all students. Many of the

administrators and teaching staff in this district have worked in this district for their entire

professional careers. A large percentage of them were educated in the local universities. Social

relationships are complex and many school personnel from all levels of the system have other,

non-school connections through churches, sororities and fraternities, family ties, and long-term

friendships. Social standing in the community is conferred by cultural and historical legacies that

are not apparent at first to outsiders. Many agendas are paved through these social networks,

rather than through the official agendas of the school system. There is a sense that people look out for one another and facilitate or block reform efforts through informal means.

The district has identified 15 schools that work closely with NIUSI to support their change efforts. The principals in particular have provided leadership on moving their students into general education classrooms although this has been complicated by lack of professional knowledge and skills on the part of special and general educators in terms of curriculum adaptations and modifications as well as approaches to adults working in teams on behalf of students. A strong and focused superintendent provided leadership for principals to work on inclusive education.

The curriculum is observed to be highly prescriptive. The reading program contains a set of specific practices that are to be accomplished daily. In spite of this very prescriptive curriculum, teachers are observed leading a variety of activities in their reading blocks that may or may not parallel what other teachers in the same building are doing on the same day in the same block. The district intends for classroom activities to be highly aligned but teachers appear to take a great deal of latitude in their teaching. The tone in classrooms varies widely from class to class. In some classrooms, teachers are actively engaged in small group and one-on-one conferences. In others, the teacher commands center stage with all of the students engaged in the same activity. Principals and coaches complete classroom observations weekly and comment on items that are observed on the classroom walls. Little discussion is overhead about the instructional process, although teachers voice eagerness to comply with the program.

In one building, a strong principal takes us to one classroom where the classroom teacher shows us a graph that has been developed by one student with disabilities who used icons to build each bar of his graph. A number of light bulb symbols show the count of light bulbs in his

house. The teacher is touched by this adaptation of her homework assignment. The student seems proud of his accomplishment and the attention he receives. Later, in a workshop, principals and practitioners alike want more information about how to develop sets of accommodations and they worry about the time that it will take.

Workshops seem to go well. Participants give high ratings on post workshop evaluations. Participants are engaged and eager to ask questions. But, later visits to classrooms reveal that little if any of the material and tools shared are being using in classrooms. Administrators tell us that this is typical and suggest that principals do not provide the kind of scaffold needed to implement new practice. We wonder the degree to which principals have deep understandings about how and why inclusive education is important. There is much talk about *what to do* and little talk about *why.*

Conversations with central administration leaders suggest that they are capable and able to organize workshops, meetings, action agendas, and have the planning skills to accomplish a great deal. What they are trying to accomplish and why is less clear. There is concern about what will be allowed although who has authority to change their plans is not clear. Meetings are observed in which some members with leadership titles spend much of the meeting talking about their work. Afterwards, other meeting participants inform us that not much is accomplished by that person. This pattern is observed during each of our three day visits.

The inclusive education agenda and decreases in disproportionality moves slowly forward in this district with a few principal leaders accomplishing thoughtful work in their buildings. However, the systems view is less positive. Without deep understanding at the district level for what they are trying to achieve and why, shifts in the bureaucracy that will maintain the

change trajectory are unlikely. The buildings making change are likely to continue to improve as long as their principals stay.

A Western Big City School District

This district serves about 280,000 students and employs about 32,000 people, including full-time, part-time, substitute and temporary employees. Of these, almost 19,000 are licensed personnel with another 12,000 individuals providing support as clerical, food service, bus drivers, para-educators, and school police. There are approximately 1,000 administrators in the system. The superintendent reports to an elected school board and leads five regional service units, each with its own superintendent. Each region has a regional center that coordinates district resources such as special education, athletics, technology, and professional learning. During NIUSI's work with this system, it opened, on average, seven schools each year, partnered with a variety of other national organizations including the Edison School System, implemented NCLB, and partnered with the community to develop a foundation that supports inclusive education. Thirty-seven schools partnered specifically with NIUSI. Leadership retreats, school learning team workshops, site liaisons within the system who coached the 37 buildings, annual celebrations that brought national speakers to the district, continuous monitoring of the district's data through NIUSI's data maps were some of the many activities that were implemented to support improvement of teaching practices.

Leadership at the most senior levels of the organization has helped other administrators and practitioners understand their role in taking responsibility for students with disabilities. In doing so, they have asked schools to design their improvement efforts around serving *all* students, including those that are assigned to special education and other federally mandated programs. As one district leader describes it,

The unwritten policy are [sic] the conversations you have with your colleagues that say: this is what the case is. I can't do this. I'm not a line officer. You're a line officer. This is what kids are not getting. So we need to sit and talk about what kids are not getting because you have to make some demands of the people who should be giving it to them. To say: Did you look at this? Did you look at that? Is there a way you can include this child in this activity and still make sure you are addressing the needs of this child. You tell me what it's going to take to educate this child who stepped over the doorstep because this child has different needs than other people do. So if you have different needs, what is it going to take for you to do this here? (B001, p. 2).

She goes on to explain that her job is to make sure that the resources are made available to serve students with disabilities in general education. Her counterpart, the Chief Academic Officer, has the same mindset. Together, they create discourse patterns at the district and school level that push principals and teachers to understand that they will teach *all* children.

Interestingly, in this district, the special educators who have long had their own classrooms and curriculum are concerned about how to reframe their work so that they have parity in the classrooms that they support, without being seen as para-educators. The learning tools that practitioners need to make these adjustments are not readily available so practice is lagging behind vision in this district. In spite of NIUSI's efforts to offer professional learning and create contexts for coaching within buildings, staff are stretched and often deal with crisis situations rather than supporting practice change.

Discontinuities between deep understanding of the inclusive education agenda at central administration and leadership for learning and change at buildings are significant barriers to sustained changed in this district. This is a well-organized bureaucracy that has figured out how to get resources into buildings and ensure that textbooks, technology, food services, transportation and curriculum are well established and organized. But, issues of equity are rampant within buildings, with high levels of disproportionality in many schools, and highly segregated programs still proudly on display at buildings. The personal and relational side of

organizational learning so well captured in the small urban district is absent here. The principals that we talk with don't know the change leaders at the district level. Their goals and ambitions for their schools are crafted from their own experiences and beliefs, tempered to some degree by the principal networks they participate in. They know the rhetoric of the district's mission but they are implementing it based on their own histories, not shared learning.

<div align="center">Discussion</div>

Beginning in the early 1990s reform focused on systemic change and getting to scale (Levin & Fullan, 2008). Getting to scale with multiple kinds of innovations requires a different kind of systemic reform – one that focuses on motivating innovation and flexibility to approach inclusive, equitable outcomes rather than replication (Skiba et al, 2008).   However, getting to scale is only part of the problem. Sustaining continued improvement, innovation, and responsiveness requires a whole other mindset on the part of educators, the public, and policy makers. This mindset entails capacity building at all levels of the system—in other words, learning to think and act in ways that build systemic learning through *understanding* and *reflection*.

The reform efforts in San Diego from 1998 to 2002 seem to reflect that perspective (Hubbard, Mehan & Stein, 2006). Grounded in the organizational learning work of Senge (2006), systemic thinking suggests that critical examination of the ways that systems such as education operate along with exploring who is advantaged and disadvantaged within the system create the context for distributing equity and opportunity throughout the system. In a broad effort to improve professional practice, the San Diego system invested heavily in helping practitioners learn about their practice, in practice. While work among teams of practitioners at the building-level demonstrated commitment and improvement over time, systemic improvements to the

system as a whole remained elusive. Hubbard, Mehan, and Stein (2006) suggest that discontinuities in the bureaucracy at the central administration hampered coherence and, in the end, unraveled progress that was being made at the practice-level.   The three cases described in this paper provide additional examples of the need to work at the practice level while creating systemic continuity.

Where the cultures of community and school are compatible, this kind of systems work is daunting but possible. When systems work flies in the face of realities on the ground, as it did in the Southern Big City system, systems reform sounds like code for imposing majority, deficit views on minority communities and their children. Systems work must have a value base itself that is grounded in equity, an understanding of the cultural work of education, and offer a way to inform policy through exemplary practice.   Systemic reform requires understanding how structural components of a complex system perpetuate a given set of values that appear resistant to tinkering and occasional exhortations to change. Further, systemic change involves making strategic choices about levels of change that have a high probability of improving the critical products or outcomes.

Systemic reforms require systemic thinking and systemic design but it also needs processes that are designed to mitigate social reproduction, explore cultural historical perspectives, and encourage participant agency in activity systems such as classrooms and schools to produce equitable outcomes for students and families (Artiles & Dyson, 2005). The work of Michael Cole and others elaborate these ideas and offer the opportunity to explore the interplay between internal psychological characteristics and external mediators to include functional systems of artifacts and participant structures (Cole, 1996; Rogoff, 2003; Wertsch, 1995). Activity theory provides a framework for researchers to understand how families, students, and professionals

construct their local practices, interpret rules, and organize their work in the context of complex

sociocultural characteristics that are themselves dynamic.

As Michael Apple (1996) notes, understanding the challenges that exist within our public

school systems is complex and multifaceted. Understanding is complicated by the

epistemological and theoretical assumptions that undergird research efforts. Looking at

relationships between student achievement and school governance for instance, may blur

distinctions about cultural politics, local economics, the relevance of school knowledge, and the

value that teachers and their students place on the official curriculum. A pragmatic focus on

variables that researchers or policy makers suggest are the only levers available for improvement

positions reform as preferable to stasis. Yet, without profound and deep understanding about the

daily lives of teachers and students and the ways in which what is taught overtly and covertly

legitimizes some while marginalizing others, there is little to offer in authentic improvement in

the experience of urban schooling (Lee, 2007).

Our experience illustrated by the three cases presented suggests that structural issues indeed

create contexts in which collective efforts towards understanding and reform have limited

potential. Systemic reform is defined and used in various ways, but the general conception is

that in order to produce the changes necessary for quality education, components throughout

multi-layered systems of education will need to be addressed (Levin & Fullan, 2008). Schlechty

(2008) provides the perspective that distally imposed standards and performance criteria will fail

to be implemented unless educators and communities participate in meaningful ways in

constructing and interpreting standards in ways that generate improvements. Without deep and

shared understanding, the strategies and tactics that individuals or parts of a system employ to

achieve short-term improvements will sabotage or circumvent work on the fundamental changes

required to shift students from the margins while simultaneously changing the conditions of the mainstream. We agree that structural and systems issues plague school systems. But, those issues are also ways in which the current social order is maintained and some groups of students are able to continue to benefit while others continue to be disadvantaged. At the heart of systemic change is the capacity of systems workers to understand the forces that buffet the system and that work in insidious ways to reproduce particular kinds of social order.

In the beginning, in the middle, and at the end, there are the children and their families, living out their lives in complex environments that offer simultaneously a rich fabric of family and kinship, history, tradition, and community and bleak realities of poor schools, limited access to work and careers, and constant vigilance against violence and crime. This description, like many that summarize the urban experience, is constructed from a vantage point of conferred safety, a normative stance, and assumptions about what is to be valued (Smith, 1999). It provides a familiar vision that resonates with our collective narrative but, in doing so, marginalizes individuals whose lived experience is complex and highly varied. Deeply embedded in researchers' collective constructions of who urban children and families are, narrations of loss and desperation, and dis/abilities and dis/advantage. In our rush to reform, have we dampened the capacity of teachers to teach rather than blame the children or their circumstances (Lee, 2007)?

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