

This New Field of Inclusive Education: Beginning a Dialogue on Conceptual Foundations

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Abstract

Numerous scholars have suggested that the standard knowledge base of the field of special education is not a suitable intellectual foundation for the development of research, policy, and practice in the field of inclusive education. Still, we have yet to have a dialogue on what conceptual foundations may be most generative for the growth and development of the field of inclusive education. This article imagines and initiates such a new dialogue among educational researchers and teacher educators about the intellectual resources that can best support inclusive educators everywhere. As inclusive education gets increasingly taken up within international policy discourses, it may be imperative to explore and identify theories and ideas that can be responsive to diverse and hugely unequal contexts of schooling. This article forwards an initial collection of intellectual resources for an inclusive education that can accommodate such complex schooling conditions and invites rich scholarly exchange on this issue.

Key Words: *inclusion; conceptual foundations*

When inclusive education first burst forth as professional area of research and practice in the 1980s, it was assumed by most U.S. educators to be a conceptual and practical outgrowth of the field of special education. This is not surprising. The Regular Education Initiative (REI) debate that initially launched the instructional and social priority of teaching students with and without disabilities in the same classrooms took place among special education scholars (Osgood, 2005, 2008). The participant rolls of the REI debate made it clear that inclusion was crafted and proposed by special educators who had an interest in reducing the segregation and isolation of students with disabilities.

As the research and practical basis for inclusive education developed over the ensuing decades, the field of special education continued to bear the primary responsibility for building the intellectual and practical foundation for the new field of inclusion. This is demonstrated in Brantlinger's (2006) analysis of university textbooks. She found that the special education knowledge base migrated to become the theoretical and scientific foundation of inclusive education in the United States. Higher education texts have taught that the scientific and

practical expertise accrued over years of special education research should essentially follow students with disabilities as they shifted into the general classrooms, thereby supplying the necessary conceptual and pedagogical foundations for the new inclusive enterprise.

Over the past three decades, the keystone of inclusive education development in the United States has been the proliferation of an intellectual and pedagogical apparatus built by special education to address the learning needs of students with disabilities in general education classrooms. The primary goal of this professional work has been the application of a special education knowledge base to the instruction of students with disabilities in general classrooms (e.g., Bryant, Smith, & Bryant, 2007; Lewis & Dorlag, 2010; Vaughan, Bos, & Schumm, 2010).

Given the fact that inclusive classrooms are general education settings comprised primarily of students without disabilities, it is not surprising that numerous educational scholars have proposed that the knowledge base of special education, the research and theories that chiefly encompass the field (e.g., Paul & Marfo, 1997), might be a poor foundation for the work of inclusive educators

(Ballard, 1999; Slee, 2001, 2011). If one were to build a field of inclusive education from the ground up, one might not necessarily begin with the intellectual and instructional traditions devised to educate students with disabilities in separate classrooms and schools.

Sktric (1991) has established that the conceptual infrastructure of U.S. special education consists of two main disciplinary components, psychological measurement and behavior modification. As a practical matter, the field of measurement has provided special educators with the technical ability to diagnose specific childhood disorders, thereby locating areas of psychological or educational deficit in the student. Measurement has also served as a central practical feature of the application of the federal legal system of discrete disability types, allowing schools to use psychometric assessments in processes that qualify students for categorical special education services.

Behavioral theory and programs of behavior modification have offered a rigorous practice of educational treatment, a scientific approach to the remediation of identified areas of academic or social deficit. Together, the tandem of psychological measurement and behaviorism has served as the scientific foundation, the theoretical and practical toolbox that has chiefly defined the work of special educators.

This was a toolbox designed originally for separate special education provision. Recent historical research has uncovered how the conceptual and ideological underpinnings of the field of special education were fashioned primarily to provide diagnostic-prescriptive remedies for educational or psychological deficits. These interventions assumed that students with disabilities would be segregated from students without disabilities to receive the specialized treatment. Far from supporting inclusion, the research base of U.S. special education was developed to make segregated schooling more efficacious, offering a scientific rationale and an effective instructional protocol for the social isolation of children and youth with disabilities in the public schools (Danforth, 2009; Danforth & Ressa, 2014).

The special education science underlying and supporting segregated classrooms and programs has been repurposed toward the aims of inclusion. The act of decorating the new field of inclusive education with the intellectual furniture of special education, Brantlinger (1997) reminds us, effec-

tively distances inclusive teaching from the intense struggle of Americans with disabilities for civil rights, equality, and full participation in society. Inclusion, when furnished as a version of special education, is cleansed of the political conflicts and purposes of the disability rights movement. Naraian (2013) has critiqued this approach as pacifying the radical edge of inclusive education, offering “not a fundamental reconceptualizing of difference, but a strategic cover for traditional, deficit-based practices” (p. 361). It is framed as a politically neutral professional activity, denying the complex role of schools and teachers in political questions of access, participation, and equality in regard to young people with disabilities. The intellectual and practical reach of special education extended into inclusion while depoliticizing issues of human value and social participation. As a result, the science of segregated disability schooling became the research foundation for segregation’s political and practical antithesis.

Given the critique of special education knowledge as the intellectual foundation of inclusive education, we suggest a provocative question: If we set aside the assumption that the knowledge base of special education offers sufficient theoretical and practical support to the ongoing work of inclusive educators, what might we offer as the best conceptual foundation for the field of inclusive education? We particularly recognize that the charge to prepare teachers for inclusive education requires straddling commitments to the learning of students both with and without disabilities and their families, as well as to the learning of teachers in schools. This process may, we suggest, require diverse theoretical commitments that can, collectively, transform our understandings of inclusive practice. We are, therefore, imagining a new conversation among educational researchers and teacher educators about the collection of ideas, of research and theory, that might serve as useful, fruitful intellectual and practical support for the future development and improvement of inclusive education. Our chief goal in this article is to encourage the development of a rich and diverse scholarly exchange about this issue.

Certainly this conversation does not categorically exclude the scholarship of special educators. But it starts from the premise that the conventional view that special education knowledge *necessarily* funds the instructional and social goals of inclusive education is questionable. This new dialogue begins

with a claim that inclusion is a complex political project in the schools that requires general educators, special educators, school leaders, and other professional personnel to break sharply with prior beliefs and conventions that justify segregation, rejection, and devaluation of students on any basis (Ferguson, 1995, 2008). The dialogue begins with the assumption that inclusive teaching is both advanced professional work involving a range of instructional practices and oppositional, purposeful political activity seeking school communities of equality and human diversity.

The purpose of this article is threefold. Broadly speaking, we wish to initiate a new dialogue among educational scholars about the conceptual basis for inclusive schooling, about the configuration of ideas that provide structure and content to the field of research while simultaneously permitting culturally situated programmatic responses. Given the advancement of inclusive education in nations around the world, the dialogue we wish to encourage should be expansive and polyvocal. This discussion must simultaneously engage the specific cultural dimensions of policies and political realities in different locations, allowing inclusion to assume different trajectories to address the local contours of cultural-historical understandings and practices. A powerful intellectual foundation for inclusive education development in Afghanistan may differ greatly from what suffices to support and propel inclusion in Canada or Finland.

Yet, we simultaneously caution against the development of different “versions” of inclusive education; we recognize the danger that without some unifying tenets of inclusive education, such versions may inadvertently permit the re-entry of contested meanings of disability (Peters, Johnstone, & Ferguson, 2005). Ultimately, in exploring many culturally-situated “inclusions,” evincing both local variations and more universal motifs, this conversation should direct us toward a transnational theorizing of inclusive education.

To that end, we offer an initial articulation of a new knowledge base devoted explicitly to the development of inclusive education research, theory, and practice. We forward a first proposal in that new conversation, an initial articulation of a set of conceptual foundations that we believe provides substantive conceptual guidance and support to inclusive educators.

We do so with deliberation and a great deal of caution. Because researchers are working primarily

in the United States, we remain cognizant that such intellectual resources must bear validity within sociocultural contexts that are vastly different from the United States. To do otherwise would raise many troubling questions. First, it would maintain hierarchical relations between the Global North and Global South—relations that are typically concretized through multinational aid packages from donor agencies comprised largely of countries in the Global North. Additionally, it would ascribe unequal value to the contributions of educators who are engaged in this work across widely varying national and local conditions (Kisanji, 1998). Finally, an exclusive focus on the U.S. context implicitly ignores the challenges of implementation in other contexts and subsequently serves to exacerbate the theory-practice divide. Our task, therefore, is to propose some general conceptual foundations that can remain sensitive to culturally specific processes and meanings in contexts very different from the United States.

The complexity of this task required us to shift our orientation to the concept of inclusive education itself. Instead of conceiving inclusive education as an *outcome* that must be achieved, we have conceptualized it as a *process* that is always ongoing, continual, and by extension, unfinished. Whether in the United States or Afghanistan or Finland, inclusive education remains a work in progress. Still, as a “*principled, unending process*” (Booth, 2009, our emphasis), we see it as necessary, to advance a specific set of evaluative parameters, priorities of human value and community life, that can inform inclusive education projects anywhere. Collectively, these priorities and conceptual resources may reasonably constitute an intellectual foundation for an inclusive education. In offering this, we invite critique, commentary, and reformulation that continues and enriches this new dialogue of the intellectual foundations of inclusive education. Ultimately, no single statement such as what we provide in this essay can fully constitute the knowledge base of inclusion. A rich and well-informed dialogue among many participants will be more suitable to the task. We begin with a description of four foundational priorities for inclusive educators.

Four Foundational Priorities

One can imagine that any configuration of foundational ideas in support of inclusive education

development would address a set of vital, central priorities. Any intellectual foundation for inclusive education must support growth and innovation in the areas of policy development, research and theory, and pedagogical practice. It must facilitate the furtherance of inclusive education as both a discrete field of educational activity and as a pedagogical area intimately connected to, informing, and benefiting from advances in all fields of educational scholarship and practice. It should interpret schooling as human social activity that nurtures the growth, learning, and well being of individuals and families while simultaneously contributing to the democratic character of communities. Though optimistic and progressive, it must retain a critical awareness of and resistance to the historical and social patterns of social injustice and cruelty that divide communities and harm individuals and families. It must equally facilitate an understanding of struggle that is expansive, that is as willing to look inward as outward, and which can listen to opposing voices, as well as speak with conviction. With vigilance, it must address and respond creatively to the structures, attitudes, and practices that perpetuate social exclusion and devaluation in schools and society.

We recognize that for teacher preparation programs in many parts of the world, some of these aims may seem distant and even irrelevant to the more immediate and pressing concerns of simply achieving student access to education. We also understand that the motivations for entry into the profession of teaching are often driven by socio-economic realities that may detract from rather than facilitate, the vision of democratic communities that we perceive as integral to the work of inclusive educators. Our insistence on these priorities is not to diminish the significance of such material differences within the varied contexts of teacher preparation. On the contrary, we hope that the pragmatic negotiation of such differences for an inclusive practice that is guided by such priorities can continually refine our understanding of the complexities of *doing* inclusive education, anywhere.

Our proposal conceptualizes inclusive education under four foundational priorities, umbrellas of political activity necessary to the current challenges of being an inclusive educator. For each of the four conceptual areas, we offer an intellectual resource to support and guide the development of inclusive research and practice.

We conceptualize inclusive education in terms of the following priorities:

1. *Democracy*—an ethical approach to schooling and a broader community life that intentionally pursues freedom and equality for all. We begin with the commitment that inclusive teaching should embody the principles of a liberal, pluralistic democracy (Lipsky & Gartner, 1996), providing young people with opportunities to experience, develop within, and contribute to democratic living (Callan, 1997). Arguably, in many world contexts, including the United States, the presumption of democratic ends does not readily harmonize with the historically specific claims of particular groups (Grande, 2000). For indigenous peoples or populations trapped within authoritarian regimes, for instance, the injunction to preserve a democratic vision for inclusive schooling may not reflect the pragmatic relations between communities, nations, and societies. We acknowledge this complexity; our rationale in preserving this priority rests on the conviction that activism occurs in all societies, regardless of the nature of their political institutions. Such activism may well spawn the kinds of liberatory narratives that are commensurate with democratic ends. To preserve this delicate balance between the construct of democracy and the possibilities afforded by local contexts, we examine two ideas espoused by John Dewey, his *vision of a democratic community* and his concept of *moral equality*.
2. *Interpersonal relationships communicating value*—a way of cultivating and appreciating the interpersonal relationships—in particular among educators and students in schools—that create the possibilities of human fulfillment and positive social change. Inclusive teaching should cultivate microcommunities of respect, reciprocity, and acceptance that reach across all possible social obstacles and sociological divisions (Bogdan & Taylor, 1989). The work of teachers is a complex art of ethical interaction, a way of relating to children and teaching them to relate to one another. The work of educational philosopher Nel Noddings (1984, 1992, 1995) on the centrality of caring relationships provides profound, powerful guidance to the daily work of inclusive educators.
3. *Political consciousness*—an ideological praxis that exposes, resists, and counters the political oppression of people with disabilities, in particular, as well as other people who belong to groups that are subject to exclusion and devaluation. Inclusive teaching should involve a “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Leiter, 2004, p. 74), an ongoing critical analysis of human consciousness, behavior, and social structures in order to challenge conventional meanings that perpetuate social injustice and suffering. A political consciousness, therefore, is equally conversant with power relations within local

schooling contexts and how they enable particular meanings of disability. The field of disability studies, an interdisciplinary tradition of social analysis looking at the experiences of people with disabilities in many cultural contexts, helps us understand how social inequality is created and maintained. We explore Tobin Siebers' (2008) concept of the *ideology of ability*, a piercing example of disability studies literature that shows how disability and people with disabilities are habitually discounted and devalued.

4. *Situated agency*—Philosophers and social theorists use the word *agency* to represent the process of decision making and action undertaken by an individual. Our concern is with the agency of people who advocate for inclusive education—students with disabilities, their families, educators, policy makers, and researchers. Often inclusion advocates operate within complex, contradictory social terrains where the formal and informal rules are confusing and inconsistent. Advocates are embedded within specific historically produced sociocultural contexts where meanings of learning and achievement, ability/disability, success/failure are continually contested, negotiated, transformed, and abandoned. Inclusive education has to account for how a commitment to socially just pedagogy can inform agency within contexts that are stable and predictable, as well as erratic and incalculable. We offer the scholarship of Third World feminist writers on forms of *oppositional consciousness* as a resource to support teachers navigating often baffling schooling contexts toward goals of equity.

Democracy: John Dewey, Community, and Equality

The task of democracy is forever that of creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all contribute. (Dewey, 1939, p. 225)

Two specific concepts espoused by John Dewey inform our understanding of democracy in relation to inclusive schooling: democratic community and moral equality.

Dewey's vision of democratic community involves an understanding of the mutual relationship between the individual and society. The well being of the community and the full development of individuals operate through inseparable reciprocity. The purpose of the democratic society is to create communities of equality and social support so that the free expression and full development of the individuality of each citizen is a paramount

concern. The task of people in the democracy is to contribute their unique talents and effort to the daily interactions and activities that support the community of freedom and equality. The meaning and value of those activities and abilities is a social product, an achievement of the community.

Dewey's understanding of democratic community is a mundane, everyday approach to the concrete activities of living together. Equality is not just grand superlative carved in bold letters beneath marble statues of presidents and civil rights leaders. It is literally created—made real—in the face-to-face conversations and interactions of common people going about their business each day. Two neighbors lean against the fence that divides their properties. Both stand at the outer edge of their own individuality, at the perimeter of their neighbor's individuality. Both lean against and interact on what they share, what they have in common. The neighbors talk about interests and concerns that are inevitably shared by people who live side by side. In these daily social exchanges that take place in side yards, shopping centers, houses of worship, and schools, the equality of people can be made and remade as an ethic of interaction, as a way of being with other citizens (Martin, 2002; Ryan, 1997; Westbrook, 1993).

Biklen and Burke's (2006, p. 166) notion of "presuming competence" is a salient example of what Dewey's concept of democratic community means in inclusive schooling. To presume competence in interaction with a person with disabilities is to avoid ascribing deficit and defect ideas to the humanity of the person. Instead, one interprets a body or actions that may seem unusual or surprising as completely reasonable, as ordinary and making good sense within the experience of the person with disabilities.

A teacher who presumes competence adopts an orientation of deep respect for the individuality and life experience of the person with disabilities. The teacher's obligation is not to project an ableist interpretation on something another person does, but rather to presume there must be a rationale or sympathetic explanation for what someone does and then try to discover it, always from another person's own perspective. (Biklen & Burke, 2006, p. 168)

Appreciating the humanity of the person with a disability, honoring the person as an equal, requires

an open mind. The educator moves past the accumulated cultural dross, the stereotyped interpretations of why a person speaks, moves, or behaves in a certain way, to understand how this individual actually operates in the world.

For example, Jamie Burke, a young man with autism, struggles to form his thoughts and expressions into vocalized speech. So he typically types to communicate his ideas. He learned to type with the support of a facilitator who provides support by holding his arm or hand. In a classroom discussion, his typed production of language is slow by comparison to the quick oral articulations of his classmates. The adult facilitator can be an awkward presence in the teen-to-teen conversation.

In this instance, presuming competence means moving beyond stigmatized concepts of autism and the unusual aspects of Jamie's mode of communication to adopt an open and accepting orientation toward Jamie and what he has to say. We listen to value his words and access the distinct personality and perspective behind the words. We avoid the ableist trap of assuming that slow language production is a sign of lesser intelligence, linguistic pathology, or lesser humanity. We hear Jamie, listen to Jamie, and appreciate what he has to contribute to the class.

Ideas originating in such Deweyan notions have found their way into the policy rhetoric of inclusive education in many international contexts. It is not uncommon to find "child-centered" pedagogical approaches valorized in policy documents, as well as the repeated exhortation for teachers to remain responsive to the backgrounds and learning profiles of their students (Sriprakash, 2012). We note that the appropriation of such ideas is constrained or facilitated, though always mediated, by existing political and sociohistorical discourses (Kumar, 2005; Sriprakash, 2012; Steiner-Khamsi & Quist, 2000). Though such mediation undoubtedly poses a significant challenge to national/local governments for the implementation of teacher education policies (Mitchell, 2005), we suggest that the commitment to the everyday equity work in schools envisioned by Dewey remains relevant and, in fact, actively endorsed by educators working under widely differing sociocultural contexts.

Closely aligned with Dewey's view of a democratic community is his notion of moral equality. Obviously, all young persons are unlike. They differ in a million different ways—physical size, appearance, interests, personality, needs, strengths, weak-

nesses. But how should we interpret those differences? John Dewey coined the concept "moral equality" (Dewey, 1976a, p. 299) to capture a democratic way of thinking about how students differ from one another. Dewey encourages us not to think about differences in terms of hierarchies of superior and inferior, higher and lower, better and worse. Instead, he distilled the complex array of student differences through a lens of incomparability.

"Moral equality means incommensurability, the inapplicability of common and quantitative standards" (Dewey, 1976a, p. 299). Educators should avoid concocting a grand standard or overarching concept to compare students to one another. Dewey was a strong critic of intelligence testing as a way of understanding and representing the learning and capabilities of students. He critiqued standardized testing as decontextualizing the concrete activities of students through abstract comparisons to fabricated norms, creating a harmful and misleading hierarchy of human performance that failed to comprehend how students actually learned in relationship to specific life challenges. Such testing foolishly prioritized a goal of competitive ranking over the more democratic and practical goal of understanding and appreciating the actual growth and learning of each student (Dewey, 1976a, b).

Acting on the basis of moral equality begins with rejecting the misguided goal of comparing one student to the rest of the class or to a statistical average claimed to represent a general population. Instead, educators should open themselves to appreciating each student in the specific scope of human individuality, carefully observing and recognizing the distinct qualities found in each individual.

Dewey crafted an arboreal metaphor to explain this concept, employing a biological analogy that represented variations in human activity, learning, and growth as wholly natural. Imagine that each child is like a distinctive plant that grows in its own ways, rising to its own height, wrapped in its own bark, spreading its own branches, sprouting its own leaves and flowers. But don't expect an oak to become a violet, or vice versa.

A violet and an oak tree are equal when one has the same opportunity to develop to the full as a violet which the other has as an oak. (Dewey, 1981, p. 346)

It is important not to misread Dewey as reducing children to "types" or "categories." His biological

metaphor speaks to the natural variations of human individuality within a temporal landscape of growth and change. An oak and a violet can each grow fully and develop to become stronger, more refined and capable. There is no reasonable basis to assert that an oak is an insufficient violet or that a violet is a higher level version of an oak. Like children learning and developing on unique growth trajectories, each is quite naturally incomparable.

The struggle to dismantle systems premised on competitive ranking remains a daunting task across nations. It is not surprising that there emerges a strange discrepancy between the rhetoric of national policies on inclusive education and the continued reproduction of educational systems that privilege high-stakes testing (Mitchell, 2005; Singal, 2006). We suggest that ideas similar to Deweyan constructs of democratic community and moral equality may already be present in forms consonant with the intellectual traditions within local contexts (Das & Randeria, 2014). We also note that the struggles for justice of marginalized groups within nation-states may offer a sophisticated window into the marshaling of such traditions to achieve goals of equity (Cherian, 2013). Reiterating our aims for this article, we offer Dewey's vision as a means to stimulate dialogue and sharing of intellectual resources that can benefit equity-minded educators everywhere.

Interpersonal Relationships Communicating Value: Nel Noddings's Ethic of Caring

The main aim of education should be to produce competent, caring, loving, and lovable people. (Noddings, 1995, p. 368)

Contrary to the rise of test score technocracy in the United States, Noddings (1984, 1992, 1995) has placed ethical, supportive human relationships at the center of the school lives of teachers and students. Noddings describes the public schools as falling out of balance, tipping so far toward competitive schemes based on standardized test scores that the priority of promoting "the growth of students as healthy, competent moral people" (Noddings, 1992, p. 10) has been lost. U.S. schools now pursue an empty social mission, teaching young people academic content and skills without caring for them deeply and without teaching them how to create caring relationships with one another.

Many otherwise reasonable people seem to believe that our educational problems consist largely of low scores on achievement tests. My contention is, first, that we should want more from our educational efforts than adequate academic achievement and, second, that we will not achieve even that meager success unless our children believe that they themselves are cared for and learn to care for others. (Noddings, 1995, pp. 675–676)

Noddings emphasizes the way that children and adolescents develop into moral persons by participating in relations of care, connections that bind us to one another and nurture us each as individuals. Morality is learned in social interactions, in valuing dialogue, and lasting connections that mutually support the participants. The process of developing and maintaining caring relations between individuals is central to the development of moral character.

In schools and classrooms, both the relationships between teachers and students and between students and their peers are crucial. Noddings challenges teachers to not only feel a sense of caring or believe that caring about students is a priority. She challenges them to enact an ethic of caring in daily interactions with young people and to help our students learn how to enact an ethic of caring in their own lives.

What is an ethic of caring in the schools? "Caring gives priority to relationships" (Noblit, Rogers, & McCadden, 1995, p. 681). At the microsocial level, a caring relation is an interpersonal connection between two human beings—a person who provides care and a person who receives care. In the teacher-student relationship, the educator accepts students for who they are, valuing their own social identity, while holding their educational and social best interests as the highest priority. Enduring, committed relationships between educators and students that gain depth and survive struggles over time are the most impactful and meaningful in the lives of children.

Noddings (1984, 1992) offers two specific relational concepts to help guide the work of teachers in classrooms, *engrossment* and *motivational displacement*. These two concepts help educators understand how to live an ethic of caring in their relationships with students.

Engrossment is the experience of offering oneself completely and without qualification to

the needs of another person. Often this involves listening and providing emotional support in a nonjudgmental way. But this can also take place when teachers are being playful or joking around with a student. It can happen when teachers are asking probing questions, leading a discussion, or offering a word of encouragement. The key is that the teacher is fully receptive to students, to another human being, taking in the words and perspective of another, receiving that individual completely and without the strictures of judgment.

The word *engrossment* literally means “written in large handwriting.” Engrossment is a bodily, emotional, and mental act of perceiving another person in large letters written across the scene. When teachers embody engrossment in dialogue with a child or adolescent, the student is larger than life, elevated in the teacher’s powers of perception and attention. At the moment, whether the teacher is providing assistance with a mathematics problem or emotional support in a moment of distress, the teacher’s thoughts and feelings are filled with this needs and well-being of one individual. The teacher is fully present, available, attending to that individual’s life and well-being.

Motivational displacement describes the way that the purposes and needs of the student become the complete goal of the teacher. At the moment of interaction, the experience involves substantial intensity and concentration. The teacher’s personal motivations, concerns, and goals are set aside by the overwhelming priority of the well being of the student. All focus and effort are devoted to the singular goal of comprehending and fulfilling the best interests of that person.

What does an ethic of caring actually look like in the classroom? Noblit and Rogers have spent many hours in classrooms studying how teachers enact an ethic of caring. They found that caring relationships are vital to creating an environment of trust and emotional safety in the learning community (Noblit, 1993; Noblit, Rogers, & McCadden, 1995; Rogers, 1994).

(Caring) is the glue that binds teachers and students together and makes life in the classroom meaningful. ... It is through concerned and responsive teachers’ attempts to recognize, understand, and respect their student that trust is established and caring relationships are built in the classroom. These caring relationships between teachers and

students create possibilities—opportunities for academic as well as interpersonal learning to occur. (Noblit et al., 1995, p. 681)

When teachers and student create caring relationships based on trust and respect, then the community can flourish as a space of learning.

In many instances, the relational challenge for teachers comes when they are teaching students whom they experience as unlike themselves. Teachers often find it easier to understand and communicate with students who are members of their own cultural group. That group may be defined in a variety of ways, including race, social class, religion, sexual orientation, nationality, and disability. Students who share the teacher’s social identity and participate in the teacher’s own cultural values and practices are often easier to understand, relate to, and connect with.

Pang (2005) has explored the importance of caring relationships in bridging the cultural gaps between teachers and students who come from different social groups in society. Many students belong to racial and language minority groups that the dominant, white, middle-class culture stereotypes as lazy and incompetent. Unfortunately, teachers from the dominant cultural group tend to interpret the social behavior, interpersonal style, and academic performance of minority students as indications of their intellectual or moral inferiority. Pang and colleagues emphasize the need for teachers to “develop strong cross-cultural communications” and learn “cultural awareness” to fully understand and support their students (Pang, Rivera, & Mora, 1999, p. 27–28). Strong, trusting relationships promote the development of “healthy cultural identities and high academic self-concepts,” thereby creating a comfortable and productive social setting where students grow and learn (Pang et al., 1999, p. 27–28). Caring relationships can be a way for teachers and students to span cultural differences and overcome limiting stereotypes.

Pang’s work is relevant to inclusive educators for two specific reasons. First, for decades, segregated special education classrooms have been disproportionately filled with students of color. African American males, and to a lesser extent, Latino males, are overrepresented in the special education system (Harry & Anderson, 1994; Harry, Klingner, Sturgis, & Moore, 2002; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Losen & Orfield, 2002). Once identified as having a disability, students of color

are placed in segregated special education classrooms significantly more often than their white peers (Fierros & Conroy, 2002). One cannot work effectively with students with disabilities in U.S. public schools without addressing the fact that many of these students are from cultural minority groups and live in economic poverty (Brantlinger, 1994; Brantlinger, 2001; Danforth & Smith, 2005).

Second, multicultural educators, who have spent many years helping teachers work across the lines of culture and language to improve relationships, understanding, and trust, are now acknowledging that disability and disability identity is part of their important work. Persons with disabilities are now understood by many multicultural scholars as an oppressed minority group that has similar experiences of discrimination and exclusion of other minority groups (Ayres, Quinn, & Stovall, 2009; Chapman & Hobbel, 2010; Steinberg, 2009).

Just as dominant-culture, white, middle-class teachers often experience students from minority cultural groups as distinctly different from themselves, so too dominant-culture, teachers without disabilities frequently experience students with disabilities as foreign, inexplicable, and peculiar. Teachers without disabilities who do not have a strong foundation of life experiences in relationships with people with disabilities may feel uncomfortable, anxious, or fearful around students with disabilities (Danforth & Navarro, 1998; Giangreco, St. Denis, Cloninger, Edelman, & Schattman, 1993). The need to build caring relationships as a bridge between races and social classes is parallel to the need to create relationships of trust and acceptance that foster understanding between teachers without disabilities and students with disabilities (Bogdan & Taylor, 1989).

Political Consciousness: Ideology of Ability

Whereas both Dewey and Noddings encourage educators to build communities of equality, respect, and social support, inclusive educators must also remain critically aware of how and why people with disabilities are frequently excluded from full and valued participation. Inclusive educators need a critical interpretive framework that can expose the reified social structures and conventional processes that yield cruelty and social injustice.

Siebers (2008) created the concept *ideology of ability* to capture a powerful, often unacknowledged

mode of foundational belief that permeates the activities of daily life, from the laws, institutions, and economic system down to individual thoughts and actions. At the bottom of individual and cultural consciousness is a deep, unacknowledged prejudice against people with disabilities: The ideology of ability.

Central to the shared but often unreflective activities of cultural thinking is the assumption that being human means being nondisabled. When we think of life, of living, of being a person, we don't include disability as an option or alternative within our understanding. We simply assume that being alive means being able-bodied.

The ideology of ability represents the able body as the baseline of humanness. Absence of ability or lesser ability, according to this ideology, makes a person less than human. (Siebers, 2008, p. 139)

People with disabilities are understood as either not fully human, or they are less valuable, imperfect versions of humanity.

The ideology of ability is exemplified in numerous, specific beliefs about ability and disability. We examine three beliefs to provide a useful sampling of Siebers's critical concept.

1. "The ideology of ability simultaneously banishes disability and turns it into principle of exclusion" (Siebers, 2008, p. 10).

Exclusion is a keystone of U.S. public education. In the United States, there are currently residential institutions for many people with visual impairments, hearing impairments, intellectual disabilities, autism, and psychiatric disabilities. More than 5% of all children and adolescents with disabilities live in hospitals or institutions (Individuals with Disabilities Act Data [IDAD], 2010). Almost one in five students considered to have emotional or behavior disorders are housed in locked hospitals or residential programs (IDAD, 2010).

The public schools in the United States have isolated classrooms and schools for children with autism, behavioral disorders, learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, visual impairments, and hearing impairments. More than 14% of all students with disabilities in the United States spend their entire school day in buildings fully isolated from students without disabilities (IDAD, 2010). Almost half of all students with intellectual

disabilities have no opportunities to interact with or create friendships with students without disabilities (IDAD, 2010).

Fewer than 10% of all students without disabilities share a classroom with a student with intellectual disability. The systematic social separation often leaves students without disabilities with a desire to avoid interaction with students with intellectual disabilities. Siperstein, Parker, Bardon, and Widaman (2007, p. 451) sadly conclude that “little appears to have changed in the past thirty years regarding people’s perception of ID.”

In the United States, disability and exclusion go together like inhalation and exhalation. All too often, forcibly housing a young person with disabilities in a hospital or residential facility secluded from the general community, or providing schooling in a classroom or school that allows no contact with young people without disabilities seems completely reasonable.

2. “Disability is always individual, a property of one body, not a feature common to all human beings, while ability defines a feature essential to the human species.” (Siebers, 2008, p. 10)

Disability, in U.S. public schools, is typically viewed as belonging to one person. Students are thought to fall distinctly into one of two groups, those with disabilities and those without. This binary interpretation ignores how human beings actually vary, the incalculable variability of physical, developmental, and cultural differences. Even more, this oversimplification of diverse humanity pretends that human abilities and bodies are consistent and predictable. According to Siebers (2008, p. 26), “As a living entity, the body is vital and chaotic.” Human bodies and lives do not reflect mathematical certainty and robotic regularity.

Consistency is an illusion. In truth, human bodies are frail, fragile, and unreliable. All people are vulnerable to illness, accidents, weakness, and inconsistency. Our minds forget, wander, and stumble into confusion or distraction. Our bodies succumb to injury, illness, discomfort, and suffering. The mental and physical abilities of individuals fluctuate with changes in mood, concentration, strength, comfort, and environmental conditions. A task that a person completes easily 1 day or one moment is challenging or impossible the next. All people—with or without disabilities—are simultaneously able and unable, competent and incompetent.

3. “Overcoming disability is an event to be celebrated. It is an ability in itself to be able to overcome disability.” (Siebers, 2008, p. 10)

A staple of modern journalism, of newspapers, magazines, and television news, is the stock story about a heroic person who is overcoming a disability. The story is intended to be inspirational, emotionally moving, a positive and even complimentary account of a person with a disability. The person is represented as a role model, as someone for people with disabilities to emulate and for people without disabilities to respect.

The popular morning television show *Good Morning America* aired a dramatic story about an impressive high school graduate. On the MSNBC website, the video is accompanied by a short written story, as follows:

Paralyzed California Teen Walks at High School Graduation

A California teen paralyzed nearly all his life lived up to his big promise this week and walked on stage to accept his high school diploma.

For the last three years, 17-year-old Patrick Ivison of San Diego has been going through intensive training for Tuesday’s ceremony, enduring six hours per day of physical therapy, according to KGTV in San Diego.

He vowed to everyone he knew that he was going to walk on stage during commencement.

“There’s always that like, oh, I’ve got, you know, all of America expecting me to get through this,” Ivison told KGTV. (Omer, 2012)

Good Morning America host George Stephanopoulos introduces the video clip with an expression that signals to viewers to prepare their heartstrings: “Of all the great moments at all the graduations this year, this one may be the most inspiring.” The video shows Patrick sitting in his wheelchair at his high school graduation. He is called to the stage to receive his diploma. A muscular man standing in front of him pushes a mechanical walker up to his chest. Patrick is hoisted to a standing position by a crank mechanism. He grasps the walker for balance. Legs wobbling, crowd on their feet cheering, the large assistant backing up with two hands on the walker, the high school graduate slowly walks to center stage. Triumphant, he receives his diploma and then plops back into his wheelchair.

The untold story is about a capable student and a university that is accessible to students who use wheelchairs. A young man paralyzed in a car accident earned a perfect 4.0 GPA in his high school studies. He is an outstanding student who will attend the University of Southern California. Expectations and possibilities for paralyzed young men and women have changed greatly since the days when Ed Roberts first attended the University of California at Berkeley in the early 1960s. High schools and universities are now far more accessible and supportive for students with disabilities. This talented young man has done well in high school, and he has a bright future ahead of him.

The morning television show story focuses on Patrick's ideological achievement: He worked extremely hard for 3 years to appear as nondisabled as possible for 4 min in front of a large audience. For about 26 steps, with assistance from a rolling walker and a strong assistant, with an entire auditorium audience cheering, he walked ... almost like other graduates. In this story, his great achievement is not his straight A average and acceptance to a top university. It is his 4 public minutes of almost walking, of imitating the bodily motion of a person who does not have a physical disability.

As Patrick received his diploma, television announcer Stephanopoulos says, "The entire arena stood, too, shoulder to shoulder with Patrick." If Patrick acts almost nondisabled, if he strives unbelievably hard to overcome his disability, if only temporarily and with both human and mechanical assistance, then the crowd of people without disabilities rally to his side.

The message from *Good Morning America* is a standard, oft-repeated version of the ideology of ability. "Disabled people must try to be as able-bodied as possible all the time" (Siebers, 2008, p. 10). What Patrick should do, according to this ideology, is struggle and toil endless hours to approximate the life and activity of a person without a disability. But living a highly successful life as a man with a disability—that is not a story worth telling.

Siebers' (2008) achievement rests on the fact that not only does his theory isolate the ideology of ability as a politically salient feature of the "built environment" which we inhabit, but also that it encompasses the variability that inevitably constitutes the lived experience of disability anywhere. For a young person with physical disabilities in

India, for instance, it may be necessary to demonstrate some ability to walk whenever possible, in order to gain access to educational opportunities within hugely inaccessible physical environments. Those opportunities may be the only means to compete for vocational training or forms of employment that can guarantee a marginally higher standard of living (Naraian, 2013; Naraian & Natarajan, 2013). Despite the vastly different political and sociocultural conditions within which they live, Siebers' (2008) theory recognizes both Patrick and the youth in India as making legitimate claims to a disability identity, precisely because both contexts index the institutional deployment of an ideology of ability. Consequently, in as much as inclusive educators supporting Patrick in the United States need to be vigilant of the "overcoming" narrative, educators who support the Indian youth to resist stereotypes of incompetence and become self-sufficient, may also be understood as advocating for "inclusion."

Situated Agency: An Oppositional Consciousness

The preceding example reminds us that educators all over the world work within schooling contexts that are inevitably short on resources and subject to schooling mandates and priorities that work at odds with an inclusive stance. For instance, even as teachers take up commitments to serve children equitably, they are simultaneously confronted with many entrenched institutional beliefs, including student learning as objective, measurable, and available for standardization; disability as deficit; behavioral control as superior to democratic classroom; and families as adversaries of schools. In the face of such powerful discourses, how will teachers sustain their inclusive orientation? How will their efforts to serve children inclusively be sensitive to the sociocultural, historical, and material specificities of their schools and communities while also advancing an inclusive agenda? What kind of consciousness would enable them to straddle competing goals within the flawed material realities of their schools without invalidating their professional identities as inclusive educators?

We argue that the situatedness of all individuals within historically specific material contexts lies at the heart of individual agency in the pursuit of equity and justice. Teachers cannot merely draw on an array of universal understandings and skills.

They equally need to contextualize their strategies to address the discordant requirements of specific contexts and situations. Such work for equity through *agency*, we suggest, requires a consciousness that U.S. Third World feminist writers have variously described as *oppositional* or *differential* or *mestiza* (Anzaldúa, 1987; C. T. Mohanty, 2003; Sandoval, 2000). Drawing on the everyday lived experiences of Third World peoples, these scholars suggest that their oppositional activities permit us to understand agency as always plural, shifting and contradictory. In other words, teachers may actively push back against labels in one context, but may just as equally use them, if necessary, to obtain the supports required by a student that are not made freely available to her. This movement between ideological positions is characteristic of such a *differential* consciousness where one must read each situation of power and self-consciously select the best strategic position that can work against the forces of power (Sandoval, 2000). Belief systems are not seen as fixed and immutable; on the contrary, through strategic and fluid use, they can be collectively transformed into a “tactical weaponry” that can fuel an ethical and moral commitment to equity and social justice.

Agency that is based on such fluid movement between ideological stances leaves the individual in an ambivalent state that can be uncomfortable, yet also empowering. In describing this ambivalent state, Minh-Ha observes, “The meanings of here and there, home and abroad, third and first, margin and center, keep on being displaced, depending on how one positions oneself” (Minh-Ha, 2011, p. 39). Such a consciousness—a *mestiza* consciousness—has a high tolerance for ambiguity because it emerges from the recognition of multiple, even opposing, ideas and viewpoints. This in turn, fosters the capacity, *la facultad*, to weave one’s way through different sociocultural experiences (Anzaldúa, 1987). When inclusive educators recognize, acknowledge, and integrate such opposing perspectives within their trajectories of practice, they are demonstrating the ability to transform the space of ambiguity into creative action. While such creative work might, on some occasions, mean simply waiting rather than taking immediate action, in other instances it can entail straddling competing positions, such as both behaviorism and constructivism, explicit instruction and inquiry-based learning, labeling and strength-based strategies.

Such straddling of contradictory positions, however, is not accomplished without thoughtful assessment of outcomes. Though a *mestiza* consciousness offers a release from the extremes that can become an opportunity for creative transformation (Minh-Ha, 2011), it does not condone injustice. Still, even as we have to demand recognition of the injustices that are repeatedly committed, we simultaneously have no choice but to “cross over, to make a hole in the fence and walk across, to cross the river, to take that flying leap in the dark” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 71). A focus on justice means that teachers’ equity-minded work must subsume a coalitional consciousness whereby practitioners engage with opposing groups, views, and experiences. Their location as inclusive educators does not rest solely on the experiences of specific groups, such as people with disabilities, but also on the *collection* of groups that constitute the world of schools, which might include students, families, other educators, administrators, lawmakers, government officials, and public figures.

This collective within which teachers, especially in U.S. public schools, are embedded, is clearly complex. Teachers contend daily with student measurement and accountability mandates, hostile public scrutiny of their own competence, aggressive family advocacy or apparent family negligence, the politics within affluent communities, and the struggles within historically segregated, high-poverty or under-resourced neighborhoods. At the same time, they might draw on their own *figured identities* as teachers committed to democracy and equity to frame their practice (Holland, Lachiotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). Given the tangle of interests and priorities that arises from this complex web of varied interests, perspectives, and priorities, how will teachers determine the appropriate course of action to undertake?

In describing *coalitional politics*, C. T. Mohanty (2003) makes a distinction between *common interests* and unique *needs and desires* within and between groups. This distinction can prove useful in helping teachers make decisions that preserve an oppositional stance. Teachers certainly can claim solidarity with specific groups based on abstract ideals of equity and social justice that bind people together. Yet within groups, as people occupy different positions along the axes of class, gender, race, and other social categories, their *needs and desires* may not overlap so readily. A white middle-class mother with a child who has learning

disabilities may have different needs and desires than an immigrant working-class grandmother who takes care of a student with intellectual disability in the same school.

Therefore, when teachers who are situated within the complex configuration of the schooling collective make decisions about equitable practice, they cannot rely solely on abstract ideals to guide their decision making. They are also obligated to understand the unique *needs and desires* of specific groups that are affected by schooling. This might mean deploying practices that don't fit neatly with an inclusive philosophy, but yet might positively transform the experience of schooling for either the student or the family, or both.. For instance, inclusive educators are frequently stymied when families of young students with autism seek an approach that is premised on a behaviorist orientation and that risks stifling the student's own narrative. Reconciling themselves, albeit partially, with this approach may still further inclusion if teachers recognize the *ideology of ability* that is implicated within the requirement for this approach, but simultaneously privilege the narrative of empowerment derived from one particular family's experience. In other words, when teachers recognize the significance of working through competing knowledge bases that pervade a community at any point in time and draw on a range of instructional options to serve their students, they are enacting a *differential* consciousness. They are simultaneously exercising a form of collective agency that has greater transformative potential than a polarized response based on abstract ideals of social justice.

Conclusion

In 1904, William James proclaimed triumphantly that John Dewey and his University of Chicago colleagues had founded a new school of psychology. What he meant was that the Chicago faculty had established a sound and fecund orientation to human psychological research that could and would stand as the foundation of a modern scientific discipline devoted to understanding human thought and activity. They had built the conceptual foundation necessary to leave behind Titchener's (1898, 1899) structural approach, as well as European psychology, establishing a new psychological discipline of inquiry and knowledge. One can argue that the articulation and acceptance of the functionalist conceptual foundations of Dewey's

Chicago School set the table for the successful development of the 20th Century field of American psychology (Backe, 2001a, b; Whitely, 1976).

As the new psychology stepped away from prior theories and approaches to find its proper bearings and set its own disciplinary course, so too, we argue, should the field of inclusive education distinguish itself from the conceptual underpinnings of the field of special education. If inclusive education is to mature and develop as an educational area of fruitful policy, research, and practice, it requires not the hand-me-down notions of its historical and practical predecessor. It needs full and rich conceptual moorings established for its own purposes and goals.

In this article, we have articulated what we view as a sufficient set of conceptual foundations for the new field of inclusive education. In doing so, we have no illusion that our proposal will stand as a mighty fortress of reason, subduing the many counter-proposals. To the contrary, our goal is to promote a thoughtful and ongoing dialogue about the most generative conceptual foundations for the field. Just as inclusion is a purposeful, ongoing process of growth and change, so too is such a dialogue of knowledge. In the rich exchange of ideas among many participants resides the best chance for inclusive education to create an intellectual footing that promotes new development, learning, and understanding. Only then might some 21st Century intellectual descendant of William James be fully justified in proclaiming the birth of a promising new field of inclusive education.

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