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Contemplating Teachers' Disposition and Pedagogical Skills within Inclusive Classrooms: Responsibilities of, and Implications for, Teacher Education Programs and In-Service Professional Development

Abstract

In this article I advocate using Disability Studies in Education as a discipline to inform work about inclusive education. Second, I discuss teacher (1) dispositions (beliefs and responsibilities) about human differences; (2) skills in pedagogical flexibility; and, (3) ability to collaborate with others, as the critical areas necessary for creating and maintaining inclusive classrooms. Third, I pose questions to serve as a springboard for further discussions about inclusive education regarding teacher educators' responsibilities to preservice and in-service teachers.

Keywords: inclusion, inclusive education, pedagogy, collaborative teaching, disability studies

Die Bedeutung von Einstellungen und pädagogischen Fähigkeiten von Lehrkräften für inklusiven Unterricht: Aufgaben und Implikationen für die Lehrkräfteaus- und -fortbildung

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Beitrag schlage ich erstens vor, Disability Studies[1] *aus dem Bereich der Bildungswissenschaften dafür zu nutzen, auf die Durchführung von inklusivem Unterricht vorzubereiten. Zweitens gehe ich auf drei Aspekte ein, die ich für die Ermöglichung und Umsetzung von inklusivem Unterricht für zentral halte: (1) die Einstellungen (Überzeugungen und Haltungen) von Lehrkräften in Bezug auf Unterschiede zwischen Menschen, (2) ihre Fähigkeit, pädagogisch flexibel zu handeln, und (3) ihre Bereitschaft und Fähigkeit zur Zusammenarbeit mit anderen. Drittens formuliere ich einige Fragen, die als Sprungbrett für weitere Diskussionen über inklusiven Unterricht dienen sollen,*

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[1]   Bei den *Disability Studies* (sinngemäß „Studien zu oder über Behinderung") handelt es sich um eine interdisziplinäre Wissenschaft, die Behinderung als soziale, historische und kulturelle Konstruktion begreift und sich der sozial- und kulturwissenschaftlichen Erforschung des Phänomens Behinderung widmet.

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wobei ich auf die Verantwortung von Lehrenden sowohl in der Lehreraus- als auch in der Lehrerfortbildung eingehe.
Schlüsselwörter: Inklusion, inklusiver Unterricht, Pädagogik, Co-Teaching, Disability Studies

> "Inclusive education commences with the recognition
> of the unequal social relations that produce exclusion."
> Roger Slee (2011, p. 39)

1.   Introduction

Teacher dispositions reflect their beliefs about human differences and the degree to which their responsibilities lie in reaching and teaching all students (Nieto, 2013). Moreover, dispositions ground teachers in understanding what is needed, and what is possible, in terms of teaching a diverse group of students – encompassing the cyclical demands of planning, instruction, assessment, and further planning (informed by all previous stages of the process). Once the "what is needed" is determined, then the teacher can decide "what is possible" in terms of their skills in providing pedagogical flexibility. Another important consideration is sharing responsibility for educating all students through some form of collaboration, be it team teaching or consulting. In brief, the three areas I have chosen to foreground in this short article that focuses on pedagogy in successful inclusive classrooms are a teacher's: (1) disposition toward human differences; (2) skills in flexible pedagogy; and: (3) ability to collaborate with other professionals and parents. Each of these areas are discussed in subsequent sections, followed by a discussion of some implications and questions designed to stimulate further discussion.

2.   The Importance of Teachers

The teacher is the most influential person within a classroom, constantly working to improve the quality of engagement and instruction, while creating an environment that supports academic, emotional, and psychological support for students. In inclusive classrooms, teachers are expected to be knowledgeable about, and comfortable with, student diversity. Although inclusive education was a term primarily associated with students identified as disabled it has since come to symbolize all forms of diversity, including socio economic status, gender, culture, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so on (Baglieri, Bejoian, Broderick, Connor & Valle, 2011). Of course, an intersectional awareness is also needed for all students, as there is no single marker of identity, for example, a female who is a poor Latina immigrant of African-descent from the Dominican Republic and a lesbian therefore simultaneously navigates issues of socio economic status, gender, ethnicity, nationality, race, and sexual orientation. Teachers, too, must be aware of, and navigate these forces that shape the identity of

such a young woman – making her feel safe, respected as a contributor of knowledge, a participant, and a learner, along with another 15, 25, or 35 students in class.

In some ways, these inclusive expectations of teachers represent an ideal. Where else in society is anybody expected to come to know the arguably infinite forms of human variation, treat everyone equally, connect with each one on their academic, social, and emotional levels, and teach them knowledge and skills? At the same time, it is incumbent upon each teacher – with all of her or his imperfections – to see themselves, and inclusive education, as a constant work-in-progress. Additionally, for those of us who work in researching and teaching inclusive education at the university level, such idealism gives rise to questions about "pre-service" and "in-service" teacher education. For example, to what degree can and do teacher education programs effectively support and model inclusive education at the pre-service level? To what degree can authentic professional development in schools advance and support inclusive education at the "in-service" level?

2.1 The Importance of Teacher Dispositions

It is important for university-level teacher educators to consider two distinct – yet related – groups: pre-service and in-service teachers. When working with individuals within these groups, each person must consider, and constantly reflect upon, each area of (1) disposition toward human differences, (2) abilities in pedagogy, and (3) skills in working with other educators. These crucial areas may be perceived as *abstractions* for pre-service teachers, and lived *realities*, within a specific context, for in-service teachers. This distinction determines how to conceptualize the teaching of certain knowledge and skills about inclusive education for pre-service teachers perhaps without a place to see them in action. Conversely, such knowledge and skills may or may not influence change by in-service teachers in their existing classrooms. Regardless, one area to target, shared by both groups, is engaging them about their dispositions toward human difference. To help do this, the interdisciplinary academic field of Disability Studies in Education (DSE) can be utilized.

3. Using the Lens of Disability Studies

Many teachers resist the possibilities and promises of inclusive education because they may think: "That child does not belong in my classroom," "There are specialty teachers to take care of that child," or "I cannot – or will not – change how I teach, so if they can't keep up they must go." However, by beginning with engaging educators about questions such as: *What do we think about human differences and why? Where does that information come from?*, we begin to consider: What are the sourc-

es of our knowledge about disability? Who has created that knowledge? Who benefits from that knowledge? Who does not benefit from that knowledge? What if that knowledge is inaccurate or simply wrong? It is necessary to spend time on these interrelated areas because of the simple fact: *what we think about people influences how we teach them.*

To help with these conversations, I cull from DSE because it is an interdisciplinary field that seeks to trouble longstanding notions of disability as a deficit, disorder, or dysfunction; in brief, as something *missing* within a person (Connor & Valle, 2017). Above all, it primarily critiques the seemingly omnipresent framing of disability within a medical model, a way of thinking that posits people as ill or broken, in need of fixing or a "cure." In contrast, DSE views disability as a natural form of human variation, thereby challenging society to examine how widespread beliefs continue to marginalize individuals by asking what is "disability" and its relationship to "normalcy" (Linton, 1998).

In these discussions, students come to see how the world has been arranged in binaric structures of normalcy/abnormalcy, able-bodied/disabled, general/special, and desirable/undesirable. It becomes clear that characteristics of all individuals are hierarchical, and that the idealized American citizen is: of European-descent, male, able-bodied, professional, English-speaking, heterosexual, handsome, academic, and athletic (Davis, 1995). In a diverse society, so few citizens fit this mold, but those that do are favored, and those that do not are deemed inferior. Put another way, normalcy and deviance are mutually constitutive – one cannot exist without the other. By interrogating the concept of normalcy, DSE offers an alternative lens to fields of knowledge that traditionally constitute the foundations of special education – science, medicine, and psychology. Instead, using a social, cultural, and historical lens, DSE reframes the issue of inclusion from one that has been viewed as primarily legal, technical, and managerial response, to one of civil rights.

3.1 Civil Rights

Understanding disability from a "minority model" perspective means that disability is viewed as another "Other," part of the sociological frame. Just as differences can lead to forms of discrimination such as race and racism, gender and sexism, sexual orientation and heterosexism, the corresponding "ism" is ableism – a form of structural, cultural, systematic oppression based on the belief that people without disabilities are superior human beings (Hehir, 2005). In their seminal text *The Disability Rights Movement: From Charity to Confrontation*, Fleischer and Zames (2001/2011) connected the major topics of the civil rights movement within a powerful narrative that includes: pitiful portrayals of "wheelchair bound" children; alternative ways of functioning such as seeing by touch and hearing by sign; deinstitutionalization and

independent living; the struggle for change in the courts and in the streets; the disability rights legislation section 504; the Americans with Disabilities Act; access to jobs and health care; activists combatting physician assisted suicide; disability and technology; disabled veterans and their rights; education and the Least Restrictive Environment; and: disability, identity, and culture.

In *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement,* Joseph Shapiro writes, "Nondisabled Americans do not understand disabled ones" (1993, p. 3). This sweeping statement serves as a springboard for conversation in graduate education classes. It tends to open up the larger topic of to what degree can a non-minority member understand a minority member's perspective of, and lived experiences within, society in general. It comes as quite a shock that the majority of information written about people with disabilities is not by themselves, but able-bodied people in various fields, including education. DSE, on the other hand, centers upon the voices of "the disabled" – including researchers, activists, children, youth, adults, and parents – who usually articulate what passes as knowledge about them is largely inaccurate, misleading, and even harmful. The implications for this ontological dissonance are huge, as suggested by Barton's observation (1996):

> "[…] it gradually began to dawn on me that if disabled people left it to others to write about disability, we would inevitably end up with inaccurate and distorted accounts of our experiences and inappropriate service provision and professional practices based upon these inaccuracies and distortions" (p. 16).

In fact, the field of DS is filled with statements, testimonies, and counter-narratives to dominant discourses of disability, along with suggestions to rethink and reframe disability as human difference (Brown, 2003; Linton, 2006; Mooney, 2008). It is clear that learning about disability from the source of disabled people is more authentic than most forms of educational research (Brantlinger, 1997), literature (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000), and mainstream media (Haller, 2010). These learnings about disability are very powerful to both pre-service and in-service teachers, and actively help them *unlearn* many of the inaccuracies they have come to know with view to thinking about human difference (Connor, 2015). Scholars within DS shift the conversation from conceptualizing inclusive education as approximating a norm or "fitting in," to one that requires us to look at how we have come to rationalize exclusion and segregation within our "democracy."

3.2 Creating Change (Re)Shapes Reality

The beauty and the challenge of inclusive classrooms is that they require changing "traditional" notions of education, including rethinking old habits, ways of acting, ways of thinking – as well as challenging commonplace, longstanding beliefs. In brief,

inclusion means looking at schools and classrooms with new eyes and seeing possibilities of what has not yet been done on a national scale. Opportunities exist for teachers to help create inclusive classrooms – from developing curriculum to organizing furniture plans, from planning co-taught lessons to assessing instructional effectiveness, from knowing all students to informing them of their strengths and areas to be focused upon. At the same time, educators must be mindful of not "throwing the baby out with the bath water," in other words, making sure we retain what is valuable in teaching.

Much has been written over the last twenty-five years about supporting inclusive education through classroom practices. For example, Spencer Salend's *Creating Inclusive Classrooms: Effective and Reflective Practices* was first published in 1990 and is now in its 8th edition (2005). Given the expanse of existing literature, and the length limitations of this article, I choose to articulate six points that serve as important "tools" for teachers to utilize within daily classroom practice to help develop, expand, and cultivate a flexible pedagogy.

3.2.1 A Sense of Fairness

Teachers can be conflicted about providing different forms of support for students in an inclusive classroom such as one-on-one interactions, additional time, a modified assignment, or an alternative product. To help teachers re-think the concept of "being fair," Welch (2000) developed three different definitions of fairness: (1) *Equality*, meaning every participant receives the same reward; (2) *Equity*, meaning the reward is proportionate to input; the person who contributed the most or achieved the highest standard receives the greatest reward; and: (3) *Need*, meaning those who have the greatest need receive the greatest reward. Depending upon the classroom situation, each one of these understandings can be invoked with view to what is fair within a specific context. As with all of the points being made here, a unidimensional response of "one size fits all" is contrary to the foundational thinking within inclusive classrooms.

3.2.2 Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Based upon the principles originating in architecture to create a design that allows – from the very beginning – access for all people to all parts of a building's structure, educators have embraced the tenets of Universal Design and applied them to classrooms. In a nutshell, tenets include providing for: equitable use; flexibility of use; being simple and intuitive; perceptible information; a tolerance for error; a low physical effort, and: size and space for approach and use (Burgstahler & Corey, 2008). In addition, UDL incorporated two more education-specific tenets: (1) a community of

learners, and (2) a receptive instructional climate. These are important as the former promotes interaction and communication among students and between students and teachers, while the latter urges for instruction to be designed as welcoming and inclusive of all, with accompanying high expectations (Valle & Connor, 2011).

3.2.3 Multiple Intelligences (MI)

Gardner's Multiple Intelligences (1983/2011) broke the mold of what may constitute intelligence. Despite the fact that his theory has not been sufficiently validated for its critics, his work resonates strongly with teachers in their quest to engage and assess students, offering choices to students as "entry points" into the content and/or skills being taught. Schools have always privileged certain knowledge over others – such as literacy and numeracy – elevating some student's achievements and neglecting important possible ways of demonstrating knowledge for others. As flexible teachers know, visual-spatial, bodily kinesthetic, musical, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and naturalist ways of thinking, knowing, and "doing" can also be accessed to engage students with content and skills being taught.

3.2.4 Learning Styles (LS)

Pioneered by Dunn and Dunn (1978) and refined over time (Dunn, 2000), a Learning Styles approach to education capitalizes upon the different ways that students learn. Some factors are developmental, some are environmental, and can change due to time, place, and context. Teachers can consider various dimensions of learning to inform their planning, including: sociological (how students work with others); environmental (student surroundings); physiological (awareness of mental and physical body rhythms); psychological (ways of processing and responding to information); and: emotional (satisfaction in managing work).

3.2.5 Differentiated Instruction (DI)

Some of the most stimulating work developed over the last 15 years on curriculum and pedagogy has been by Carol Tomlinson (2001) and is termed Differentiated Instruction. In many ways DI can be seen as thoughtful and structured approach for teachers to contemplate the three major areas of content (the "what" being taught), process (the "how" it is being taught), and product (the "evidence" of learning). The premise of DI is that every student can be met at their current instructional level, and provided with the means to engage and grow as part of a learning community.

3.2.6 Habits of Thinking: Simple, Useful Ideas

Regardless of how careful instruction is planned, teachers are required to "think on their feet" every day. There are some habits of thinking that they can use when presented with a student who has become "stuck" or reached an impasse. In order to help the student, a teacher can think in terms of immediately changing the rate, the volume, or the complexity (RVC) of the task (Levine, 2002). For example, in a sheet of twenty one-step mathematical problems designed for practice, depending upon a student's need, the rate could be changed to reduced or double-time, the volume could be reduced to the first ten or every other question, and the complexity can be made more sophisticated by adding or substituting two-step problems. Another habit of thinking developed by Levine (ibid.) was to determine whether a struggling student needed an accommodation (bypassing an area of need) or an intervention (targeted strengthening of an area of need). For example, if a dyslexic student cannot handle the volume of reading required in a class, provide access to audio-recorded text as an accommodation. An intervention for the student would entail, for example, direct reading instruction using a set class text to help the student practice.

3.3 The Teaching Toolbox

These six selected suggestions help us see the multiple challenges of inclusive pedagogy from many vantage points. To state the obvious, all of these options cannot be provided simultaneously, but should be acknowledged and incorporated into a balanced pedagogy that is respectful of all learners.

4. Collaborating to Co-Teach

In most professions, from surgery to law enforcement, people work in teams or partnerships. Inclusive education encourages the collaboration of educators with the common goal of supporting all students. Friend and Cook (2012) detail each step to be considered by educators – including pre-partnership explorations, along with the expected routines of co-planning, co-teaching, and co-assessing on an ongoing basis. Additionally, Friend and Bursuck (2011) have also detailed six teaching arrangements that have grown to be known as the basis for co-teaching: (1) one teach, one float; (2) one teach, one observe; (3) parallel teaching; (4) station teaching; (5) alternative teaching, and (6) team teaching. The premise of these suggestions is to provide co-teachers with options depending upon issues of teaching objectives, student needs, educator levels of content knowledge and skills, experience, classroom management, physical space, and so on.

In order to maximize success, potential co-teachers are encouraged to meet before beginning teaching to discuss a variety of issues including promoting parity, preferred instructional formats, sharing their own planning process, and assessment techniques (Friend & Cook, 2012). Common planning time is imperative, allowing teachers to focus specifically on their joint responsibilities of reaching a diverse student body. Likewise, debriefing regularly together is also important. If possible, it can be done after the lesson; if not, at the end of the day. Teachers discuss what went well and what did not. Students in general, including those with particular needs, should be an integral to their focus on planning, instruction, and assessment. At the end of week, co-teachers can self-assess and use the information shared to "feed forward" into proactive planning for the following week. The same approach can be used with a unit of study. Ideally, a general "check in" can be possible at all times (Friend & Bursuck, 2011). At the end of the semester, the co-teaching arrangement can be evaluated for success in different ways by the co-teachers themselves, administrators, and students.

Co-teaching has become "the norm" in many schools, with a significant portion of faculty involved. Upon graduation from university, two out of three new teachers find themselves in co-teaching classes. This shift has been recognized in professional literature, with an increase in interest within educational research, as demonstrated by an issue of *Educational Leadership* (January 2006) titled "Co-teaching: Making it Work," published by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, featuring a dozen articles on the topic. Nevertheless, there exists concern that collaborative teaching and inclusive classrooms are not sufficiently planned for and supported in larger school systems, such as New York City, where the local educational authority's attempts are built upon classrooms in which up to 40 percent of students are identified as having disabilities. Unfortunately, this contradicts the notion that inclusive classrooms should represent the "natural" proportions of disabled and non-disabled people in society at large, usually estimated somewhere between 12 and 20 percent (Fleischer & Zames, 2001/2011).

5. Toward More Clinically-Rich Inclusive Teacher Education Programs

The previous sections linked together dispositions, pedagogical skills, and collaborative skills as three key areas that teachers need to maximize the growth and development of inclusive classes. In addition, differences in the positionality of pre-service and in-service teachers were born in mind. On a related note, there exists a history of criticism that teacher education programs do not adequately prepare students for working in actual classrooms, and that the philosophies and goals of local educational authorities may not be calibrated with university-based visions of educational reform (Steiner, 2003). The following questions are intended to encourage programmat-

ic thinking toward more clinically rich, inclusive teacher preparatory experiences in universities:

- Is the desired student disposition clearly articulated through the mission statement of the university program?
- Is the program structured and sequential in regard to teaching knowledge and skills that support inclusion?
- Do teaching experiences focus on one-to-one, small group, and whole class teaching?
- Are field experiences (observations by students) in inclusive classrooms?
- Is student teaching placement at least partly in an inclusive classroom?
- Can teachers be dual certified as (a) both general and special, or (b) inclusive educators?
- Are secondary level teacher placements looked at with great care? (There is need for instructors to possess both advanced subject-specific knowledge and flexible pedagogical skills.)

6.   In-Service Teacher Professional Development

In addition to teaching classes of in-service teachers, and providing clinical experiences in the form of observations and student teaching, many professors either conduct research in local school districts and/or respond to requests to provide professional development. Some questions for professors to consider include:

- How can universities be partners with local and regional school districts with inclusive projects – to introduce, build, or further develop existing structures?
- In what ways can current local inclusive practices be assessed?
- In what nearby venues and to what audiences can local, national, and international best inclusive pedagogical practices be shared?
- How can the experiences of local children and youth with disabilities, and their parents be leveraged to inform university faculty and local school districts?
- What are some key local contexts in which university-school district can be made with view to foregrounding inclusive education?
- Who are the most appropriate people to be part of an advisement committee or taskforce on local inclusive education?

7.   Conclusion

The good news is that research has been conducted in all domains of inclusive education – theory, practice, and policy – over the past thirty years (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987). A major question that arises is: How can universities and school districts best utilize research from the last three decades to inform their planning for further devel-

oping inclusive practices at the district or regional level? Whether it be dispositions (Valle & Connor, 2011), pedagogy (Danforth, 2014), collaboration (Friend & Cook, 2012), leadership and school culture (Hehir & Katzman, 2012), critical interpretations that offer meaningful suggestions (Slee, 2011), international comparisons of inclusion (Artiles, Kozleski & Waitoller, 2011), or 'How To' recommendations for planning long term structural change (Booth & Ainscow, 2002/2011), information exists to help us all move forward with what Allan (2005) considers to be the ethical and moral imperative of inclusive education.

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