Normalizing Difference in Inclusive Teaching

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Abstract

Inclusion practices and special education can be transformed by using a disability studies perspective, which constructs differences as natural, acceptable, and ordinary. Although inclusion is a moral imperative in promoting social justice, some inclusive practices continue to marginalize students with disabilities. A truly inclusive school reflects a democratic philosophy whereby all students are valued, educators normalize difference through differentiated instruction, and the school culture reflects an ethic of caring and community.

The discursive communities in which we live structure our knowledge of the world and the ways that we interact with each other. By discourse, we refer not only to ideas or ideology but also to the “working attitudes, modes of address, terms of reference, and courses of action suffused into social practice” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000). One such discourse, scientific determinism, or what is often referred to in special education jargon as “the medical model,” typically relies on binaries as a means of defining and identifying human characteristics. The medical model has informed the discourses surrounding dis/ability (see Note) and education in Western society during the modern era.

Such Cartesian binary thinking both informs and is informed by the construction of the biological ideal of the “normal,” which privileges the normal body and mind in relation to those characteristics associated with “abnormality.” Disability studies, particularly as applied in Disability Studies in Education (DSE), provide the foundation for us to problematize the simplistic binaries undergirding educational decision making. The DSE perspective frames difference as ordinary human variation and, thereby, enables us to rethink the normal–abnormal binary. The question is not whether we perceive differences among people but, rather, what meaning is brought to bear on those perceived differences (D. J. Gallagher, 2001). Rather than conceptualizing variations as only medical conditions of the body and mind, DSE foregrounds the power-laden social constructions that result from the social and political discourses in which special education operates (e.g., see Davis & Linton, 1995; Linton, 1998; Thomson, 2000).

Theorizing Learning Dis/Ability

Reid and Valle (in this issue) address the debates surrounding the construction of dis/ability within the field of learning dis/abilities (LD) and, by extension, (special) education. We agree that by using a DSE perspective to inform our practices, we may begin to acknowledge that change is possible and to suggest a vision of what such change could (and perhaps should) be like. The goal of DSE scholars is to uncover and eliminate social, cultural, and political barriers that prevent access to employment, academic, recreational, and residential opportunities afforded to those without the variations that society labels as impairments. Furthermore, DSE scholars problematize and challenge the accepted educational practices related to normalizing, labeling, and categorizing individuals as having a learning dis/ability. In so doing, they promote “a politics of difference that refuses to pathologize or exoticize the Other” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 275).

Our position is best theorized in Stiker’s (1997) historical analysis: “Difference is not an exception...but something that happens in the natural course of things” (p. 12). Because so many in our society buy into difference as impairment (i.e., they construct difference as negative), the normalizing discourse and resulting social structures create barriers to access for individuals with differences and frequently prohibit them from active participation in the communities in which they reside. Dis/ability, then, is the inflexible, unyielding, and inaccessible nature of the social and political community, and not only individual physical or mental characteristics.

Our goal in discussing Dis/ability and identifying people as “dis/abled” is no longer to pathologize individuals but, rather, to politicize the term and identify the site of oppression (Ficcarello, 1970). There are
various ways that people with dis/abilities are using terms such as "dis/abled," "freak," and "crip" to reclaim personal identities (Linton, 1998).

Inclusion as a Moral Imperative

The philosophy undergirding the "age-graded, factory model of education common in most of our schools" (Dudley-Marling & Dippo, 1995, p. 410) assumes that children generally learn the same way and should strive to attain the same goals. The lockstep educational system privileges those students who are prepared to manage the specified type of academic structure, who possess the cultural capital that schools assume, and who can, therefore, operate within the range of behavior. Unspoken is the fact that schools clearly favor "certain ways of knowing, doing, thinking, and interacting" (Dudley-Marling & Dippo, 1995, p. 409). Reid and Valle (in this issue) point out that those students who do not fit the model are identified by teachers and selected for educational testing, which generally confirms an "abnormality." When such students are then segregated into remedial or special education classes, they are often subject to subpar educational preparation and teaching methodology (Heshusius, 1989).

If we understand the creation of dis/ability to be a discursive and social process, we see that we can take steps to disrupt dis/abling practices and attitudes that emerge from legitimating dis/ability as only a biological reality. Stiker (1997) adopted a social justice position for those with differences in his book A History of Disability and called for support of what has sometimes been referred to as a moral imperative—that society must work to deconstruct ableism and create a community that recognizes and embraces all differences. Stiker (1997) stated, "We must then inscribe in our cultural models a view of difference as the law of the real. It is a matter of stating and restating, first of all to children throughout their education, that it is inscribed in the human universe to value the differences it engenders and of which it is also a product" (p. 12). Differences are pervasive, ordinary, and acceptable. Inclusion of all students in general education is critically important for creating societies that recognize and embrace human variation (Thomas & Losely, 2001; Wang & Reynolds, 1996).

The DSE perspective can inform inclusion practices that, in turn, have the potential to transform the structures of classrooms and the manner in which children with differences are treated in these classrooms. DSE scholars argue for embracing, honoring, and respecting differential characteristics. Although advocates for full inclusion acknowledge that there are some extraordinary circumstances that make inclusion difficult, they continue to promote the "fundamental right to self-determination" (D. J. Gallagher, 2001, p. 638) for individuals constructed as "impaired." Active and continual effort toward the acceptance and improvement of inclusive educational practices is a possible first move toward social justice.

The discussions that circulate around students who have not been successful in school constitute a major barrier to inclusion. Labeling, teacher attitudes, and current practices marginalize students labeled as having dis/abilities. As long as we continue to position students with the pejorative label of dis/ability, teachers (Miller, 2001) and students (Shapiro, 2000) will continue to view difference as negative. The school and societal discourses that legitimate learning dis/ability as a physical and mental reality justify labeling and segregated educational settings and result in continued differential treatment (Shapiro, 2000).

Teachers often express a variety of concerns about inclusive education: their ability to meet simultaneously the needs of both "normal" children and those labeled as having dis/abilities in their general education classrooms; the lack of adequate supportive resources; and the pressures to meet academic performance standards enforced through standardized testing (D. J. Gallagher, 2001). Even when we include students in the general education setting, they frequently do not escape marginalization. Often, instruction in special education and inclusive settings attends only to the remediation of the individual with a dis/ability, rather than, as is mandated by law, access to the general education curriculum.

In addressing these concerns, it is helpful to acknowledge that many educators assume that only students labeled with a dis/ability (and not other students) require adaptation, accommodations, and modifications to the general education curriculum (Ellis, 1997; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998; Jubala, Bishop, & Falvey, 1995). Although accommodating students with a dis/ability is clearly desirable, the term suggests that accommodations are different and separate from the "normal" curriculum. This understanding often results in wholesale reductionism (Heshusius, 1989) and simplification of both curriculum and expectations (Ellis, 1997). Such ineffective instructional practices confirm the understanding of students with learning dis/abilities as less able. As such, even "included" students labeled as having LD continue to be excluded, not by classroom location but by the instructional discourses that circulate in the school. Creating an environment in which the discourse of difference (Stiker, 1997) positions all students and their myriad differences as positive, "normal," and even enriching is a critical step toward reconceptualizing and restructuring schools.

In attending to the creation of a positive discourse that centers rather than marginalizes difference, Reid and Valle (in this issue) argue that the practice of referring to student “readiness” for inclusion (Biklen, 1992; Ganterwerk, 1995; Garrick-Duhaney & Saland, 2000; Waldron & McLeskey, 1998) must give way to the conviction that access to general education classrooms is not an earned privilege, but a right: "Grounded..."
in a civil rights discourse that focuses on interactions among difference, impairment, and disability...we assume that everybody belongs and ask how educators can make general education classrooms welcoming, productive...environments for all students.” (p. 8).

We do not deny the existence of variation among students in school performance, nor are we suggesting that accommodation is undesirable. Rather, we suggest that the use of accommodations only in terms of students with LD is problematic. A truly inclusive classroom strives to bring “difference back to the norm” (Stiker, 1997, p. 192) and acknowledges the right of every individual to have access to all of the experiences and benefits available in schools. Our work, then, becomes that of creating a discourse of difference in which all students are allowed access, valued for their unique characteristics, and provided with opportunities to learn and perform in myriad ways that address individual needs and personal goals. Incorporating a DSE perspective assists educators in creating a discourse in schools that decenters the normal as the focus for curricular decisions, recognizes every student as an equal member of the community, and allows the needs and interests of each student to drive the choices made about instructional practices.

Using a Model of Differentiated Instruction

As members of a diverse society who interact within a democratic system, students are well served by a curriculum that is designed to disrupt discriminatory discourses. Teaching students to care about themselves and each other begins with providing the environments and the language they need to interact, both with students who are labeled and with those who are not.

Furthermore, to provide access and opportunity for all students, we urge educators to rethink separate assignments and activities, classroom seating positions, and lowered expectations that apply only to labeled students. In contrast, differentiated instruction can be designed for the education of all students. In the differentiated classroom (Tomlinson, 1999), three principles structure the educational philosophy. First, teachers create curricula based on where the students are, as opposed to where a graded, or standardized, curriculum assumes students should be. Second, teachers select methods through which each individual may learn as deeply and quickly as possible. This strategy is antithetical to the reductionist view of learning (Heshuis, 1989) in which teachers’ task analyses reduce learning to its ordered component parts—a logical rather than psychological approach. Third, teachers understand that cultivation of teacher-student learning relationships is essential and takes time to develop.

Creating a curriculum that caters to where individual students are is a daunting process when considering a classroom of 25 (and often more) students. We agree with Reid and Valle and with Mariage, Paxton-Buursma, and Bouch (both in this issue) that research demonstrates that a Vygotskian framework effectively guides and supports the learning of students with LD. By using instructional arrangements that provide opportunities to form cooperative relationships in which students support each other and serve as learning models, students have multiple models and guides to practice and encourage the development of new and emerging abilities (Gindis, 1999). Care should be taken to ensure that these relationships rely on collaboration, not helping, and that peers share equal status in the groupings (Shapiro, 2000). A way to encourage this type of cooperative learning is to provide activities that require multiple ways of interacting and accessing the curriculum.

An example that attends to the three principles of differentiated instruction in a secondary-level English class requires reading and responding to a text. Participation in and completion of the assignment can be made to fit each individual student’s particular needs and strengths, which may be determined through individual teacher-student discussions and student choice and combined with specific individual, pair, or group curricular goals; in cooperative groupings, students support one another in meeting their goals. They may choose to read aloud to each other, for example, or listen to a recording so that even students who do not read proficiently can gain access to the text and engage in discussion and reflective activities. Student responses may also be enacted in varied ways, such as illustration, discussion, performance, and writing. By providing multiple opportunities to participate in the learning community, student learning is both social and individualized and is reinforced through interaction with knowledge in several ways—a favored method in current learning theory (Gardner & Hatch, 1989). The use of this model allows and encourages multiple ways to participate and also reinforces the value of difference in the classroom and society. In this way, difference is reconstructed as “normal” in the classroom community.

Noddings (1994) focused her work on the importance of human relationships in learning. Through providing instructional arrangements where students support and interact with each other in continual, meaningful ways, teachers promote relationships that lead to mutual caring. When teachers model positive language and attitudes toward difference, students also are affirmed in the development of their peer relationships. A classroom discourse that dialogically and pedagogically explores and embraces differences nurtures relationships within the classroom community and leads students toward a broader appreciation of difference.

Shapiro (2000) suggested that teachers confront students’ negative attitudes toward dis/ability by imple-
menting a dis/ability awareness program, incorporating images and stories of dis/abilities into the curriculum. One goal is to disrupt the stereotypical tropes of people with dis/abilities as overcoming obstacles and seeking cures or as being pitiable, lesser, and supernormal (Davis, 1997a, 1997b; Linton, 1998; Longmore, 1997; Shakespeare, 1994). Classroom dialogue centered on discussing issues of dis/ability in positive ways disempowers the surrounding negative societal discourse. Inviting dis/abled members of the community with dis/abilities to talk with the students about their lives, families, careers, and aspirations, as well as the physical and social obstacles that stem from community responses to their differences, also works to replace typical assumptions with more real and positive counter-narratives. Personal interaction has the potential to affect and change the negative attitudes that support the continued marginalization of those with difference.

A Call for Reflective Practice

DSE scholars call for self-reflection and critique of the manner in which we include, educate, and address students with differences. There is an urgent need to confront the inequalities that are so evident in schools and to work toward creating equal status relationships for every student. “To really help, then, is to work daily to remove the stigma of difference, to create classrooms in which relationship and dialogue, as opposed to treatment and training, are central, to create a conception of community based not on normalcy, competitiveness, and ‘just desserts,’ but rather on diversity, mutuality, and social justice” (Dudley-Marling & Dippo, 1995, p. 411). Teacher preparation programs that challenge commonly accepted values and structures of schooling support such goals.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 presents a significant challenge to the implementation of inclusive and differentiated learning environments. Because NCLB supports scientific “research-based” instructional programs and methods, schools are increasingly using “proven” standardized programs and methods to boost test scores, which subsequently discourages teachers from using the type of critical pedagogy (Wink, 2000) that can engage and capitalize on the strengths of all learners. Bejoian and Reid (2004), for example, critiqued NCLB as dangerous in its focus on accountability testing that may serve to further segregate the already marginalized students with I.D and English language learners. Although the requirement of nearly all students to meet achievement standards increases the accountability of schools and could push schools toward inclusion, the type of standards-driven testing employed to measure progress does little to discourage remedial grouping. A discourse of difference supports truly inclusive instructional arrangements and disrupts the normalizing power structures (S. Gallagher, 1999) at work in a standards-driven curriculum.

Differentiated instruction, on the other hand, drives the spirit of the classroom and school community toward critical reflection and disrupts the inequalities currently prevalent in our schools and our society. Such differentiated teaching practices reflect a democratic philosophy, wherein each student’s voice is heard and valued. Inclusive environments that support equal status among students center curriculum on constructivist, student-centered principles that encourage the exploration and construction of ideas and questions. Finally, differentiated instruction supports a school culture that reflects an ethic of caring and a genuine community spirit wherein difference is valued, not considered an aberration, and is welcomed as a natural part of the school’s landscape. When we create arrangements and expectations that cater to the individuality of students and not to their potential to conform, we take small but important steps toward constructing inclusive communities in our greater society.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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AUTHORS’ NOTE

Our names appear in alphabetical order. We contributed equally to the writing of this article.

NOTE

Our visual representation of the term disability as dis/ability is our effort to use the word as an indicator of an active process of disabling rather than as a descriptor for the wide variety of physical and societal characteristics to which it is often applied.

REFERENCES


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