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## TEACHING FOR INCLUSION

My first experience with inclusion occurred during my years as an itinerant teacher licensed to teach students with visual impairment and blindness in suburban midwestern America during the 1990s. Several of my students were children with multiple disabilities and carried several labels simultaneously, including a label of some form of visual impairment. More often than not, therefore, I was the “related service provider,” who provided either monthly consultative support to educators or weekly direct services to the student. While I attended all the conferences related to the student’s individualized education program (IEP) and other relevant meetings, I was not expected to participate strongly in the overall programmatic decisionmaking for the student. With some exceptions, I was also rarely in the same building more than twice a week. Given this somewhat peripheral location in the schools, it was not surprising that even as I sensed the tensions among families, students, and educators when working with the concept of *inclusion*, the images of inclusion I came to carry were of teachers and families struggling—sometimes together, sometimes separately—to make curricular and instructional decisions. In teachers’ lounges or in quiet hallways, there was a persistent background hum of stories of angry parents, “difficult” students, and outraged educators that seemed to accompany the subject of inclusion. My first understandings of inclusion, then, grew out of the pragmatic wrestling with curricular content, scheduling, materials, distribution of personnel, and peer relationships that characterized these struggles in schools.

Many years later, therefore, as I began to spend extensive periods of time in classrooms as a researcher, it is not surprising that I would become interested not only in what inclusion should/should not look like, but more important, in understanding how teachers came to practice inclusion and their rationales for doing so. If teachers are entrusted with the task of implementing a difficult and somewhat nebulous idea, I find it reasonable and just to try to understand inclusion from the ground up, as it were. What does inclusion mean in the lived experiences of teachers as they go about implementing this abstract concept? How can such lived meanings advance the field of inclusive education?

## PREMISES OF THE BOOK

My intent to privilege local understandings of inclusion notwithstanding, the meaning of this term is not always self-evident. Although it has been readily taken up within schools, among teachers, schools, families, and scholars, *inclusion* may imply significantly different understandings of disability, schools, and learning.

## What Does Inclusion Mean?

As a special education teacher, when I encountered *inclusion*, it meant the physical placement of students with disabilities in general education classrooms. As a researcher working within the disability studies tradition, not only did I come to adopt a broader meaning, I also recognized the distinctions between these approaches and why they mattered. Inclusion as understood within mainstream special and general education scholarship leaves the ability-based conceptual foundations of the general education classroom intact; its focus is to ensure that the effects of the student's disability are minimized in a setting that has been primarily designed for students without disabilities. Therefore, though mainstream special education scholarship has increasingly come to support the inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms, it continues to distinguish ability levels between students to determine where and how they should be educated (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011; Kauffman & Sasso, 2006). This may also mean that segregated, self-contained spaces may well be regarded as appropriate for educating some students with disabilities.

Inclusion, from the perspective of scholars writing within a disability studies tradition, begins with an exploration of the extent to which schools and classrooms permit students who bring diverse learning profiles (with and without labels of disability) to learn in an equitable manner. Within this meaning of inclusion, disability is not located within the learner but rather resides in the social practices that construct that student as "different." This notion of disability as socially constructed is foundational to inclusive education. For these inclusive educators, inclusion is rooted in a democratic orientation to schooling that acknowledges diversity of student learning profiles as the norm and requires that educational spaces be designed accordingly (Naraian, 2016a). It implies a multisector, whole-school reform effort to create schooling communities hospitable to diverse learners rather than a focus on the remediation of students perceived to be lacking in required skills (Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

For many teachers, inclusion remains at the level of physically integrating students with disabilities in the general education classroom. It occurs alongside predetermined curricular and instructional arrangements that are primarily designed for a mythical "normal" student. Other teachers recognize any given classroom as hosting a range of capabilities; for these teachers,

inclusion means trying to reach *all* learners, as well as attending to students with documented disability labels. This book draws largely on the experiences of this latter group of teachers. It is true that they may not present a sophisticated critique of inclusion as popularly practiced. Still, they distinguished between deficit forms of thinking and support structures that enabled success for students who appeared to struggle in schools. Most important, they consciously sought to preserve their commitments to student learning in the midst of the pressures of testing, teacher tenure debates, scheduling experiments, and the changing circumstances of students' family lives. In that regard, these teachers offer a wealth of understanding of the intricacies of practicing inclusion that are often missing in broad prescriptions for creating inclusive classrooms.

A note on scope and terminology: I have used the terms *student with disabilities* and *disabled student* interchangeably even though the former is widely accepted as the more respectful method of address and many journals/organizations actually require authors to use that over the latter. The significance of language to index experience in respectful ways cannot be minimized. The activism of individuals with intellectual disabilities within People First movements to redress widespread historical discrimination against this group testifies to the validity of such concerns. However, several disabled activist scholars have also questioned the privileging of personhood in the term *person with disabilities*. Arguing instead for an understanding of disability as valued human experience, they embrace the privileging of disability instead in *disabled person* (Siebers, 2008; Titchkosky, 2011). My interchangeable use of the terms in this book reflects the validity of both positions.

Additionally, though the basis of inclusion is premised on environments that can be responsive to many different types of learners, this book draws heavily on the experiences of students with disabilities and their teachers. Still, the principles derived from an examination of teachers' practices have implications for many categories of marginalized learners. This argument is based on the logic that as a social category, disability remains permeable to all other categories including race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and so on (Siebers, 2008). For instance, an *ideology of ability* can cut across many different types of social experiences. Disability, therefore, can serve as an analytic lens to understand all human experience. In my research, I found that disability as a lens to understand the production of inclusive classrooms can be generative for surfacing many facets of classroom experience that have deep relevance for all learners, regardless of their ability/disability status.

### Why Learn from Teachers About Inclusion?

Over the past decade, as my research interests came to focus on understanding how and why teachers did what they did as they created hospitable learning environments for different kinds of learners, I wondered about their everyday decisionmaking:

- How did teachers develop the rationales for their practice?
- Under what conditions were they satisfied with their efforts?
- How did they reconcile their vision of an inclusive classroom with the preparation of students for standardized testing? What dilemmas did such experiences raise for them? How did they resolve such dilemmas?
- How did they make sense of how peers interacted with students with disabilities, and how did that factor into their grouping arrangements or their curricular choices?
- How did their relationships with families influence their classroom instruction?
- What was their relationship with particular types of supports such as technology, and how did they use it to advance their vision of inclusion?

The answers to such questions may seem relatively self-evident to teachers, but surprisingly these questions have not received sustained attention in the research on inclusion. Many authors have synthesized research to generate well-crafted and valuable books on how inclusion should be implemented at the school and classroom levels. Yet, even as examples from teacher experiences are utilized to illustrate those principles, there have been few in-depth case studies of teachers engaging in such work across varied schooling contexts that could begin to address the questions raised above.

Questions of practice are inseparable from questions of theory. The dearth of teacher stories in this nascent field of inclusive education may originate in some part in the critical necessity to first establish the field as a legitimate interdisciplinary tradition in its own right. During the last few decades there has been an increasingly rich and sophisticated body of work in disability studies in education that has come to provide the theoretical foundation for the field of inclusive education (e.g., Danforth & Gabel, 2006; Slee, 2011; Ware, 2010). This scholarship has yielded important insights about the premises of inclusive education:

- Disruption of notions of normalcy and, by extension, the concept of difference
- Avoidance of deficit-oriented approaches to student learning
- Vigilance of, and resistance to, an ideology of ability within schooling practices
- The valuing of the narratives of individuals with disabilities and their families
- The promotion of democratic values in schooling communities (Danforth, 2014; Danforth & Naraian, 2015; Kluth, Biklen, & Straut, 2003; Slee, 2011; Valle & Connor, 2011)