Creating Permeable Boundaries: Inclusive Educators in a Global Society

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Abstract: The authors pose a redefinition of inclusive education and inclusive educators. They describe four promising strategies that educators might use to reflect on social justice as a curricular focal point, problematize inclusive education, and help students create more permeable boundaries between themselves and those who are different.

In this paper, we propose a redefinition of inclusive education and inclusive educators. In the last decade or so, inclusive education has been advanced in order to educate students with disabilities with their non-handicapped peers. Inclusion in this context refers to the full-time integration with appropriate accommodations and supports of students with disabilities in general education classrooms located in their neighborhood schools. The major goal of inclusive special education is to create schools in which all children are welcomed, valued, and supported, as they learn (Villa & Thousand, 2005).

For us, inclusive education is a pedagogical and curricular stance in which global education, special education, and disability studies converge. Inclusive educators are those who honor the diverse cultural, linguistic, physical, mental, and cognitive complexities of their students. We assert that inclusive education begins with teaching tolerance for those who are different within one's own environment—tolerance from the inside out. Further, we advocate that inclusive educators put reflection of social justice at the center of their teaching – this includes teachers and students together questioning the meaning of social justice, reflecting on their own sense of justice and equity, acting to work for social change (Cochran-Smith, 1999), and consistently nurturing all students and learners (Kohl, 2000/01).

We begin by summarizing current research on the nature of the student body and teacher workforce with respect to responding to diversity. Then we describe our vision of inclusive education. Next we explore what it means to use the reflection on social justice as the focal point for inclusive educators. From this stance, we describe several teaching strategies that teacher educators can use for creating permeable boundaries.

Situating the need: Identifying teachers, students, and their views of diversity

Today’s teachers (PreK-16 and adult) are unprepared to deal with the complexities of a classroom that represents diversity of all kinds: racial, ethnic, linguistic, and ability. In the executive summary of the American Educational Research Association Panel on Research and Teacher Education, Cochran-Smith and Zeichner (2005) summarize the review by Hollins and Guzman (2005), “Studies reveal that in addition to being White and middle-class females, the majority of teacher candidates are from suburbs or small towns and have limited experience with those from cultures or areas different from their own” (p. 21). Furthermore, in a summary of Pugach (2005), Cochran-Smith and Zeichner (2005) state, “Despite the trend toward preparing prospective teachers to work with students with disabilities, few studies of program effects have been studied” (p. 25). Moreover, faculty in higher education do not represent the diversity that exists in the United States nor do the students in higher education programs destined to become the teachers of our next generation of teachers. For instance, full-time minority faculty increased
from 12.3% to 14.9% in the ten years between 1991 and 2001 (TIAA-CREF, 2005). This means that teachers in training often lack opportunities to interact with faculty from other cultures, which is an important experience when teaching with a focal point on the reflection of social justice. To further complicate the educational reform scene, Cochran-Smith and Zeichner (2005) articulated that several, often competing, agendas for teacher education vie for attention: professionalization, deregulation, regulation, and social justice. Conceptualizing teaching and teacher education in terms of social justice has become a focus for many scholars and practitioners (Cochran-Smith, 1999; Gaudelli, 2003; Noddings, 2005). We too conceive of social justice as an imperative concept with which inclusive educators must grapple. But unlike Noddings (2005), for instance, whose definition of social justice as “rights we demand for ourselves that should be offered to others worldwide” (p. 8), is a given, we believe that the heart of inclusive education embodies the constant questioning and reflection on the meaning of social justice.

**Theoretical Perspective**

In *The Politics of Recognition*, Charles Taylor (1994) asserts that one of the driving forces behind political, social and cultural movements has always been the need, and sometimes the demand for recognition. According to Taylor, the movement in the 18th century from honor to dignity brought with it a politics of universalism. Taylor further asserts that, at the end of the 18th century, a modern sense of identity was born, and with it, a politics of difference. Honor, as Taylor uses the word, is intrinsically linked to inequalities. In order for some to have honor, others necessarily may not have it. Taylor goes on to say that the movement from honor to dignity brought with it the idea of universalism, which emphasizes the equal dignity of all human beings, or citizen dignity. The underlying premise here is that everyone shares in this dignity. With the development of modern identity, the focus of recognition was on individuality, rather than on equality. This development gave rise to the notion that we are all different. Within the politics of difference, “we give due acknowledgement only to what is universally present – everyone has an identity – through recognizing what is peculiar to each. The universal demand powers an acknowledgement of specificity” (Taylor, 1994, p. 39). In other words, we define ourselves in relation to our uniqueness and how we are different from each other. Being true to oneself, and being recognized for who one is, becomes being true to one’s originality, which one discovers in articulation, or dialogue.

The point of convergence among global education, special education (in particular inclusive education), and disability studies is the area between the circles, which do not intersect in Figure 1. The space between the circles can be seen as border zones, areas that are fluid and not rigid like boundaries (Tierney, 1993) or a borderland, which is “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (Anzalda, 1987, p. 3). This borderland represents the point of convergence; we are concerned with eliminating this unnatural boundary by creating spaces where democracy can be practiced rather than repressive tolerance or lip service being paid to difference (Marcuse, 1965). The borderland can be eliminated through recognition of the equal dignity of all people and a respect for difference and originality. This will occur as we recognize that until the least among us enjoys full human rights and citizen dignity, even the most powerful among us will be diminished. We are diminished to if we cannot extend fairness to others not like us. As long as one person believes that when someone else gains a human right (such as legally sanctioned same sex unions or accommodations for persons with disabilities) that this gain takes away his or her rights, we will not permeate the boundaries.
The competent, inclusive educator can help students negotiate the borderlands towards a more respectful and dignified acceptance of those who are different from themselves creating a larger, more inclusive circle.

Problematizing Inclusive Education

Disability studies as a field was created in part because respect for people with disabilities was not/is not freely given or frequently found. Disability studies, as a worldview, provides us with an apt context for social justice by arguing against the dichotomies in naming, defining, and labeling that make a social justice agenda necessary (Linton, 1998). These dichotomies in naming and the dilemmas they create are painfully evident in special education, creating the desire for inclusive education.

In terms of inclusive education, the outlawing of discrimination in the workplace may be an example of the politics of dignity at the forefront, whereas the push for accommodations for special education students in the classroom and workplace may be an example of the prevalence of the politics of difference. The perennial “problem” with the politics of dignity and the politics of difference is that as soon as the latter is manifested in action, proponents of the former call foul play. Thus, when accommodations are made for special education students, there are parents of mainstream students who claim that their able-bodied children’s own special needs are being ignored.

A similar “problem” exists with the notion of social justice. If social justice embodies both the promotion of equity to address injustices suffered by oppressed classes, and the promotion of equality to meet the needs of all members of society, then as soon as one group of people gain a measure of equity, another group will claim a diminishing of equality. A further “problem” in the notion of social justice is that of the placement of morals. For many, morality must lie within the individual. Inherent in the term social justice, however, is the notion of morality as a collective, or a societal responsibility. But as soon as morality lies outside the individual, there is the danger of societal power being used to coerce.

Taylor (1994) believes, as do we, that one can go beyond the tension between the politics of dignity and the politics of difference by accepting the other on his or her own terms. Taylor
calls this acceptance “the presumption of equal worth” (Taylor, 1994, p. 72) and argues that we only need a sense of our own limited part in the whole human story to accept this presumption. We further assert that social justice contains the same kind of tension, and that by problematizing the notion of social justice, students will be able to uncover this tension and learn to go beyond it. The “problem” that this creates often requires that teacher educators, teachers, and their students must become comfortable in the presence of two seemingly opposite concepts.

Creating permeable boundaries: Strategies for change

Landorf is a global education professor at FIU, a research extensive minority institution in the Southeastern USA and the top producer of Hispanic graduates in the US and the third largest producer of minority graduates (52% Hispanic, 12% African-American, and 4% Asians). The student body, as a microcosm of a diverse metropolitan community, may be uniquely suited to a study of inclusive education in process. The university community includes 1st and 2nd generation Cuban Americans who are bilingual (Spanish/English) as well as 1st and 2nd generation Haitian Americans (linguistic, Creole/English) and Asian Americans. The “nut” to crack for preservice K-12 teachers at this urban university is that of making real multicultural connections. In spite of the fact that many teacher education students are bilingual and hail from other cultures, many have grown up in mini-monocultural enclaves (e.g., Little Haiti, Little Havana, Chinatown, etc.). Landorf provides opportunities for students to experience and gain respect for the “other” through the following strategies: Visual Teaching Strategy; Using the City as Text—Service Learning; Problematizing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR); and Cross Cultural On-Line Dialogue.

The first strategy is modeled after Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), a third through fifth grade curriculum, developed by Philip Yenawine and Abigail Housen for the teaching and learning of visual literacy (http://www.vue.org). For the visual teaching strategy, students and teachers examine carefully selected art images. The teachers then ask the following three open-ended questions: “What's going on in this picture?” “What do you see that makes you say that?” and “What more can you find in the picture?” While verbalizing their responses, opinions, ideas and interpretations to the pictures, students are encouraged to build meaning by injecting information from their own observations and experience. In the service learning strategy, teachers enact John Dewey’s philosophy that experiential education forms the foundation of moral, intellectual, and civic life (Dewey, 1938) by linking academic course objectives with real community needs (Cairn & Kielsmeier, 1999). The reflection of social justice and its political, social and cultural permutations around the world is at the center of the third strategy. By problematizing the content of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and using the 30 articles of the document as a blueprint to examine global issues, preservice teachers experience an opportunity to discover for themselves the universal values that are at the core of the internationally recognized declaration of principles. In the last strategy, students conduct online dialogue with cyber-classmates from the Arab and Muslim world or people with disabilities. In so doing, they construct their own meaning of “the other” and by interacting with those who are culturally different from themselves, come to appreciate and/or accept the nature of values as they are manifested across cultures.

Implications

Clifford Geertz (2001) maintains:

It is the asymmetries...between what we believe or feel and what others do that make it possible for us to locate where we now are in the world, how it feels to be there, and where we might or might not want to go. (p. xx)
What is needed to ensure that children and their teachers can experience the benefits described by Geertz (2001)? We believe that professors in teacher preparation programs can utilize strategies similar to those described above. Modeling how to accept multiple perspectives is a strategy that university faculty can use to promote dialogue, help resolve seemingly dichotomous polarities, and advance acceptance and valuing of children’s diversities. In the process of engaging in activities like these, teacher educators are reaching towards the goal of empowering preservice teachers to learn about themselves, to begin to be able to hear the perspectives of others who are different from themselves, and come to their own notions of teaching for social justice.

We believe that teacher educators can problematize a variety of issues that arise in teacher education coursework. We encourage teacher educators (and by implications teachers) to overtly and explicitly address the tensions that exist. This means that faculty must encourage dialog that validates, challenges, analyzes, and critiques assumptions, ideas, and conclusions without silencing the unique voice(s) of the teacher candidates (students). This means that faculty must model and demonstrate how to create a dialectic where two seemingly opposite points of view are held at the same time. The common thread for all of the strategies is to create larger and larger circles where more differences are included. We look forward to a future where teachers create a more inclusive, more socially just classroom experience and thus empower their students to cross more borders, move into and out of circles that overlap, and treat others who are different from themselves with respect.

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