Working in boundary practices: Identity development and learning in partnerships for inclusive education

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ABSTRACT

There has been an increasing trend to promote partnerships for inclusive education that share responsibility for teachers' and students' learning. Yet, the complexities of collaborating across institutions and professions as well as the identity work that goes with it has been under theorized in inclusive education partnerships. Drawing from Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and the literature on boundary practices, this paper advances theoretical tools to examine and further understand the work of inclusive education partnerships. We conceptualize partnerships as a fertile ground for learning and identity development as professionals work across institutional boundaries and face tensions and contradictions created by the overlap of different communities of practice and their respective policies and mediating tools. We illustrate theory with examples from our own work in a professional learning school for inclusive education and provide recommendations for teacher learning in teacher education programs.

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1. Introduction

Inclusive education is a global movement that emerged in response to systemic exclusion of students who are viewed as *different* (e.g., students with disabilities, ethnically and linguistically diverse students, and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds) from meaningful access and participation in education. We define inclusive education by synthesizing previous definitions (e.g., Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006; Artiles, Kozleski, Dorn, & Christensen, 2006; Corbett & Slee, 2000) with Fraser's exploration of justice (Fraser, 1997, 2008). Inclusive education is a continuous struggle toward (a) the *redistribution* of quality opportunities to learn and participate in educational programs, (b) the *recognition* and value of differences as reflected in content, pedagogy, and assessment tools, and (c) the opportunities for marginalized groups to *represent themselves* in decision-making processes that advance and define claims of exclusion and the respective solutions that affect their children's educational futures. This notion of inclusive education as a continuous struggle reflects the notion that we exist in dynamic contexts. The margins and centers of our work are in continuous flow producing new margins and centers (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007).

The Education for All report (UNESCO, 2010) pointed out that 72 million children do not yet have access to education, and that still millions of children leave school without having acquired basic literacy and numeracy skills. In England, for instance, issues of equity for students with special needs were found to be tightly bound to broad social, economic, geographical, and educational inequities (Dyson, Jones, & Kerr, 2011). In India, the development of an inclusive agenda still encompasses a range of exclusionary practices that deny access to education and marginalized students with disabilities, particularly females from lower cast background (Singal, 2006). In Uganda, lack of professional development in inclusive educaiton, lack of a wide range of resources, high teacher-student ratios, and negative teachers' attitudes toward inclusion contribute to creating barriers for eduaitonal access and particiaption for students with special needs (Kristensen, Omagor-Loican, & Onen, 2003).

Students in many settings across the globe experience multiple layers of difference. Examples of these students may include but are not limited to Latino students whose first language is Spanish and are identified for special education in the United States (U.S) (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005), immigrant students with disabilities in Germany (Werning, Löser, & Urban, 2008),

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indigenous students identified for special education in Australia (Sweler, Graham, & Van Bergen, 2012), female students with disabilities from a lower caste background in India (Singal, 2006), Gitano and Moroccan students with disabilities in Spain (Arnaiz & Soto, 2003), and students with special needs from ethnic and religious minorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Pasalic-Kreso, 2002). Students in these and other contexts need complex services and practices in order to dismantle the barriers that keep them from learning and participating from the general education classroom. In these cases, disadvantage or exclusion is exacerbated by the interaction of multiple factors (Crenshaw, 1995).

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) was first introduced in feminist critical theory as a way of uncovering the effects of multiple forms of discrimination such as being female, African–American, and disabled in the United States. Intersectionality helps to explain how students who are identified as learning disabled and whose first language is Spanish may experience complex forms of exclusion because of the ways in which schools address or fail to address the intersection of these layers of difference and, instead, respond to either the learning disabilities or the student's language needs. Identity and capability may be subsumed by markers of difference that lead to monolithic and deficit views of individuals. These monolithic views of students that are embedded in educational policies and teacher preparation narrow the lenses that educators, and the institutional contexts in which they work, employ to support and nurture learning, marginalizing groups of students marked as different for one reason or another. When a student is seen as needing specialized supports, other aspects of student support may be less emphasized because services for learning, behavioral, and language supports may be structured separately and teacher skill sets are often distributed across roles and personnel that are categorized by student differences. In the U.S, for instance, English language learners (ELLs) identified for special education are less likely to receive instruction in their home language than their general education peers, and districts serving these students have reported not having the services to provide quality opportunities to learn for these students (Zehler et al., 2003).

While there are teacher preparation programs that have worked intensively to foreground inclusive education through integrated structures and curricula (e.g., Florian & Rouse, 2009; O'Neill, Bourke, & Kearney, 2009), universities in many countries still reflect bifurcation in their personnel preparation programs. Special education may be assigned its own department, embedded in Educational Psychology (e.g., Leibnitz University in Germany) or Curriculum and Instruction departments (e.g., University of Pretoria in South Africa). There are many other organizational permutations that have been adopted. In any event, general, special and bilingual and other teacher education programs can be found across the globe in separate specialized silos governing specific teacher preparation programs with little coordination across programs (Hausstätter & Takala, 2008; Pugach, Blanton, & Correa, 2011).

As a result, educators who provide specialized services for students may be prepared in a variety of departments that include social work, psychology, and education. Particularly in the U.S, teacher education communities (e.g., special education, bilingual education, social justice education) have tended to produce conversations within them rather than across them (Pugach, Blanton, & Florian, 2012). Even when there are efforts to merge special and general education teacher programs in a dual certification format, attention to disabilities trumps attention to other students' identity markers such as race, class, language, and gender (Pugach & Blanton, 2012). This is due, in part, to the disparate disciplinary and pedagogical traditions of these communities

(Cochran-Smith & Dudley-Marling, 2012). This separation diminishes the potential for nurturing teachers who have the attitudes, dispositions, understandings, and skills to teach all students, particularly students who experience intersecting forms of exclusion. Further, educators need to be able to work across professions, fields, and disciplines to develop school and teacher capacity for inclusive education. Partnerships between universities, schools, and school systems are a vehicle for interdisciplinary education.

Drawing from cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) (Engeström, 1987, 2001) and the literature on boundary practices (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Star & Griesemer, 1989), we explore theoretical tools to examine and understand the work of inclusive education partnerships. In this paper, we theorize practitioner partners as boundary workers who cross institutional boundaries to engage tools from other communities of practice. Boundaries are fertile grounds for identity development and learning since boundary workers face tensions and contradictions in the overlaps and challenges to institutional boundaries. These concepts are applied to our own work in a professional learning school for inclusive education in the U.S. In the conclusion, we advance recommendations for teacher learning in teacher education programs.

1.1. Partnerships for inclusive education

There has been an increasing global trend in education to promote partnerships for inclusive education. UNESCO's Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000), for instance, has emphasized the significance of partnerships in improving access and educational experiences for all students. This speaks also to building teacher capacity for inclusive education. As McIntyre (2009) argued in his review of partnerships in western countries, partnerships between schools and universities are crucial for the development of teachers and inclusive education. These partnerships are important for bridging the theory-practice gap and for innovating inclusive pedagogies in collaboration with teachers in schools (McIntyre, 2009). In the U.S, the latest report of the Blue Ribbon Panel on Clinical Preparation and Partnerships for Improved Student Learning (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Preparation (NCATE, 2010)) recommended that "teacher preparation program and districts have to start thinking about teacher preparation as a responsibility they share, working together"(p. 3) and that "partnerships between school districts and teacher preparation programs need to be intentional about the district problems they seek to address" (p. 14). Partnerships composed of schools and universities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other services (e.g., social work and speech pathology) have the potential to apprentice teachers in practices that can dismantle compounding barriers that keep certain kinds of students from learning in schools. Teacher development, in this vision, is a part of a larger partnership agenda that focuses on student learning.

Considering this movement toward a shared responsibility for students' and teachers' learning, it is critical to understand what happens when professionals from multiple professions and with various kinds and levels of expertise, different tools, understandings, and commitments to task at hand, come together to improve the education of students who experience multiple layers of difference. A recent international review of the literature on professional development for inclusive education has shed some light to this use (Waitoller & Artiles, submitted for publication). For instance, between 2000 and 2009, 53% of published research on professional development for inclusive education was based on action research projects (Waitoller & Artiles, submitted for publication). Avalos (2011) also noted that professional development efforts (not only those with an inclusive education focus) have moved away from traditional in-service training toward