Becoming an inclusive educator: Agentive maneuverings in collaboratively taught classrooms

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HIGHLIGHTS

- A sociocultural approach to teacher agency is used to understand inclusive practice.
- Teachers experienced dissonance between their figurative identities and demands of practice.
- Negotiating a culture of performativity with discourses of equity produced local forms of agency.
- Student learning needs, curricular decision-making and professional roles were sites of agency.

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"And so I think being a radical teacher is showing your love in the classroom. I think that it's being able to push the boundaries of whatever environment you are in. And that would look different in whatever school you are. And … I think it's really hard to be [a radical teacher] and it takes a lot of self-assurance and confidence that you are right." (Gina, 6th grade special educator)

1. Introduction

The work of inclusive schooling, including the preparation of teachers for such education, occurs in an increasingly performative culture that has significantly altered traditional relationships within schools and academic communities (Ball, 2003; Labaree, 2014). In such a cultural context where standardization and accountability hold primacy, there is little room for an "autonomous or collective ethical self" (Ball, 2003, p. 226). For teacher educators who seek to develop teachers who are committed to resisting an *ideology of ability* (Siebers, 2008) in schools, and who can demonstrate the competence to enact those commitments, the relentless spread of a culture of performativity in schools produces a persistent dilemma of practice—what does it mean to both resist and partake of schooling discourses that perpetuate practices of sorting and categorization? Within the scholarship on inclusive education, including investigations of collaborative teaching partnerships, there is little research that has specifically examined this dilemma in teaching practice. Its significance to the field has been minimally explored, particularly within US schooling contexts, despite the recognition that ability-based practices remain central to the configuration of schooling systems all over the world (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007; Slee, 2011).

Even as teacher preparation for inclusive education remains premised on valuing diversity (Florian, Young, & Rouse, 2010) and "deepening teachers' confidence in the potential of each learner," (Opertti & Brady, 2011, p. 464), the aspirations for educators are generally restricted to challenging deficit-ridden practices whenever they surface in schools and to work towards a whole-scale multi-sector reform of schooling systems in general (Ainscow & Miles, 2009; Slee, 2011). Such a lofty charge is undoubtedly deeply relevant given that, around the world, at least 58 million children are out of school and about 100 million children do not complete primary education (UNESCO, 2015). Yet the impact of inclusive practices, deployed alongside accountability discourses, on the overall academic achievement of students continues to suggest a complex picture (Farrell, Dyson, Polat, Graeme Hutcheson, & Gallannaugh, 2007; Sermier Dessemontet & Bless, 2013). Not surprisingly, the preparation of teachers and teacher educators for inclusive practices, has assumed deep significance (Florian, 2012). A concerted investigation into teachers' struggles

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and successes in enacting inclusion in an era of accountability, however, remains limited within disability studies scholarship generally. We take up that missing focus in this paper to explore the experiences of novice teachers who were prepared for inclusive education within a critical disability studies-informed teacher education program (Ashby, 2012; Booth, Nes, & Strømstad, 2003; Oyler, 2011). We wanted to understand how these teachers took up "inclusion" within their practice and how they configured their identities as inclusive educators in this process (Naraian, 2010; Thorius, 2016).

Typically, appropriations of "inclusion" take place in many different schooling spaces depending on the structure and affordance of those systems (Booth et al., 2003; Pancsofar & Petroff, 2016). This stems from the widespread diffusion of the meanings of inclusion such as the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education, inclusion of all students with a particular focus on students from marginalized groups, special education, or responsive instruction that can meet the needs of all learners (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Hart, Dixon, Drummond & McIntyre, 2004; Wah, 2010). The particular meanings in use within a context determine the spaces in which educators must carry out their professional responsibilities, engendering a configuration of roles suited to such spatial arrangements. In the US, the historical bifurcation of education into special and general education tracks (Skrtic, 1995) has resulted in a range of service delivery models for inclusive education that draw on both tracks particularly through the institution of collaborative teaching (Blanton & Pugach, 2007; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007). Collaborative teaching between general and special educators is an important means by which schools in the US fulfill their legal obligations to students with disabilities. The focus on inclusive practice in this paper is situated within the unique constraints and affordances of this space.

Despite multiple approaches to effective collaborative teaching that have been proposed, the "one-teach, one-assist" model remains the most frequently used approach in US public schools with lack of time surfacing as a persistent challenge to effective co-planning for all methods of co-teaching (Mulholland & O'Connor, 2016; Pancsofar & Petroff, 2016). More importantly, the literature also has continually disclosed the inevitable power dynamics that pervade the shared professional space (Bessette, 2008; Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014), and the effects on educators' identities, particularly that of special educators (Naraian, 2010). Despite the ambiguous nature of the benefits of this practice for students with and without disabilities (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010; Murawski, 2006) it remains an important mode of delivering special/inclusive educational services in US public schools. In this paper, we retain the focus on collaborative teaching contexts as an important site to inquire into teachers' sense-making of inclusion as practiced within a culture of performativity. We simultaneously register the immense complexity of, and variability within such contexts that call for creative responses when upholding commitments to inclusion.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Teacher preparation for inclusive education

Given the widespread use of collaborative teaching as a means for delivering inclusive education in US public schools, it is not surprising that a significant portion of the research on teacher education for inclusive education has focused on bridging special and general teacher education programs (Blanton & Pugach, 2007;

Conderman & Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009) and on the preparation of teachers in content-specific general education programs for collaboration with special educators (Allday, Neilsen-Gatti, & Hudson, 2013; Gehrke & Cocchiarella, 2013). Scholars also continue to describe pre-service and in-service teachers' attitudes towards the education of students with disabilities (Broderick & Lalvani, 2017), as well as their understandings of inclusion (Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2011; Kamenopoulou, Buli-Holmberg, & Siska, 2016). More recently, teacher education scholars have begun to investigate curriculum and pedagogy for preparing teachers to teach inclusively (Ashby, 2012; Florian, 2012; McKay, 2016; Oyler, 2011).

Several of these teacher education scholars work within the disability studies in education tradition. Within disability studies, disablement is understood as produced through externally imposed barriers that oppress individuals with disabilities and prevent their access to, and inclusion within, all walks of life (Ware, 2010). Disability studies in *education* (DSE), shines a specific spotlight on the ways in which this disablement is enacted and reified through the practices of schooling for many groups and individuals (Danforth & Gabel, 2006; Gabel, 2005). Ashby (2012) and Oyler (2011) have both written descriptive analyses of their own disability studies-informed teacher preparation programs and the specific components of these programs. Oyler (2011) highlights the need to support pre-service teachers in analyzing their assumptions, which may include "their values, perspectives, positions, cultural locations, biases, and limitations" (p. 207), in order to understand the mechanisms of disablement at work in schools and society. Ashby (2012) notes the conflict between the traditional special education culture with its focus on "identification and labeling of difference" (p. 93) and a DSE framework that seeks to locate disability within societal constructs rather than within the individual. Booth et al. (2003) similarly suggest that a central charge of teacher education for inclusive education is supporting educators in the re-conceptualizing of inclusion as a stance toward disability and difference rather than as a space to educate students with labeled disabilities alongside their typical peers. This scholarship generally upholds the goals of preparing pre-service teachers to understand themselves as "agents of change in schools" and to equip them with the "tools necessary to make that happen" (Ashby, 2012, p. 97).

As teacher education and professional development programming grounded in a DSE framework gains increasing currency, reports on the outcomes of these educational experiences have emerged. Rice (2006), for example, specifically notes the "tensions that students felt between an inclusive philosophy and the meritocratic structure of schools" (p.260) as well as a discomfort with taking on a role of advocacy in their work as inclusive educators. Gehrke and Cocchiarella (2013) described a similar tension between participants' university-based learning and their field experience that lead to a "perceived lack of confidence in their ability to implement inclusion in practice" (p.204). Rouse (2008) found that the unease in taking up inclusion, which he refers to as "the believing," could be assuaged through a strong knowledge base ("knowing") and opportunities to practice the teaching inclusively ("doing"). While theory to practice tensions have been well documented in teacher education (Allen & Wright, 2014; Shulman, 1998) the specific tension between inclusive praxis and "context-bound realities of daily life in schools" (Kozleski, Gonzalez, Atkinson, Mruczek, & Lacy, 2013, p. 156) has emerged as an important dimension within preparation for inclusive education. Researchers have increasingly acknowledged that the support and retention of teachers committed to teaching inclusively is dependent on helping them negotiate these tensions (Danforth &