Teacher learning as curating: Becoming inclusive educators in school/university partnerships

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Contradictions in a school/university partnership emerged because of overlapping and competing artifacts and rules.
- Teachers resolve contradictions by *curating* educational experiences in situated practice.
- Curating educational experiences involved privileging and appropriating certain artifacts over others.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to answer the following questions: (a) What contradictions emerge in the context of a school/university partnership for inclusive education? And (b) How do resident teachers resolve these contradictions as they learned to be inclusive education teachers? Contradictions emerged as teacher residents were required to use in their classrooms pedagogical artifacts taught in the masters' program that were in conflict with the school district's curricular policies and mandated practices. We use the notion of *curating* to explain how resident teachers resolved contradictions in situated practice. We provide recommendations for research and teacher learning efforts for inclusive education.

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1. Introduction

This study examined teacher learning amid school/university partnerships for inclusive education. Inclusive education is a global educational movement with multiple contested meanings (Clough, 2000). In fact, commentators argue that inclusive education has lost its original radical meaning, namely to transform the 'regular' school (Slee, 2011). For instance, efforts to develop teacher capacity for inclusive education have been critiqued for being narrowly focused on including students with disabilities in general education and for ignoring the longstanding and troubling links between disability, race gender, and class (Waitoller & Artiles, 2013). As a response to these critiques, and synthetizing prior definitions, inclusive education has been conceptualized around alternative perspectives on justice (Fraser, 2009) as follows:

> 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 (Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013, p. 35)

According to this definition, exclusion is a dynamic and historically evolving process created by intersecting forms of injustice based on misdistribution, misrecognition, and misrepresentation (Crenshaw, 1991; Waitoller & Artiles, 2013). These factors include but are not limited to (a) the lack of access to quality education (i.e.,

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exclusion based on misdistribution), (b) the mismatch between students' abilities, cultural and language backgrounds and those prevailing in schools (Nasir, Rosebery, Warren, & Lee, 2006) (e.g., exclusion based on misrepresentation), and (c) the constrained opportunities for students and their families to represent themselves in key educational decisions (Harry & Klingner, 2006). Examples of these complex forms of exclusion are found around the developed and developing worlds (see Artiles, Kozleski, & Waitoller, 2011). Thus, rather than assimilating those considered as different to the normative ways of thinking and doing of schooling, inclusive education demands the transformation of existing policies and practices to dismantle injustices based on misdistribution, misrecognition, and misrepresentation.

This ambitious inclusive agenda has implications for teacher learning. Rather than only learning accomodations and modifications to include students with disabilities in general education, pre- and in-service teachers should learn to dismantle intersecting forms of exclusion based on misdistribution, misrecognition, and misrepresentation (Waitoller & Artiles, 2013). School/university partnerships that prepare teachers to fuse teaching practices such as cultural responsiveness and inclusive pedagogies (e.g., co-teaching and differentiated instruction) can contribute to such an ambitious inclusive agenda. However, there is a scarcity of research on teacher learning for this purpose and in such contexts. The purpose of this study is to advance our understanding of how teachers learn to be inclusive educators amid contradictions that emerge when schools and universities engage in dismantling overlapping forms of educational exclusion.

Next, we review the literature on school/university partnerships for inclusive education, identifying some of its limitations. Then, we discuss the theoretical lens that informed our study, describe the research methods, and report the study findings. Finally, we build on Levi Strauss' concept of *bricoleur* (1974) and prior research to advance the notion of curating in the study of teacher learning.

2. Teacher learning in school/university partnerships for inclusive education

School/university partnerships play a key role in developing teacher and school capacity for inclusive education as they bridge the theory-practice gap and contribute to innovative inclusive practices (McIntyre, 2009). Partnerships potentially allow for leveraging resources and expertise, achieving outcomes that could not be accomplished by an isolated institution (McIntyre, 2009). This leverage is of particular significance for students experiencing intersecting forms of exclusion because their educational needs typically demand the crosspollination of various forms of expertise (Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013).

Professional development initiatives have relied on collaborative action research projects, moving away from traditional in-service training models (Avalos, 2011). Forty-eight percent of the research published in peer review journals across the globe on professional development for inclusive education examined a form of school/university partnership using action research (Waitoller & Artiles, 2013). This body of research suggests such partnership model is one of the most promising approaches to develop school capacity for inclusive education (Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013).

Yet, contradictions are ubiquitous in school/university partnerships as both institutions tend to have their own understanding of teaching, learning, and educational equity (Bartholomew & Sandholtz, 2009; Smagorinsky, Jakubiak, & Moore, 2008); involved organizations are committed to use particular toolkits, and are enveloped within distinct histories and policy constraints. Amidst these tensions, teachers become objects and subjects of learning (Avalos, 2011). They have to comply with the demands of

working at schools (e.g., conform to different curricula, instructional and assessment practices), as well as learn and utilize the tools and skills that they are taught in their university programs. These conflicts, among other factors, mediate teacher learning (Smagorinsky, Gibson, Bickmore, Moore, & Cook, 2004).

Research on teacher learning amid school/university partnerships for inclusive education has been informed by two distinct perspectives on learning that have not been systematically articulated (Waitoller & Artiles, 2013). First, this research has been informed by an individual perspective based on cognitive and behavioral theories of learning, relying on individuals as the unit of analysis (e.g., Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007). As a consequence, complex interactions between teachers, and their teacher educators, administrators and students within schools' institutional arrangements are downplayed and research is culturally and institutionally decontextualized (Waitoller & Artiles, 2013). Alternatively, this work has been informed by concepts associated with socio-cultural theory, such as communities of practice (e.g., Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006). This scholarship focuses on descriptive accounts of school-wide changes in practices and policies. As a result, documentation of community changes have been privileged at the expense of situated analysis of teacher learning (Artiles, Kozleski, Dorn, & Christensen, 2006). Thus, teacher-learning research for inclusive education has not generated a robust understanding and theorization of how teacher learning occurs in the midst of tensions that emerge in school/university partnerships. In this article, we use Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT; Engeström, 1987) to bridge individuals and their institutional and community contexts, and thus, better understand teacher learning.

2.1. Theorizing teacher learning in school/university partnerships

We assume that human behavior unfolds in activity systems which are complex social organizations that involve subjects (e.g., teachers), their communities (e.g., school and university staff), mediational artifacts (e.g., curricula, and assessments), a division of labor (e.g., who does what), rules (e.g., school policies), and the object of the activity (e.g., students' learning of academic standards, teachers' learning) (Engeström, 1987). For instance, we understand a classroom lesson as situated in an activity system in which teachers' and students' actions are mediated by the elements of the activity system—i.e., object, artifacts, rules, roles and community perspectives. Activity systems afford and constrain teachers' opportunities to learn and implement what they are learning in their teacher preparation programs. Focusing on activity systems broadens the unit of analysis beyond the mind of teachers to teachers-acting-with-mediational-artifacts-within-institutionally-and-historically-contextualized activity systems (Wertsch, 1991).

Mediational artifacts are an important element of activity systems as they mediate how people come to know, make meaning of, experience, and act upon the world (Cole, 1996). Artifacts are both material (e.g., a scripted curriculum book) and also internal representations of such mental models (e.g., the meaning of teaching or inclusive education) (Cole, 1996). We use the notion of *pedagogical artifacts* to describe artifacts that have been created for teaching and mediate teachers' thinking and actions in the classroom. For instance, co-teaching (Friend & Cook, 2010), differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2014), and cultural responsiveness (Villegas & Lucas, 2002) are pedagogical artifacts. They have emerged from and have been developed and appropriated by certain communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) to teach particular kinds of students (e.g., students with disabilities and students from ethnically diverse backgrounds).

School/university partnerships in which teachers learn to become inclusive teachers in school-based contexts can be