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Privilege, Compromise, or Social Justice: Teachers' Conceptualizations of Inclusive Education

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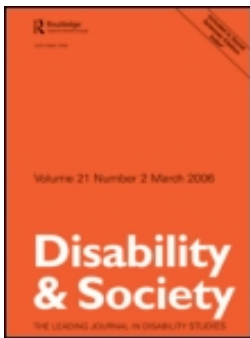


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Privilege, compromise, or social justice: teachers' conceptualizations of inclusive education

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This qualitative study explored the beliefs of teachers in the USA about the education of students with disabilities, focusing on their conceptualizations of inclusive education. Data were obtained through in-depth interviews with 30 teachers. The findings highlight multiple interpretations of inclusive education and suggest that teachers' support for inclusive education may be linked with the ways in which they conceptualize this practice. Most teachers' beliefs about the education of students with disabilities were embedded in dominant educational discourses that centered on the otherness of some students, and an unquestioned acceptance of implicit assumptions in special education. Findings support the need for a paradigm shift in teacher education, moving away from deficit models towards an understanding of inclusive education as linked with issues of social justice.

Keywords: inclusive education; teachers' beliefs; teacher education; special education; social justice

Points of interest

- This study reveals multiple interpretations of inclusive education among teachers in the USA.
- Most teachers expressed surface-level support for inclusive education and held beliefs that access to general education classrooms be based on students' disability type, functioning level, IQ scores, or behaviors.
- Teachers' beliefs about special education were entrenched in medical model perspectives on disability. Very few teachers questioned the assumptions implicit in special education.
- Teachers who strongly supported inclusive education viewed children's learning and cognitive development as embedded in sociocultural contexts.
- Teachers who expressed a strong willingness to implement inclusive practices held beliefs about inclusive education as related to democratic societies, equitable education, and social justice.

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Introduction

Educational discourse in the USA is becoming increasingly focused on how to successfully include students with disabilities in general education classrooms, which refers to classrooms attended by students without disabilities or where non-disabled students learn the general education curriculum. However, in practice large numbers of students with disabilities continue to be educated in *self-contained* learning environments; that is, separate, smaller classrooms or schools for students with disabilities. National statistics available for 2005 indicate that approximately 34% of all preschool children with disabilities and approximately 54% of all students with disabilities between ages 6 and 21 were educated predominantly (i.e. spent at least 80% of the school day) in general education classrooms (US Department of Education 2010).

In 1975, educational equality for children with disabilities was addressed in the USA when the government passed Public Law 94-142. This law, currently known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, guaranteed all students with disabilities a free, appropriate public education in the *least restrictive environment* – that is, alongside their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent possible. Although this landmark educational reform granted students with disabilities access to public education previously denied to them, it simultaneously spurred the establishment of the separate institution of special education. In the years that followed, special education, which genuinely aims to educate students with disabilities in the best way, emerged as an increasingly segregated service system, entrenched in clinical models, with its own practices, regulations, staff, and sets of assumptions about the students that they purport to serve (Connor and Ferri 2007). Today, general and special education exist as parallel systems, their divide perpetuated by teacher education programs that prepare the two sets of teachers in a manner which reinforces the notion that they require isolated and distinct instructional skills. Furthermore, as Linton (1998) observed, this bifurcated system of teacher education lends credibility to the idea that there are broadly two kinds of learners. Ironically, although many departments of education across the country increasingly identify the preparation of teachers for inclusive education as a mission, it can be argued that the continued existence of dual systems of teacher education would render such missions largely rhetorical. Indeed, as Baglieri et al. argued, the very usage of the term ‘inclusion’ in the context of students with disabilities ‘reifies taken-for-granted assumptions that the “natural” position of this group is one of dis-belonging’ (2011, 2123).

In the United States, the term inclusive education (sometimes referred to as inclusion) has come to refer to the practice of educating students with disabilities in general education classrooms with the provision of the supports needed. The term ‘inclusion’ is sometimes used interchangeably with ‘mainstreaming’; however, it should be noted that their meanings are not the same in the context of the education of students with disabilities. Mainstreaming refers to providing students with disabilities varying levels of opportunities to interact with their non-disabled peers during the school day; inclusion involves placement in classrooms that have been restructured to meet the educational needs of *all* its students. In essence, the distinction between these terms can be understood as the difference between visiting a classroom versus having full membership in it. Although inclusive education has been elevated to dominant education discourse in the United States, the idea is not

endorsed by all concerned, and is approached in many different ways. Situating the practice in vastly different philosophical perspectives, some view it as one option on a continuum of educational placements, some as an emerging educational paradigm, and others as a fundamental matter of civil rights and equitable education (Winzer 2000). Despite the fact that interpretations of inclusive education vary, common usage of the term tends to rely on assumptions that it is fundamentally about students who have identified disabilities, and that, like special education, it is about *place*. These dominant conceptualizations have remained largely unexamined in the years since the passage of Public Law 94–142. In more recent years, however, a growing body of scholarship in the United States and in the international arena has indeed challenge these assumptions, positing that inclusive education is less about disability than it is about democracy and asserting that inclusive practices should be grounded in general education reform and framed in the context of social justice (Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006; Slee 2001; Ware 2003; Ballard 2003).

This raises relevant questions about the ways in which teachers conceptualize inclusive education and situate themselves in the parallel education systems. Although studies have explored teachers' perceptions of their preparedness for inclusive education and their attitudes towards it, there is little research on their conceptualizations of this practice and even less on whether it is viewed in the context of civil rights, democratic societies, and social justice. Existing literature suggests that teachers tend to subscribe to dominant views on inclusion; that is, they are favorably disposed to this practice for students with mild disabilities but view it as unrealistic for others, and generally regard education in self-contained classrooms as best practice for students with severe, cognitive, or multiple disabilities (Dupoux, Wolman, and Estrada 2005; Sze 2009). As such, there is indication that our present system of identifying students for placement in segregated educational settings is based in the *medical model*, which positions disability as limitations that need to be overcome. By focusing solely on biological impairments, the medical model lends credibility to the assumption that the source of the 'problems' related to disability is located within individual bodies, thereby absolving society of any complicity in outcomes for individuals with disabilities (Byrom 2004). When educational practices are based in medical model perspectives, disability labels serve as a discursively produced system of sorting; those identified as normal are retained in general education classrooms and those identified as 'other' – banished (Baker 2002; Slee 2004). Consequently, it is argued, special education serves to legitimize segregated education by the removal of disorderly elements or 'burdens,' based on the clinical judgments of those in positions of power or control (Kliewer 1998; Skrtic 1995).

The *social model* offers perspectives on the experience of disability as socioculturally constructed and contextualized (Linton 1998; Davis 2002; Hahn 1997). Framing disability as human diversity, those who adhere to the social model view the education of students with disabilities as related to issues of civil rights and equitable education. In stark contrast to medical model rhetoric, views on inclusion that are based in the social model persuade us to retract our gaze from impairments or limitations, and focus instead on institutional practices and policies that oppress and marginalize some students. There are few empirical studies that explore whether teachers consider these kinds of issues or view them as relevant to student learning outcomes. In teacher education, attitudes towards inclusion are often left unexplored, although there is indication that these may be an important predictor of successful inclusion (for example, Cook et al. 2000). Most teachers, having had few

meaningful relationships with persons with disabilities, lack awareness of their own complicity in perpetuating oppressive educational practices and ableism in schools and, like most non-disabled people, consider their own able-bodied status the norm (Oyler and Hamre 2006). Attending to teacher dispositions has an important place in teacher education; unexamined beliefs may remain latent and later present stumbling blocks to creating inclusive classrooms (Villegas 2007). This study was based on a stance that in order for inclusive education to be effective, we need to attend to teachers' beliefs about this practice and about its role in democratic and just societies. To this end, the study aimed to gain an understanding of how teachers conceptualize inclusive education, to examine their interpretations of educational discourses and practices, and to explore the ways in which they position themselves as teachers.

Methodology

Participants

There were 30 participants in this study – 20 general education teachers and 10 special education teachers who were teaching in five different school districts in New Jersey, USA, in classrooms ranging from pre-kindergarten to Grade Five. In terms of gender, four participants were male and 26 were female. Their teaching experience ranged from four to 30 years. The author is not professionally affiliated with the schools in any manner. In order to recruit participants, flyers pertaining to the study were posted at schools. Additionally, the author obtained permission to speak with teachers at a staff meeting. The study was described as one that aims to explore teachers' understanding of learning and development among students and their perceptions of different educational programs for students with disabilities. The authors' role in the field of inquiry was explained as one that seeks to understand teachers' perspectives for the purpose of informing teacher education programs. Written information describing the study was provided to teachers. Those interested in participating contacted the author to schedule a convenient time for an interview. Participants were also recruited via word-of-mouth; that is, those who participated in the study subsequently shared information about this project with other teachers. This served as an additional recruitment method, as teachers contacted the author seeking to participate in the study.

Procedure

Interviews were scheduled with teachers who sought to participate in this study. These were typically conducted in their classrooms after school hours. The interviews were guided by open-ended questions that encouraged teachers to reflect on their beliefs about children's learning, intelligence, abilities, and on their attributions for variability in academic performance among students. The following are some examples of questions that were asked of teachers: 'What contributes to children's learning or successful schooling outcomes?', 'What, in your opinion, is intelligence?' and 'What makes someone intelligent/smart – how did they get to be that way?' Teachers were also asked to discuss their understanding of the range of learning environments for students with disabilities, and their beliefs about the benefits, drawbacks, or challenges of each. Examples of these kinds of questions include: 'In your opinion, what are the main benefits of inclusive education/self-contained

classrooms?,' 'What determines the placement of a student with a disability in a general education classroom – or, why are some students with disabilities placed in general education classrooms and others, not?' and 'Do you think inclusive education can have an impact on society?' Although the discussions were guided by open-ended questions, to a great extent, teachers' stories of personal experiences and the issues spontaneously raised by them also served as starting points for exploration. Each interview lasted between one and two hours. Interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

During data analysis the transcribed interviews were reviewed exhaustively. Initially, the full breadth of teachers' perceptions, conceptualizations, and attributions were recorded. In the next stage, patterns and commonalities in teachers' discussions were noted in a non-discriminate manner. Following this, codes were identified based upon frequency and consistency of particular perspectives or interpretations that existed across the data. This is consistent with the emergent themes approach, which is described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as a method for analyzing data in which conceptual themes emerge from the data rather than the other way around. The numerous codes that were identified were then organized under more abstract stratifications or coding categories, each category containing a cluster of codes that pertained to the broader conceptual theme. Once the codes and the conceptual categories under which the codes were organized were identified, the transcribed data were coded. All of the data analysis and coding was done by the author.

Results

The study yielded valuable insights into the multiple ways in which the teachers conceptualized inclusive education. Most teachers in this study began conversations on inclusive education by expressing support for it, articulating that inclusion has benefits for students with and without disabilities. However, further exploration revealed the existence of beliefs that presented roadblocks, and perceptions of this educational practice as unrealistic for many students with disabilities. The findings are organized and presented as three broad conceptual themes that emerged pertaining to ways in which teachers understood the nature of learning, development, disability, and inclusive education.

Inclusion as privilege

Although teachers initially articulated positive attitudes towards inclusive education, stating for example that they were 'on-board with inclusion,' further discussion revealed that many of them considered it potentially beneficial for only some students with disabilities. Their conceptualizations of inclusive education were characterized by beliefs that the placement of students with disabilities in general education classrooms is based on factors such as: type of disability, 'functioning level,' cognitive abilities or IQ scores, and students' behaviors. Among these, the absence of challenging behavior was the most frequently stated reason for the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms. Students' abilities to function independently were also commonly viewed as a criterion. Many teachers believed that in order to merit placement in general education classrooms, students with disabilities should have the ability to 'keep up' or to comprehend information

at the level presented. Although many teachers understood the concept of differentiated instruction and acknowledged it as good educational practice, they simultaneously held beliefs that differentiation could not be done for everyone, articulating that the educational needs of some students are such that they cannot be met in general education classrooms. For example, one special education teacher commented:

It depends on how cognitively challenged they are. If they are challenged, let's assume really challenged, and they're not keeping up in general ed. – I've had some kids that resource room has been great for. Others, I guess, if they're more cognitively challenged, you know, need to be in a class that might be self-contained so that the levels are closer – even if your teacher differentiates – so one isn't so far behind the other.

This view of inclusive education appeared to coexist with particular ways of thinking about the nature of children's learning, cognitive development, and academic outcomes. As such, views of human intelligence as biologically based were more often expressed by teachers who viewed inclusive education as earned membership to general education classrooms. In discussing children's developmental and schooling outcomes, although all teachers in the sample identified environmental and biological contributors, the extent to which teachers emphasized these varied. Teachers who viewed access to general education classrooms as based on student characteristics tended to focus less on the impact of sociocultural factors on learning. More often, they attributed variability in intellectual functioning and educational outcomes to 'brain wiring,' 'genes,' or 'gifts' with which students are endowed. Many teachers spontaneously raised the concept of multiple intelligences, articulating that students could be intelligent in a variety of ways. However, in explaining students' strengths in particular areas, they focused on innate propensities and were less likely to consider the impact of external factors that awaken, nurture, or enhance children's potential. With regard to the outcomes of inclusive education, teachers who emphasized biological determinants of children's development tended to attribute successful and unsuccessful inclusion experiences to students' characteristics. For instance, in discussing their beliefs about why, in their own experiences, some students have benefited from inclusive education and some not, they pointed to students' attention spans, behaviors, or abilities to function independently or semi-independently. Similarly, the possibility of teasing, bullying, or the social isolation of students with disabilities in general education classrooms was attributed to differences inherent in students with disabilities. With regard to this, placement in 'safe' environments, identified as self-contained classrooms, was considered by many as being the best way to prevent negative social outcomes for students who may be stigmatized in general education classrooms. As one special education teacher commented:

[In self-contained classrooms] they feel very much at home, and um, the advantage is it's really like a family. It's not like they're a stranger in their room. And sometimes with a special ed. kid, especially one with a big, big disability, it's kind of like they're a stranger in their class because they're not getting what everybody else is getting. In a special ed. class – they're getting it.

The teacher quoted above expresses a view that students with greater needs for support ('big disabilities') would not be comfortable in general education classrooms

because they are not functioning at the same level as their peers ('not getting it'), and for this reason self-contained settings, where the students would 'feel at home,' are preferable. This highlights a view of general education curricula as rigid; rather than considering how curricula can be modified such that all students 'get it,' many teachers held the belief that those who are unable to keep up with the pace of the general education classroom and access its curricula *as is* are best served elsewhere. Additionally, in the quote above, the solution to the issue of a student with a disability not being fully accepted in their classroom is seen as removal of that student from their natural peer-group; seeking strategies to increase acceptance among students in general education classrooms is not considered. These views, which were shared by many general and special education teachers in this study, are consistent with medical model perspectives that identify impairments as the source of problems related to disability, and fail to acknowledge the impact of sociocultural attitudes and reactions to disability as a contributor. More generally, among teachers who ascribed to conceptualizations of *inclusion as privilege*, problems inherent in institutional structures and classroom practices were left largely unexamined.

Inclusion as compromise

A second conceptual theme that emerged from this study's findings was that of inclusive education as a compromise or a 'trade-off.' Inclusive education was viewed by all teachers in the study as having many benefits for students with disabilities in the domain of social-emotional development. However, many believed that potential gains in this area were at the expense of learning academic content. Teachers articulated beliefs that *some* exposure to non-disabled students in general education classrooms was necessary for *most* students with disabilities, articulating benefits such as the availability of peer modeling, larger peer networks, and opportunities for the incidental learning of appropriate social behaviors. However, benefits such as intellectual scaffolding from peers, enhanced cognitive development, or the learning of general education curricula were less mentioned and often absent in their discussions. More commonly, teachers articulated that although inclusion may lead to social gains among students with disabilities, ultimately these were at the cost of receiving individualized education and 'truly' differentiated instruction. As such, teachers viewed self-contained settings as places where specialized education is provided, and by extension where 'real' learning occurs. For instance, in articulating the advantages of self-contained classrooms, one general education teacher said:

The best learning environment would be in the self-contained classroom. ... I think the self-contained classroom where they can work at their own pace and master skills on their level, you know, and then move onto the next skill – I think that that would be the best setting for their cognitive level.

Perceptions of the education of students with disabilities as presenting a difficult choice between social-emotional development and academic learning were linked with perceptions of self-contained classrooms and resource rooms as venues for the delivery of special education and as access to resources and professional expertise. Additionally, many general and special education teachers accepted popular notions that only special education teachers are able to effectively teach students with

disabilities, and that these ‘highly trained’ teachers are best accessed in self-contained settings. Discussing the benefits of self-contained settings, these two general education teachers expressed the following:

In smaller class settings, of course the teacher is more highly trained than I am in special ed. ... I’m assuming that they’re so trained in it, they know what they’re doing and can handle situations better.

I would have to come back to the idea of specialized services. Very specialized services. You know, skillful people are meeting the child’s needs.

Thus, for many teachers in the study, self-contained learning environments held numerous advantages for students with disabilities in the area of academic learning. In this regard, inclusive education paled in comparison and was, at best, understood as a difficult compromise.

A noteworthy finding in this study pertains to perceptions of special education teachers as having distinct characteristics. In responding to a question about whether special educators are different in any regard from general educators, many articulated beliefs that in addition to being ‘highly trained,’ special education teachers must possess certain personal qualities and dispositions deemed necessary for teaching students with disabilities. As such, they expressed agreement with popular notions of special education teachers as ‘special people’ who have patience, understanding, kindness, and empathy in excess of general education teachers. Special education teachers were also perceived as being more flexible in their teaching, more passionate about their work, and more open to teaching diverse groups of students. Some expressed agreement with the idea that ‘it takes a special kind of person’ to be a special education teacher; others articulated that special education teachers need to have ‘a little bit more’ of what is required to be a good teacher. Although these kinds of beliefs were held by many teachers in this study, some rejected them. It is worth noting that the idea that special education teachers have distinct qualities, personalities, or ‘specialness’ was more commonly challenged by general education teachers. Among the 10 special education teachers in the study, only one engaged in critiquing the clichéd notion.

Inclusion as social justice

The study’s findings pointed to a third and distinctly different conceptualization of inclusive education articulated by a small group of mostly general education teachers in the sample. Among this group, inclusive education was viewed as a practice that has far-reaching implications for students with and without disabilities, and more broadly for societies as a whole. Teachers who held these views expressed a conviction that all students, with very few exceptions, can benefit from inclusion. Of particular significance is that teachers who articulated strong support for inclusive education and a willingness to teach inclusively could also be distinguished by their views on the nature of children’s learning, cognitive development and schooling outcomes. When discussing these topics, they gave primacy to environmental influences. As pointed out in an earlier section, all teachers in the study acknowledged the contributions of both biological and environmental factors (i.e. nature and nurture) in children’s developmental and learning outcomes; however, they differed in the extent to which they focused on each. Teachers who expressed the strongest

support for inclusive education tended to conceptualize children's learning and intellectual development as situated in sociocultural contexts and inextricably linked with issues of power and privilege. De-emphasizing 'brain-wiring' and genetic endowments, they focused instead on factors such as socioeconomic conditions, accessible resources, nutrition and medical care, parenting styles, and opportunities for early learning. Rejecting notions that some children are 'smarter' than others, they were more likely to attribute variability in educational outcomes to inequities in societies and problematic assessment practices. Additionally, they placed the onus on themselves, articulating beliefs that it is a teacher's responsibility to 'reach every student in the best way.'

Similarly when discussing the schooling of students with disabilities in particular, these teachers did not focus solely on the impact of impairments, but instead considered issues of segregation and stigma as related to learning outcomes. Some acknowledged their own lack of experience or knowledge of issues involved in educating students with disabilities. Engaging in self-reflection, they contemplated the ways in which they might themselves be accomplices in the institutional structures that serve to create hierarchies within school communities and to identify some students as other. In speaking about the practice of 'included' students being frequently pulled out of the classroom for special education or support services, the following quote from a general education teacher is informative:

What I'm doing is – I'm sending a signal – a message to him or her as well as those that don't have needs that there's something inherently different about this individual. I'm reminding this young man or young lady every time they leave my room there's something different about them. And I'm reminding their peers that there's something different about them each and every time they walk out of my room.

The views of teachers who expressed strong support for inclusive education were consistent with social model perspectives on disability. These teachers made critical connections between segregated schooling for students with disabilities and the historical oppression of other marginalized groups. They framed inclusive education in the context of equitable education for *all* students, not just students with disabilities. For instance, the general education teacher quoted below articulated a view of inclusive education as a practice that disrupts fear-based prejudice and plays a vital role in broad social change:

If you're a humanist and you believe that we're responsible for the people we co-habitate with on any level, then it doesn't make sense that you should close away certain people. And I think probably the reason why we're so afraid of people with physical disabilities or visible disabilities is because we're not used to it. You know, it's like if you've never met a person of color and you meet someone of color for the first time, you know ... I mean I think it's complicated – it's probably oversimplifying to try to equate the two but I think that if you're going to talk about people's reactions to difference in general, that there's probably many parallels.

Overall, teachers who articulated strong support for inclusive education were more likely to critique educational practices and to problematize special education. They raised critical questions pertaining to traditional ways of assessing students, the validity of measures of intelligence, and inconsistencies between the kinds of knowledge possessed by some students and those that are valued in schools. They

were also less willing to accept assumptions about learning among students with disabilities, and questioned the purpose that is served by maintaining separate classrooms. The general education teacher quoted below acknowledged that he had little understanding of what takes place in self-contained classrooms but voiced skepticism about whether these are the most appropriate learning environments for the students served in them:

Is a land of milk and honey waiting beyond those doors? ... I've asked that very question, you know – who's raising the bar for them in that classroom? ... Because I always worry – if I were put into a room with someone, with – with five people who didn't speak, I think my language would suffer. ... I don't know – who's stimulating their wanting to be more than, or really aspiring to be more than they could be, other than their own inherent desire to be. Yeah, I don't know. Not having been in that room, I don't know. That would just be my concern, if I could state one for the record.

It is noteworthy that those who held the views discussed in this section were likely to be general education teachers, with the exception of one special education teacher. Challenging commonly held assumptions about the education of students with disabilities and the meaning of inclusive education, these teachers troubled the categories of 'normal' and 'disabled' and expressed discomfort with institutional practices that uphold these distinctions among people. Identifying inclusive education as an avenue for 'breaking down barriers' between all groups of people, the general education teacher quoted below engaged in disrupting dominant educational discourses:

[Inclusive education] would knock down some of the class distinctions between, you know, those that we consider normal, you know, high functioning, and those that we would consider abnormal, low functioning. So I'd like to say – that stigma, that barrier, that façade, so to speak, would be kind of broken down.

Discussion

The findings of this study shed light on the vastly different ways in which the concept of inclusive education was approached by teachers and indicate that the ways in which it was conceptualized was linked with teachers' support for this practice. For a majority of teachers in this study, interpretations of inclusive education were consistent with popular usage of the term. Few teachers veered from defining this practice as pertaining specifically to students with disabilities, and dominant conceptual elements of inclusive education as *place* were present in the thinking of most. Furthermore, among many teachers, support for inclusive education existed at a surface level. The study's finding that many teachers considered inclusive education unrealistic for students with severe disabilities, multiple disabilities, cognitive impairments, and those with labels such as autism point to perceptions of membership in general education classrooms as based on selective criteria. Consistent with existing findings (Dupoux, Wolman, and Estrada 2005; Sze 2009), many teachers in this study viewed severity of disability, type of disability classification, and students' behaviors as factors that should be considered when making placement decisions, and viewed low IQ scores as a criterion for denial of access to general education classrooms. As such, the findings highlight a paradox: many teachers articulated a view of inclusive education as good practice for *all* students, and yet

variability in their interpretations of 'all' rendered certain students inappropriate candidates for this kind of education in the opinions of the same teachers. There was general acceptance of the idea that professionals, using evaluations that are clinically and educationally sound, can effectively identify students who need to be educated separately. Remarkably, most teachers did not question the sociopolitical and constructed nature of how labels are assigned, how intelligence is measured, and how undesirable behaviors are defined in the institutional systems that use these as separation criteria. This is resonant of Brantlinger's (2004) assertion that once a 'problem' is identified in a student, the institutional practices that label, sort, and exclude are assumed to be neutral. Additionally, consistent with Slee's (2001) argument that educational policies become valid mechanisms for the exclusion of students, teachers in this study unquestioningly accepted the principle of least restrictive environment as the overarching rationale for the removal of some students from general education classes.

The perception among many teachers in this study that, in order to be placed in general education classrooms, students should be able to 'keep up' with their non-disabled peers suggests that the education of students with disabilities continues to be framed in the medical model of disability, which focuses on the need for individuals with disabilities to overcome their limitations in order to fit into mainstream society. Additionally, the notion that students need to be 'ready' for inclusion stands in contrast with full inclusion philosophy, which emphasizes that *programs*, not *students*, need to be made ready for inclusive education (Sapon-Shevin 2007). The findings shed light on a view of general education classrooms as selective venues for homogeneous groups of students. The presence of significant human variation was understood by teachers as scientifically derived justification for the denial of access to general education classrooms and curricula; the burden was placed on students to earn the right to belong. Despite operating from a deficit-based model, few teachers located deficits in institutional practices, policies, and structures. It is worth noting that, overall, special education teachers in the study were more likely than general education teachers to express support for separate systems of education, and less likely to challenge existing practices. This is consistent with other studies (for example, Blecker and Boakes 2010) in which special education teachers were found to be more likely to see the benefits of segregated education practices.

A core finding in the study pertains to teachers' conceptualizations of inclusive education as compromising specialized services and the learning of academic curricula. This expressed view of inclusive education as a compromise, one in which social development was opted over academic learning, suggests that teachers' support for segregated learning environments may be rooted in beliefs that students with disabilities require significantly different methods of education. Valle and Connor (2010, 43) discussed the existence of the educational myth that there are 'two types of children – able and disabled – who require different kinds of instruction delivered by differently trained teachers in a parallel system of public education.' Consistent with their assertions, the findings revealed that teachers' understanding of special education was entrenched in dominant educational discourses that construct and uphold the *otherness* of students with disabilities and position them in a separate category of learner. Furthermore, the perceptions of many teachers that only self-contained classroom settings offer truly individualized education, differentiated instruction, and access to specialized services reveal that that they may be

operating from conceptualizations of special education as a *place*, rather than as *services* that can be delivered in any place.

A remarkable finding in this study pertained to many teachers' expressed agreement with the notion that special education teachers can, and should be, distinguished from general education teachers in terms of their dispositions and personal characteristics. This points to the existence of another myth in education – that it takes *special* people to teach students with disabilities. In this study, not only did teachers accept the myth of two kinds of learners, but also that of two distinct categories of teachers. In addition to reifying the need for parallel systems of education, the hidden import of this popular sentiment should be unpacked: when special education teachers are positioned as possessing virtues such as patience, kindness, goodness, and so forth, in excess of general education teachers, problematic notions about the extreme difficulties inherent in their task as well as about the undesirability of the students they teach are being covertly reinforced.

The study indicates that the extent to which teachers' disrupted dominant educational discourses and problematized current practices were related to their support for inclusive education and their willingness to implement it. Additionally, these were related to their understanding of the nature of children's learning and development, their interpretations of meaning of disability, and their beliefs about the role of teachers. To summarize, the views of teachers who expressed the strongest support for inclusive education were characterized by: a de-emphasis on biological determinants of children's learning and development and an emphasis on sociocultural factors that influence outcomes; an understanding of the phenomenon of disability as embedded in sociocultural, political and historical contexts; and a conceptualization of inclusive education as an issue related to equitable education and democratic societies.

These findings have strong implications for teacher education, and suggest that if we are to prepare teachers for inclusive practices, they need to have an understanding of the constructed nature of disability and a strong grounding in child development from sociocultural perspectives. In teacher education, inclusive education needs to be framed as a practice related to social justice. Critical thinking aimed at helping teachers to make connections between inclusive education and the need to confront *all* forms of segregation should be woven throughout coursework in teacher education programs. Issues related to disability should not be confined to the realms of special education, but rather infused into discussions on democratic educational practices, diversity, multicultural education, and so on. Currently, few teacher education programs include coursework that addresses the sociocultural construction of disability, and issues of social justice are not typically brought to the forefront in special education training. General and special education students are not asked to problematize the institutionally sanctioned segregation of some students, and many graduate without ever having made connections between people with disabilities and members of other historically marginalized groups.

Traditional special education relies on paternalistic ideas of 'helping' students with disabilities. Situated in the medical model, which aims to 'fix' problems located in individual minds and bodies, special education all too often focuses its gaze on the deficits of students with disabilities; the dialogue on institutional mechanisms that perpetuate ableism remains silent. This study highlights the importance of providing teachers with the tools needed to critically examine institutional policies and practices and to redefine what needs to change. It is only when we prepare

teachers to be ‘thoughtfully critical of the society in which they live,’ by calling into question the exclusion of some members of society, that they are able to create truly democratic learning communities in which all students are valued members (Ballard 2003). However, merely engaging in a critique of institution systems may not be enough. Teachers also need to learn to identify their own roles in perpetuating the *status quo*. Slee (2001) suggests that if we are to create truly inclusive classrooms, it is essential to confront our own complicity in systematic exclusion. Few teachers in this study examined their own roles in perpetuating the segregation of students with disabilities, and the few who did voiced the strongest support of inclusive education. Overall, this study indicates that teacher education could benefit from an infusion of coursework that is firmly grounded in a sociocultural approach to learning and development, invites examination of historical and present attitudes towards people with disabilities, teaches students to recognize the discourses that perpetuate segregation, and engages them in a dialogue about their own complicity as educators, in the continued marginalization of many groups of students.

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