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To cite this article: Jessica Bacon & Beth Ferri (2013) The impact of standards-based reform: applying Brantlinger's critique of 'hierarchical ideologies', International Journal of Inclusive Education, 17:12, 1312-1325, DOI: [10.1080/13603116.2013.826290](https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2013.826290)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2013.826290>



Published online: 05 Dec 2013.



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The impact of standards-based reform: applying Brantlinger's critique of 'hierarchical ideologies'

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(Received 18 November 2012; final version received 15 July 2013)

Brantlinger's [2004b. "Ideologies Discerned, Values Determined: Getting past the Hierarchies of Special Education." In *Ideology and the Politics of (in)Exclusion*, edited by L. Ware, 11–31. New York: Peter Lang Publishing] critique of hierarchical ideologies lays bare the logics embedded in standards-based reform. Drawing on Brantlinger's insightful analysis, we trace how hierarchical ideologies impacted inclusive practice at one urban elementary school, deemed 'failing' under the No Child Left Behind Act. Drawing on the qualitative analysis of data from interviews, public forums, and documents, we chart some of the negative effects of hierarchical ideologies on inclusive practice. We illustrate, for instance, how the school instituted a variety of segregated programmes aimed at increasing test scores. We also uncover how grade-level expectations and the need for content modification were used to justify exclusion. Finally, we examine how graduation requirements negatively impacted students with disabilities.

Keywords: special education; special education needs; inclusive education

Hierarchies are not purposeless, passive rankings, but represent important interdependent relations among people of different ranks. Indeed, the role, and perhaps even *raison d'être* of dominant groups hinge on the existence of Others who can be designated as inferior and less worthy . . . For some students to pass and excel, Others must do poorly and fail. Routines of the accountability and standards movement rely on the dynamic of some teachers and schools judged as excellent models of best practice, while others are declared incompetent and failing. (Brantlinger 2006, 201)

When we look at development's ebb and flow over a lifetime, the fine distinctions in rates of human learning that were observed tend to dissipate and disappear. Oh, that we could reach that wisdom at an earlier age. (Brantlinger 2005, 136)

Standards-based reform and special education in the USA

The origins of standards-based reform (SBR) in the USA can be traced to the first systemic push for national curriculum linked to high-stakes examinations in the 1950s Cold War era. After the launch of Sputnik in the 1960s, the USA increasingly linked

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educational reform to global competition (Kreitzer, Madaus, and Haney 1989). In subsequent decades, reforms continued to evolve; however, formal legislation did not require high-stakes tests, accountability systems, and sanctions for ‘failing schools’ until the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001. Additionally, Race to the Top (US Department of Education 2009) federal grants provide hundreds of millions of dollars to states that institute a national set of common core standards, teacher and leader evaluation systems, and proscribed steps to improve low-achieving schools. Both NCLB and Race to the Top reflect a neoliberal agenda (Apple 2004) by greatly expanding charter schools.

SBR has transformed education for all students in the USA, with specific consequences for students with disabilities. After the implementation of NCLB, all but 1–2% of students with disabilities were required to participate in high-stakes examinations and be included in accountability data. Research documenting the impact on students with disabilities has been mixed. Because they are now included in assessment and accountability systems, students with disabilities have gained more access to general education curriculum (Defur 2002; Thompson and Thurlow 2003; Ysseldyke et al. 2004) and are held to higher expectations (Flowers, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Browder, and Spooner 2005; Nelson 2002; Thompson and Thurlow 2001). Less positive outcomes include increased tracking and segregation (Sandholtz, Ogawa, and Scribner 2004; Smyth 2008) and higher dropout rates (Cole 2006; Lillard and DeCicca 2001). In this paper, we draw on Brantlinger’s work to offer insights into how SBR reflects and reinforces hierarchical ideologies.

Brantlinger’s critique of SBR

Brantlinger (1997) argued that ideology preserves ‘existing social structures and power relations’ (437). While accusing pro-inclusionists of allowing ideology to guide practice, traditionalists in the field, have often denied the existence of ideology in their own work. Brantlinger (1997), however, revealed that ideology permeates all aspects of social life, although ideologies that serve as dominant groups are often uncritically viewed as neutral. Brantlinger (2004b) distinguished between two types of ideology: ‘hierarchical’ and ‘communal’. Hierarchical ideologies establish ‘social hierarchies through interpersonal competition and stratifying practices’ (20). Communal ideologies are based on ‘human dignity, commonality, equality, and reciprocity’ (20). Examples of stratifying practices, grounded in hierarchical ideologies, include ability grouping, tracking, and pullout instruction. SBR reflects hierarchical ideology, whilst inclusion is grounded in a communal ideology.

Emerging as a key element of educational policy, Brantlinger (2001, 2004a, 2004b, 2006) considered how privilege would be perpetuated by practices, such as SBR. In reasking Gramsci’s essential question, ‘Who benefits?’ Brantlinger (2006) revealed how school structures, such as SBR, served existing hierarchies. Because dominant groups ‘set, get consensus for, and enforce normative standards . . . to designate themselves as competent and Others as inadequate’, (200). Brantlinger argued that SBR policies define the subordinate Other, while reinforcing existing hierarchy.

Brantlinger (2004a) was particularly interested in how accountability, standardised curriculum, and mandatory exit exams perpetuated social class inequities in schools and diminished ideologies more supportive of inclusion. Acknowledging that states used ‘gateway tests’ tied to graduation requirements to signify a certain standard of knowledge, Brantlinger (2001) demonstrated how a disproportionate number of students with disabilities, students of colour, and poor students failed to graduate as a result. Thus,

high-stakes exams, according to Brantlinger (2001), ultimately served more privileged groups and cut off social mobility for less privileged groups.

By considering who benefits and who loses under SBR, Brantlinger (2006) illustrated that in addition to reproducing hegemony and serving the interests of dominant groups, SBR served neoliberal ends benefiting test producers, transglobal capitalists, media outlets, politicians, and members of the educated middle class. In this paper, we draw on Brantlinger's work to uncover how hierarchal ideologies undergirding SBR diminished inclusive practice and communal ideologies in one urban school context.

Method

The focal point of this research was an urban elementary school labelled 'failing' under the NCLB. Westvale, a K-5 urban elementary school in New York State (NYS), was a particularly apt example of resegregation and overrepresentation of students of colour. The approximate demographics of the school were: 95% free and reduced lunch, 40% limited English proficiency, and 20% students with disabilities. The racial makeup of the school was: 50% Hispanic or Latino, 35% Black or African-American, and 10% white. The urban school district (Springertown) had roughly 20,000 students.

Data were drawn from 19 semi-structured interviews with 22 educators, school- and district-level administrators, and state-level policy-makers. All participants had intimate knowledge of Westvale and the district or had a position in which they provided oversight to the district. Table 1 provides a description of the participants included in this study. All participant, school, and district names are pseudonyms and job titles are kept purposely vague in order to protect the confidentiality of participants.

Data were also drawn from observations of 15 public meetings, including presentations, district-level community and parent meetings, and state-level policy meetings. Public documents were also analysed for themes that connected to primary data sources. Examples of documents included national, state, and local policy statements, media documents, websites, and research briefs.

Table 1. Interview participants details.

Name	Job title	Years of work experience	Gender	Race/ethnicity
Mr Johnson	School level educator	5–10	M	White
Ms Songer	School level educator	20+	F	White
Ms Clark	School level educator	5–10	F	White
Mr Kroger	School level administrator	20+	M	White
Ms Allan	School level administrator	15–20	F	White
Ms Slater	School level administrator	20+	F	White
Mr Copper	District level administrator	30+	M	White
Mr Klosher	District level administrator	30+	M	White
Ms Garcia	District level administrator	15–20	F	Latina
Ms Hoffman	State level administrator, NYSED	30+	F	White
Ms Davern	State level administrator, NYSED	30+	F	White

Although we incorporated grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss 1990) for our data analysis, Brantlinger's concept of hierarchical knowledge was also useful in highlighting power structures embedded in the data. As we analysed our data, we tacked back and forth between themes that emerged from data sources and Brantlinger's (2004b) critical works, which helped to reveal the workings of hierarchical ideologies.

Findings

Findings from the study extend Brantlinger's criticisms by showing how SBR policies led to the resegregation of students with disabilities in one urban school. Westvale Elementary School, for instance, instituted segregated educational programmes as a direct result of SBR. Similarly, Springertown School District adopted practices in which students were increasingly tracked into remedial classes at the secondary level. As Brantlinger (2005) noted, 'the most troubling aspects of special education' (i.e. segregation, watered down curriculum, and tracking) are a part of the 'same phenomenon' and common to all 'low status arrangements' in schools (131).

From a school in good standing to persistently low achieving

During the 2008–2009 school year, Westvale was designated by the state of New York, in compliance with NCLB requirements, as a 'School in Need of Improvement'. This designation was shared with many urban school districts across the USA that had high numbers of English Language Learners (ELLs), who consistently underperformed on state exams, but were suddenly included in accountability measures. At this stage, schools receive federal funds and are required to take action to improve test scores, while families can opt to transfer students to other district schools. The following school year (2009–2010), Westvale continued to miss accountability targets and was labelled a 'School Under Registration Review (SURR)'. Before Westvale could implement the sanctions tied to holding a SURR status, the next year (2010–2011), NYS required the 'bottom five percent of Title I schools' previously identified as SURR be identified as 'Persistently Lowest Achieving' (PLA) (NYSED 2012, ¶1). Thus, in the span of just three years, Westvale was recast from a school in 'good standing' to a PLA school.

Because of PLA requirements, Westvale was required to select one of four intervention strategies authorised by the state in an effort to improve test scores and meet accountability targets. Administrators at Springertown School District chose a 'transformation model', which required that a redesign team be convened, school-level administration be replaced, and teachers be reinterviewed for their jobs (NYSED 2011) – a practice Darling-Hammond (2010) argued may exacerbate rather than diminish achievement gaps. A new instructional programme called 'Expeditionary Learning' (EL) was also implemented. The school day was extended by one hour and Response to Intervention and Positive Behaviour and Intervention Supports were instituted, also by administrative fiat. The school was allotted in excess of seven million dollars over three years to implement the school transformation plan.

Unfortunately, during this process, Westvale also 'transformed' from a school that had been moving towards a fully inclusive model, to one that reverted to a variety of segregated, tracked, and pullout classes. Ms Allan, an administrator, spearheaded Westvale's evolution towards full inclusion two years prior to the 'transformation process'. Unfortunately, because of the mandated stipulations of adopting a 'transformation

model', Ms Allan was forced to leave Westvale Elementary School, even though the district had previously rated her as a 'highly effective' administrator. During her tenure, Ms Allan successfully adopted a communal ideology (Brantlinger 2004b), which led her to fight for inclusion at Westvale, even though, as she explained, 'people thought I was crazy'.

Unfortunately, in conformance to the mandated reform at Westvale, Ms Allan's successor did not commit to building on a communal ideology. The implications for special education would be particularly impacted, though in the long run, all students would be denied the experience of inclusive community building at Westvale. When the redesign team was organised it included a parent, a NYS Department of Education employee, a Westvale teacher, and a district-level administrator. The 'transformation' plan they outlined failed to consider the model of service delivery for special education students. Ms Slater, the administrator appointed to deal with special education after the transformation was completed, explained that special education initially fell outside the redesign team's focus on 'general ed. kids getting 3's and 4's and passing [the state exam and] us getting off of the state list (PLA)'. This failure to consider special education was not attributed to oversight, but rather to the belief that special education did not figure into the 'transformation' of the school.

Because special education was not considered during the planning process, Ms Slater led the way in implementing a service delivery model, which was comprised of a combination of 'inclusive' or co-taught classrooms, resource rooms, self-contained classrooms, and a range of pullout services. Ms Slater justified these settings by arguing that students who were behind academically were not 'getting their needs met' in inclusive settings, particularly because they were not learning skills necessary for success on state examinations. Similarly, Mr Kroger, a school-level administrator, explained that because students with disabilities were not meeting NCLB accountability requirements, he hoped that increased pullout instruction would help to 'fine tune and pinpoint . . . their weaknesses'.

Ms Slater's and Mr Kroger's reasoning was embedded in hierarchical ideologies (Brantlinger 2004b), in which service delivery is aligned with grade-level norms. Moreover, the ease in which the school shifted from inclusive to traditional service delivery points to the 'danger' that Brantlinger (2004b) identified in adopting policy or practices without explicitly connecting those practices to an underlying ideology. In other words, because the ideology grounding inclusive practice at Westvale was not explicit or fully internalised at the time of its launch, segregated special education (like inclusion previously) could be seen as simply one more value-neutral option for service delivery in a school that was accustomed to cycling through a range of service delivery options mandated by the district or the state. The professionals, did not feel it necessary to consult with families assuming that, 'because of their specialized training, they know what is best for other people's children' (Brantlinger 2006, vii).

Grade-level instruction

From the outset, SBR expanded pullout instruction and homogenous ability grouping at Westvale. Moreover, the threat of sanctions reinforced hierarchical ideology (Brantlinger 2004b), where more restrictive placements were seen as necessary for those students who could not 'keep up' with grade-level norms. Many of those we interviewed stated that it was difficult to include students with disabilities because of pressures stemming from SBR. Educators at Westvale assumed that students with

disabilities, who presumably could not keep up with the fast pace of content standards, had to be pulled out of class to remediate *their* deficits and to allow regular education classrooms to move more rapidly through content. As Brantlinger (2005) noted, because ‘narrow skills-based curriculum’ and individualised pullout instruction represent the ‘*modus operandi* for special education’, their validity, efficacy, and appropriateness are taken for granted (133) and seen as ‘beyond criticism’ (126). Thus, the inclusion of the special education students into the general education curriculum was not even a consideration in the early stages of planning.

The implementation of EL (Expeditionary Learning 2012) at Westvale highlighted how hierarchical ideology (Brantlinger 2004b) influenced educators’ perceptions. Many educators, for instance, praised EL’s focus on meaningful and culturally relevant instruction. Semester-long interdisciplinary projects proved to be engaging, creative, and authentic ways to capture student learning. Teachers drew on the content standards and worked in grade-level teams to develop curriculum that related to the topic of the semester. Student work was shared in weekly school-wide assemblies. In brief, the school invested tremendous time and resources to successfully implement the EL curriculum.

Unfortunately, this initiative failed to shift the instruction for many students identified with disabilities, despite the fact that some administrators and faculty believed it would be a good fit for all students. District-level administrator, Mr Copper, for instance, suggested that EL was an approach that fit the instructional needs of students with disabilities. He clarified that the hands-on, interactive aspects of EL were particularly effective for students with disabilities. Ms Songer, a special education teacher assigned to a co-taught inclusive classroom, stated that EL was working well for students with disabilities because her ‘team has been great about differentiating . . . We’re trying to do a lot of technology with it . . . The kids are so into it’. Both Mr Copper and Ms Songer believed that the EL model held great promise for students with disabilities; unfortunately, however, they represented a minority view.

Mr Johnson taught a self-contained classroom of nine boys who were primarily Hispanic and labelled as Emotionally Disturbed. Because the class was multi-aged, his students participated in the fifth grade EL group, rather than with their grade-level peers. Mr Johnson rationalised that because his students were not on grade level, it was commonsense that they were excluded from grade-level projects. He reasoned that many of his self-contained students would find grade-level EL work ‘overwhelming’ and that it might ‘lead to a meltdown or just acting out’. Instead, he modified the content of EL so that his students would be successful. Mr Johnson perceived regular education classes as spaces that could not adequately differentiate or modify EL instruction even though the students in his class were fully included in regular education the previous year.

Brantlinger (2004b) argued that although educators (such as Mr Johnson) were benevolent in believing in the efficacy of special education, they were less inclined to consider that special education is not a neutral or ‘natural response to [supposed] flaws in affected children’ (11). In fact, the seeming benevolence of special education and special educators, according to Brantlinger, only serves to ‘silence criticisms and depoliticize’ (4) the negative impact of special education practice on children. Families and students also begin to believe that low-tracked and segregated classrooms are in their own best interest, perpetuating hierarchical ideologies. As a result, students come to ‘internalize messages about their own inferiority’ (4).

Ms Clark, a speech and language pathologist, likewise argued that EL was not appropriate for students in self-contained classrooms. She justified their exclusion, by saying that their teachers,

need to be teaching ABCs . . . [and] more of these basic skills . . . In the eight to 10 year-old self-contained classroom, she [the teacher] has one student that pushes in with the other fourth graders, but she can read and write, so it's more appropriate. [for her]

School-level administrator, Ms Slater, also suggested that students with disabilities should not be included in general education EL instruction and, instead, should get a 'double dose of reading – because reading is a skill that they will truly use in their life'. In each of these instances, the curricular expectations for students with disabilities reflect low expectations of students with disabilities and of general education teachers, who are not expected to differentiate instruction for diverse learners.

Ms Songer, who taught in an inclusive setting, was able to adopt a more communal ideology, viewing EL as beneficial for all students. In contrast, Ms Clark, Mr Johnson, and Ms Slater (who all operated in segregated settings) adopted a hierarchical ideology in suggesting that EL was an approach that was not appropriate for students in special education. Instead, they felt students in these settings needed instruction that was entirely different from what general education students needed. In fact, hierarchical thinking led to circular logic: the more students were segregated because of their perceived deficits, the more it was assumed that they were in need of remediation and the less they were perceived as benefiting from grade-level instruction.

A similar logic of basic skills and remediation strategies prompted Ms Garcia, a district-level administrator, to question whether EL was a good approach for Westvale as a whole. In her view, the entire school should be focusing on functional skills in order to rectify their status as a failing school.

You have to focus on one thing and that is good instruction . . . I don't think it's [EL] a good model for the school. I think that they need to focus on early literacy right now and . . . foundation skills if they're going to be successful.

Thus, Ms Garcia believed that Westvale students needed to spend time focusing on what they were lacking. From her perception, the entire school lacked early literacy skills and was not ready to use an approach like EL. This deficit perception was likely tied to the 'failing' label of the school and compounded by the demographics of a typical urban school in the USA. This view also signifies the ways that deficit thinking becomes a 'slippery' construct (Brantlinger 2005) – cutting across race, class, and disability status.

Brantlinger (1997, 2005) critiqued the view that students who perform below the norm will improve through intensive individualised instruction. Similarly, Gentry (2006) explained that focusing on remediating deficits 'is counterintuitive, as children learn best when they have elements of interest, challenge, choice, and enjoyment in their learning experiences' (24) – in other words, in ways that were reflected in the EL curriculum. Yet deficit-driven, skill and drill approaches continue to be seen as necessary and appropriate for poor and minority students as well as students with disabilities (Brantlinger 2005; Darling-Hammond 2010; Gentry 2006).

Modification and prioritised curriculum courses

The pressure to segregate students can increase as students get closer to graduation. By high school, schools often assume that students with disabilities cannot be included because they lack basic skills and content knowledge (that they likely did not have

access to in the first place). Issues of segregation of students are elided in such discussions of ‘needs’ and so too, in the example of Springertown which relied upon stratifying practices as students moved into high school. As Brantlinger (2004b) argued, however, ‘ranked relations [i.e. ability tracks] are based on the assumption that two groups are *fundamentally different* with an irreversible dissymmetry between them’ (20). She also noted how ‘administrators segregated by “ability” not as a result of convictions about “best practice,” but because of pressures for examination success rates’ (134). These assumptions fuelled the response to reform tracking structures across Springertown.

District-level administrator, Mr Copper, suggested that inclusion was increasingly difficult in high school, because of increased curricular demands. Yet, according to NYS policy, a student cannot ‘be removed from education in age-appropriate general education classes solely because of needed modifications in the general curriculum’ (NYSED 2010a, 58). However, because more accountability and sanctions are linked to SBR than the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA 2004), SBR often takes precedence. Thus, many schools uncritically assume that if a student’s work needs to be modified, it justifies his/her exclusion. Tracking at Springertown was characterised as a natural response to deficits within the student (Brantlinger 2004b) rather than the result of classroom practices that failed to provide access to the curriculum.

District-level administrator, Mr Kloser, lamented that teachers often questioned the ‘fairness’ of allotting students who receive modifications the same grades as other students. As Mr Kloser aptly pointed out, standardised curriculum linked to exit examinations reinforced the idea that if a student cannot meet grade-level expectations, then s/he should not be able to pass the class. In terms of inclusive practice, ‘fair isn’t always equal’ (Wormeli 2006, 1). Unfortunately, the hierarchical ideology (Brantlinger 2004b) of SBR intensifies the assumption that grades must be dispersed fairly and that course grades must accurately represent a child’s ability to perform not simply on course related material, but on state examinations.

District-level administrator, Mr Copper noted the contradiction between scores on state-level tests and grades in high school courses. He explained that a student ‘might have an 80% pass rate in algebra one . . . [and is] passing the course, but [he/she also] got a 25% pass on the Regent’s [state examination]’. When this occurs too often, the school will get labelled PLA. Mr Copper, thus, laid out the dilemma created when a student’s performance in high school courses are expected to match his or her performance on the state exit examinations. Moreover, many students who attend schools that are deemed low-achieving do not perform adequately on the state-level tests and are, thus, assumed not to benefit from regular education courses.

Although the NYSED (2010a) guidance document states that the need for a modification in curriculum is *not* a valid justification for exclusion, state-level policy-makers admit that in practice it is likely to be used as a justification. State-level employee, Ms Davern, for instance, stated:

I think most students with disabilities need to be able to master the content in the Regents exams. And I think . . . principals in schools need to be paying special attention to places where students are passing Regent’s level courses and failing Regents exams . . . Given that passing the Regent’s course is supposed to represent proficiency in the learning standards that are required within that course, we shouldn’t be seeing a big discrepancy between success in the course and success [on the state exit exam].

Thus, according to Ms Davern, if a student cannot pass a state-level exit exam, they should not be able to pass a regular education course. Ms Davern's statement uncritically assumes that state-level tests are valid measures of achievement for students with and without disabilities, which may not necessarily be the case (Ravitch 2010).

This dilemma leads schools to segregate students and emphasise teaching to the test, a ramification of SBR that Brantlinger (2004a) lamented. Students with disabilities are more likely to excel when given meaningful, engaging, universally designed curriculum and assessments (Valle and Connor 2010). Thus, it is quite possible that a student would be successful in well-designed inclusive classes, even though they may falter on a high-stakes exam. In fact, it is not uncommon for students without disabilities to score below their class average on high-stakes tests. Yet, if there is a discrepancy between a course grade and a state exam score, the exam is unquestionably positioned as more valid. However, as Brantlinger (2005) argued, 'statistically normed, objective seeming measures' reflect particular ideologies that are uncritically assumed to be 'fair and legitimate' (132). Conversely, a tenant of an inclusive ideology is that 'learning is enhanced by contact and interaction' in settings where students are expected to have diverse learning needs and learn at different rates (Brantlinger 1997, 435). Unfortunately, Springertown responded to this modification dilemma with increased tracking for high school students.

The only official guidance that NYSED offers on graduation requirements linked to modified courses is that students with disabilities are eligible to receive a Regents (or regular education) diploma when they are 'enrolled in coursework that leads to a diploma' (NYSED 2010b 'Opportunity to Earn', ¶3). There is no guidance, however, about whether a student can or cannot receive course credit if the course content is modified as per a child's Individualised Education Plan (IEP). Thus, to assume that a student cannot receive course credit because content is modified goes against the IDEIA as well as direction from NYS.

Yet, Springertown school district responded by creating a new track of self-contained courses available for students with disabilities at the high school level. According to Mr Copper, a district-level administrator, students with disabilities in these courses could receive an '80% modification' rate and still receive credit for the course. The classes were called as prioritised curriculum (PC) classes and were designed exclusively for students with disabilities. The administrator said that although it might be tempting to put general education students who fall behind in these slower paced rooms, they would be restricted to students with disabilities because, 'it has to be pure ... We only have a certain number of slots and, obviously, I want them going to my [special education] kids because we're facing ... graduation rates in the 30s'.

When developing the content for these PC courses, Mr Copper explained how groups of general and special education teachers met and 'literally black lined parts of [the] curriculum'. The fact that the PC courses are comprised of less content and are only available for students with disabilities raises many questions about how these courses influence teacher expectations of students with disabilities and whether these classes violate Least Restrictive Environment provisions of the IDEIA. As Kintz (2011) warned, 'once placed in a certain tracking ability level' students rarely move from that track (57). Informed by hierarchical ideology, Springertown administrators responded to SBR by increasing traditional special education sorting and stratifying practices (Brantlinger 1997, 2004b).

Districts and schools across the USA have responded to SBR and high-stakes exams with increasing stratification of curriculum and viewing achievement in ever more

narrow ways. Schools and districts have been forced to make choices that undermine the inclusion of students with disabilities in regular education classes. Self-contained programmes, such as the PC classroom, result in segregating many students who would otherwise have been included in regular education courses. Brantlinger (2006) explained that, all children 'benefit from . . . access to advanced curriculum and programs . . . [but] unfortunately, these conditions rarely exist for' students in under-resourced . . . schools and low-tracked classrooms (197). Low-tracked classrooms linked to exit exams illustrate Brantlinger's (2006) predictions about how SBR would perpetuate hierarchical ideologies and magnify the inequitable education for students with disabilities, particularly for those who attend under-resourced schools and districts.

Diploma options

Brantlinger (2001, 2004a, 2006) was particularly disheartened that an increasing number of states were instituting high-stakes exams as graduation requirements a – practice that has led to increased drop out rates rather than increased achievement. Brantlinger (2004a) argued that exit exams benefit dominant groups, who create the norms that others are held accountable for meeting. As a result, exit examinations are often 'one more instance of failure for students who already fail' (Brantlinger 2006, 206). NYS has recently aligned its diploma options with exit examinations. These more stringent requirements both ostracise and stigmatise students with disabilities.

NYS legislation now requires that students pass state examinations in order to graduate from high school with a regular education diploma. These new diploma requirements would mean that many students could literally get left behind (Brantlinger 2004a). Interview participants, however, explained that NYS wanted to eliminate alternative (or IEP) diploma options for students with disabilities but, at the same time, they wanted to link Regents (exit) examinations with diploma requirements. According to a state-level employee, the IEP diploma was only a certificate of attendance and was basically a 'ticket to nowhere'. Thus, in 2012, a new diploma, called the 'Skills and Achievement Commencement Credential', was approved by NYS. This new credential functions similarly to the IEP diploma, but would only be available for the 1–2% of students who qualify to take the alternate assessments under NCLB. According to district-level administrator, Mr Copper, the new credential reflects 'a CTE [career and technical education] and is based on the CDOS [Career Development and Occupational Studies] standards'. In other words, the new credential is not a diploma, but is linked to a set of non-academic standards and is only available for a small number of students with disabilities. This new credential reinforces both physical and curricular stratifications based on who is likely to pass the state-level exit examination.

Because the new credential is available to only a small portion of students with disabilities and because NYS acknowledges that some students with disabilities who do not qualify for the alternate assessment will not likely pass the Regents examination, NYS has also adopted a third diploma option, called as 'local diploma'. Several interview participants explained that NYS was concerned that many students with disabilities would fall through the cracks and earn neither a 'Skills and Achievement Commencement Credential' nor a Regents diploma; these students were described by interview participants as 'gap area' or 'grey area' kids. In order to provide a graduation option for these students, the NYS Board of Regents voted that the local diploma

requirements be altered and be made available *only* for students with disabilities (Hildebray 2012; NYSED 2013). This local diploma was previously available for *all* students.

As documented in an observation of the NYS Commissioner Advisory Panel for Special Education meeting, a member of the group who worked for an organisation that advocates for youth questioned the decision to only have the diploma available for students with disabilities. She commented that, 'in the big picture, we are still giving a diploma that is just for a student with a disability. We have a different expectation level ... because you have a disability'. A NYS representative responded that, 'The decision is, at this point ... to keep it available for students with disabilities'. Special education advocates fought to keep the local diploma an option – at least for students with disabilities. However, it is likely that as the local diploma becomes associated as a diploma only for students with disabilities, it will become stigmatised and equated with low expectations similar to the IEP diploma in previous years.

As Brantlinger (2004a) pointed out, SBR policies tend to harm those who are already disenfranchised. Thus, eliminating the local diploma option for regular education students would disproportionately harm students who are black, Latino, and ELLs. In fact, Advocates for Children of New York (2010) released a document responding to inequities that would be likely if the local diploma option was limited to students with disabilities. The group explained that a disproportionate number of black, Latino, and ELL students relied on the local diploma as a pathway to graduation. For instance, the group noted that in 2009 'only 21.7% of ELLs received a Regents diploma, whereas 43.7% ... received a local diploma'. We wonder what might have happened to the 20% of students who graduated with a local diploma, had that not been an option. Are there additional supports for them to meet the increased graduation requirements? Furthermore, many students with disabilities will not be held to high expectations, originally touted as a rationale for including them in the accountability system in the first place, because the local diploma allowed for a significantly different set of expectations. Brantlinger (2006) suggested that the relative lack of resistance against these measures is due to the fact that those most affected are 'students already on the losing end of the school evaluative and status continua and bottom rung of hierarchies' (206).

State-level employee, Ms Hoffman, further warned of the limitations faced by students with disabilities who do not obtain a regular education diploma as they exit high school:

If you have a Regents [regular education] diploma, you can go to any kind of college you want to. If you have a local diploma, especially in the last few years, it means you are a student with a disability ... so the anonymity is gone. I don't think most colleges, most four-year colleges, will take you.

Thus, the type of diploma students receive largely determines their prospects as they transition out of high school. Narrow and stringent diploma options preclude many students with and without disabilities from having the option to enter into meaningful post-school lives. Thus, students segregated into self-contained classrooms or low-tracked classes because they are unable to meet grade-level standards, will not likely be able to receive a Regents diploma. This is indeed a high-stakes exam, because it threatens to not only limit the inclusion of students in school, but also in society.

Conclusion

Brantlinger's corpus of work continues to provide an important framework for understanding contemporary educational reform. Like Brantlinger, we have found that SBR serves hegemony and benefits already dominant groups. Brantlinger's prescient work leads us to call for continued vigilance about how school reform disproportionately disadvantages students of colour, ELLs and students with disabilities.

Brantlinger's work highlights how hierarchical ideologies are deeply embedded within schools as students are sorted and tracked in ways that mirror racial, class, and disability divisions. Hierarchical ideologies are likewise evident between highly resourced suburban schools and underfunded urban and rural schools, whose students are subject to inequitable funding based on property tax, yet held to the same accountability measures (Darling-Hammond 2010). Thus, whether operating at the inter-school or intra-school level, hierarchical ideologies become further entrenched under SBR. Of particular importance to our continued commitment to inclusive practice is how SBR perpetuated what Brantlinger (2004b) called as 'hierarchical' knowledges, thereby weakening 'communal' ideologies that reflect a more inclusive orientation. We found that even as some students with disabilities were receiving increased access to regular education *curriculum* as a result of SBR, these same students were more likely to receive this instruction in segregated classrooms. Many participants reported that it was preferable for students with disabilities (particularly those who were behind in grade-level literacy and math skills) to spend more time in segregated classes so that they could pass state-level tests. It was as if inclusion never happened in Springertown as special education students were increasingly siphoned away and relegated to restrictive environments where the focus of instruction tended to be on remediation and basic skills.

Although the segregation of students with disabilities persists at the middle and high school levels, we were surprised at the extent that the school district responded to the demands of high-stakes tests by creating new self-contained tracks for students with disabilities. 'Prioritised Curriculum' classes, designed for students with disabilities, were based on a modified set of content standards. Administrators and teachers operated on the uninterrogated belief that these classes were necessary, because they considered modifying content in regular education classes unfair or untenable. Moreover, participants supported the belief that if a child could not pass the state-level exit exam, then they should not be able to do well in the class. We also found it striking that few attempts were made to keep students in regular classrooms by using the inclusive practices that Brantlinger (1997) and others have promoted as best practices. As Brantlinger feared, SBR appears to be revalidating the taken for granted hierarchical ideologies of special education traditionalists.

SBR tied to stringent diploma requirements represents a threat to the inclusion of students with disabilities in both school and society. Brantlinger (2006) warned that 'gateway' exams linked to diploma requirements would disproportionately impact students who are already disenfranchised in schools. Although students with disabilities are still able to access alternate diplomas, these credentials (because they are quickly associated with special education) do little to help secure a student's future. Furthermore, students who do not have disabilities and who do not succeed on state tests are likewise left with no viable option to graduate high school – significantly contributing to high dropout rates (Brantlinger 2001; Lillard and DeCicca 2001).

Brantlinger's work continues to inform the ways that school structures and practices shape the lives of all students. As a result of NCLB legislation and Race to the Top

funding grants, the stakes have never been higher. Education is increasingly prescriptive and schools and teachers are evaluated (either directly or indirectly) based on how well their students' do on high-stakes exams. When students are unable to develop knowledge in a linear way, as prescribed by content standards, and when they cannot demonstrate their knowledge through standardised exams, they are viewed as unworthy of being included in classrooms and in society at large. Educators, too, are embedded within the same hierarchical logic.

Brantlinger's (2006) call for 'a counter-movement to oppose stratifying measures and work to overcome hierarchical and excluding relations in school and society' (224), issued a clarion plea to the inclusion movement and to those of us who attempt to extend her work through disability studies in education. We would do well to heed her call in promoting policies and practices that support the inclusion of all students.

Notes on contributors

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