Commentary
Inquiry-Based Teacher Learning for Inclusivity: Professional Development for Action and Change

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ABSTRACT

University-school partnerships can offer teachers a space for inquiry into theory-based practice related to teaching for equity, inclusivity, and justice. The Teachers College Inclusive Classrooms Project (TCICP) invites city teachers to join an Inquiry to Action Team where they collectively interrogate students' access to full participation in schools. Teachers are enthusiastic about this work and eagerly share their wisdom and carefully document their yearlong journeys into creating greater access and participation for students. The inquiry teams function as an alternate space for educators to share their work, ponder their pedagogical beliefs, and analyze power relationships in their classrooms and schools. As participants are validated in their work in this alternate space, they are able to build agency as intellectuals and act inclusively and for social justice within their own school spaces.

Our Project

*I*nvited by the New York City Department of Education to create a "toolkit" for teachers to learn "best practices" to support the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms, we instead argued for a professional development approach anchored in teacher inquiry. We know that some classrooms are not designed to meet the needs of a very wide range of learners and since teaching inclusively is such complicated work, it is resistant to easy fixes or one-size-fits-all prescriptions. We also know teachers—having been in that role ourselves for a

combined 20 years—are committed to problem solving for their own classrooms and stimulated by opportunities to pursue such problem solving with peers.

Therefore, we (as the Teachers College Inclusive Classrooms Project) organized yearlong Inquiry to Action teams for K-12 educators from across the city. Our work with teachers—both what we invite them to do with their students and what we invite them to do with us—is rooted in a capacity orientation to humans. That is, unlike some traditions from special education and urban education that emphasize what children and youth *cannot* do, we organize our work around investigations into what students and teachers know, can do, and value. We understand that students are members of communities that have resources and knowledge and also values and dreams. Our goal is to support teachers to inventory and understand these resources and competencies. Simultaneously, we also view *teachers* from a capacity perspective, which requires that professional development be organized in ways that honor teachers' knowledge and expertise. We do not provide "teacher proof" recommendations and do not offer ready-made solutions to their local and context- and child-specific dilemmas. Rather, we design spaces to build intellectual communities in which we ponder the possibilities and practices for inclusivity and equity.

Toward a Praxis of Critical Inclusivity

Inclusive education is built on a belief in equity in education for all (Ainscow, 2005). As a stance, inclusivity not only assumes and anticipates human difference, but it also values difference and what differences can teach us (Ainscow, Howes, Farrell, & Frankham, 2003). Thus, enacting an inclusive stance requires disrupting ideas of normal and abnormal and removing barriers to education for all students that are constructed upon these notions of normalcy (Barton & Armstrong, 2008). (See Table 1 for various examples of traits considered normal and desirable in many schools.)

Table 1

Normal and Abnormal Traits

Center	Margin
NORMAL	**ABNORMAL**
general education student	special education student, English language learners, "at risk" students
heterosexual	homosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, queer
gender conforming	sissy, faggot, tranny
stable housing	homeless, in the foster system
fluent accentless English speaker	speakers of other languages
well behaved	emotionally disturbed, ADHD, problem student
able-bodied	disabled
mentally healthy	mentally ill
physically healthy	overweight, underweight
smart	slow, stupid, retarded
clean	dirty
two parent, heterosexual home	broken home, non-traditional home
average	low performing, struggling, gifted

North American educational systems have traditionally positioned particular groups as "other" in ways that diminish their humanity and deem them inferior. Among the groups often marginalized are students who are of color, disabled, working class, queer, multilingual, female, and religious minorities. Too often these groups have been blamed for their educational experiences without an analysis of the historical, institutional, and sociocultural factors that contribute to such inequity and exclusion.

A praxis of critical inclusivity invites active interrogation of how classroom and school curriculum and instructional practices may have an exclusionary impact on particular students. This interrogation of exclusion begins with a simple proposition: Human differences abound and because of socially constructed knowledge-power matrices, there are numerous ways that students, their families and communities, their funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), and their ways of knowing

are positioned vis-à-vis authorized school knowledge. Drawing on this interrogation, teaching inclusively then requires the enactment of counter-hegemonic practices that work against the exclusion of students. These practices should be enacted with the knowledge that there is no formula for success, but rather a continuous and ongoing learning process that requires work on one's self, constantly assessing one's own assumptions about difference (Allan, 2008).

Throughout much of the movement for inclusion there have been well-meaning scholars and educators paving the way for the inclusion of students with disabilities by teaching techniques to support a wide range of learners in the general education classroom. These techniques are often helpful in smoothing the path for teachers and students to learn from and with each other. However, 30 years of techniques from inclusionists have not created a sufficient shift to make most schools welcoming places to the disabled. Quite similar to techniques for students with disabilities, comes a recent best-seller for controlling young people from low-income communities of color. We refer here to Doug Lemov's (2010) *Teach Like a Champion*. As the author explains in the promotional materials posted on Amazon.com,[1] these techniques are used in

> a group of schools that serve low-income populations in urban centers in New York and New Jersey. Across our 16 schools 98% of our students scored proficient in math and just below 90% in English. This means that our schools usually outperform more privileged suburban districts.

For students marked as "at-risk," disabled, or low-income, many teaching techniques center on compliance and control, rather than learning, co-agency (Hart, Dixon, Drummond, & McIntyre, 2004), and active engagement. We have found that teachers are eager to work counter-hegemonically together to engage with us in re-designing classroom curriculum and instruction with questions of inclusion and equity at the center.

Inquiry as Stance

While there are multiple ways to support teachers as they think through the reflective, creative, and ongoing work of teaching inclusively, we consider practitioner inquiry to be conceptually aligned due to its positioning of teachers as problem-posers and problem-solvers. Consider that:

Most versions of practitioner inquiry share a sense of the practitioner as knower and agent for educational and social change. . . . Many of the variants of practitioner inquiry also foster new kinds of social relationships that assuage the isolation of teaching and other sites of practice. This is especially true in inquiry communities structured to foster deep intellectual discourse about critical issues and thus to become spaces where the uncertainties and questions intrinsic to practice can be seen (not hidden) and can function as grist for new insights and new ways to theorize practice. (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 37)

The practice of inquiry that we invite teachers to participate in is iterative, reflective work, involving taking risks—and doing so publicly; we support teachers to embrace failure as a necessary part of learning new approaches. Thus, the *content* of the inquiry, when focused on capacity and inclusivity, has the potential to work against the dominant discourses that marginalize and exclude particular students and populations, while the *process* of inquiry can position teachers as thinking, creative, intellectual problem solvers, thus working against the dominant discourse of teachers as technicians.

Inquiry to Action Groups

Derived from the rich body of research on inclusive education and the teaching experiences of the founding co-directors, TCICP has designed various inquiry to action groups over the years, including: Designing Accessible Curriculum and Peer Supports; Implementing Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy; Integrating Assistive Technology; Integrating Multimodal Projects and Approaches; Working With Communities and Families; Designing Positive Approaches to Social and Academic Behavior Support. These practices overlap and support each other as general approaches that can foster inclusivity. For instance, designing accessible curriculum requires teachers to anticipate difference when creating lesson plans and incorporate multiple points of access, and it is often accomplished through the use of a multimodal approach that asks teachers to recognize a variety of ways of learning and expressing knowledge.

In their inquiry teams, teachers receive some direct instruction regarding a particular practice. For instance, in the Designing Positive Approaches to Social and Academic Behavior Support inquiry team, teachers read Ross Greene's (2008) *Lost at School* and learn about behavior as communication, assessing lagging skills, and teaching replacement behaviors. They read Mara Sapon-Shevin's (2010) *Because We Can Change*

the World, and consider how to build supportive classroom and school communities. They review the tenets of Positive Behavior Interventions Supports (PBIS), and learn how to do functional behavioral analyses. Simultaneously, teachers collect data around a local question or dilemma from their classroom. Analyzing the data and drawing on the framework and specific tools provided in their inquiry team, educators plan for action in their classrooms or schools. Each implementation of the inclusive practice varies depending on what resources and ideas the teacher has found most valuable as well as what school-based dilemma he or she has decided to interrogate. The intent of the TCICP professional development is to provide teachers with tools and a framework to analyze school-based dilemmas they are encountering as related to enhancing inclusivity, and to support them as they develop these practices in their classroom. How these practices are enacted is up to the individual teacher and is often subjected to much sharing of ideas and resources among inquiry team members.

All participants spend a year working on an inquiry into their own classroom or teaching practices and at the end of the year are invited to present their work at citywide conference and/or to publish their inquiry work digitally through http://www.inclusiveclassrooms.org. These digital inquiries are demonstrative of the kind of work individual teachers take up in their classrooms and their commitment to social justice and inclusivity. Examples of this work include titles such as: Inquiry to Action: How I Learned to Craft Meaningful IEPs; Social and Emotional Supports in an Inclusive Classroom Community; Access Through Integrated Technology; You've Been Punk'd: Embedding Learning in High Engagement Activities; and Multimodality: Creating Access for all Kinds of Learners. Each inquiry clearly demonstrates an understanding that at the center of each teacher's dilemma is not a student or students who cannot learn, but an education that has not accommodated or supported the learning of these students. Similarly central to this work is the teachers' willingness to examine and interrogate their own teaching practices, in particular as related to those students who occupy the margins of their classrooms.

While this work is seemingly quite individualized, one of the paramount findings of our research into the inquiry teams is the importance of the community built in the inquiry space for the implementation of inclusive practices within the school space. To quote one inquiry participant:

Throughout the journey with my inquiry team members, we shared our struggles and concerns as teachers. We talked about what wasn't working in our classrooms. We contemplated WHY these things weren't working. We collaborated to create a solid explanation of what a meaningful education means to us, as educators and

to our students. And then, with an inclusive frame of mind and an inquiry stance, we independently crafted our own lesson plans to address what WAS NOT working and to fit our inquiry team's description of meaningful education. – Sofia

Professional development participants often reported moments or experiences of isolation in their school buildings resulting from their special education licensing, school perceptions of their students, or their enactment of inclusive education. The inquiry teams function as an alternate space wherein participants can explore their work as educators, the pedagogical beliefs, and the power relationships in their schools with a group of like-minded peers enduring similar experiences in their schools. And as participants are validated in their work in this alternate space, they are able to build identities as teachers and intellectuals to act inclusively and for social justice within their school spaces.

The work of teaching is thoughtful problem solving (Oyler, 2011) and in order to make deliberate and informed choices teachers require a certain amount of autonomy and self-confidence around their decision making (Farris-Berg & Dirkswager, 2013). Membership in the intellectual communities of our inquiry teams provided participants with validation and support that fostered confidence and autonomy in their classroom decision making. This membership also served as a check for participants, to ensure that they were working for inclusivity and social justice. Membership in these communities provided participants with generative conflict, collective creativity, and collaborative sharing. The intellectual community served to create a kind of collective autonomy "that seeks to liberate the individual through the power of creative collaboration and the embracing of interdependence" (Shand, 2009, p. 76). The knowledge, reflection, and creativity of the whole group informed the autonomous decision making of individual participants in their classrooms. Thus participants were able to perform as intellectuals in their school spaces, enact inclusive practices in their classrooms and act against the systems of governmentality (Foucault, 1982) that deskill them and allow them to deskill themselves.

In this era in which teachers are subjected to prescriptive curricula, constant comparisons of their effectiveness using international benchmarks and standardized exams, the pressure to conform to narrow visions of teaching and learning is acute— at least in our context in New York City. By hosting an alternative vision of teaching and learning in a space that depended on teachers' active engagement as intellectuals, we seek to play a small role in positioning teachers as intellectuals and teaching architects so they can engage in the complex work of designing inclusive classrooms.

Note

1. See answer #4 in the Amazon Exclusive: Q&A with Author Doug Lemov: http://www.amazon.com/Teach-Like-Champion-Techniques-Students/dp/0470550473

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LINK TO:

http://www.inclusiveclassrooms.org/inquiries/inquiry-action-how-i-learned-craft-meaningful-ieps

http://www.inclusiveclassrooms.org/inquiries/social-and-emotional-supports-inclusive-classroom-community

http://www.inclusiveclassrooms.org/inquiries/access-through-integrated-technology

http://www.inclusiveclassrooms.org/inquiries/you've-been-punk'd-embedding-learning-high-engagement-activities

http://www.inclusiveclassrooms.org/inquiries/multimodality-creating-access-all-kinds-learners