

Rethinking Disability and Inclusive Education: A Teacher Study Group

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Abstract: This qualitative study explored the outcomes of five teachers' engagement in a study group, the content of which was based in the radical/critical tradition of counter-narratives and social change, and which explicitly aimed to explore institutionalized ableism and the role of educators in the systematic segregation of students with disabilities in schools. The findings indicate that teachers experienced significant and meaningful shifts in their thinking about the constructed meanings of disability in society, the nature of disability oppression, and the implications of inclusive education in democratic societies.

Key Words: disability studies in education, teacher education, ableism

Introduction

In 1975, Public Law 94-142 granted children with disabilities in the US access to a public education previously denied to them, setting in motion a global debate on educational practices pertaining to this group of students and influencing policy changes in many countries (Winter & O'Raw, 2010). This landmark legislation, which today goes by the name of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), was rooted in a civil rights perspective and a vision for the integration of children with disabilities in schools and society (Hale, 2013; Odom, 2002, Ong-Dean, 2009). Despite the progressive and emancipatory spirit which originally guided these laws (Hale, 2013), today students with disabilities remain a marginalized group, their education entrenched in ideologies of *separate but equal*. In the decades following the passing of these laws, special education has emerged as an increasingly separate system of education rooted in a set of assumptions about the distinctness of its teaching practices as well as about the children it serves (Connor & Ferri, 2007).

In academic discourses there is an increasing focus on educating students with disabilities inclusively and there exists a growing body of research which points to numerous benefits of this practice (Cole, Waldron, & Majd, 2004; Downing, Spencer & Cavallaro, 2004, Fisher & Meyer, 2002, Freeman & Akin, 2000; Rea, McLaughlin, & Walther-Thomas, 2002). However, ability-based grouping is prevalent in public schools in the U.S., with large numbers of students with disabilities educated in partially or fully segregated learning environments. Currently, national statistics indicate that approximately 33% of all preschool children with disabilities and approximately 52% of all children with disabilities between ages 6 and 21 are educated predominantly (at least 80% of the school day) in general education classrooms (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). In New Jersey (the state wherein this study was conducted), only 46.6% of children receiving special education services are being educated inclusively, i.e. in a setting in which they spent 80% or more of their day alongside nondisabled peers. These numbers are even more troubling when we disaggregate them by disability classification; for instance, for students labeled as having "autism" only 23.7% are educated inclusively (spend 80% or more of their day alongside nondisabled peers); for those regarded as having "multiple" disabilities, that percentage drops to 15.1%, and for those regarded as "intellectually disabled," it drops still further to 5.2% (The Technical Assistance and Dissemination Network).

The widespread practice of ability-based segregation of students with disabilities perpetuates stigma, leads to low expectations and a watered down curriculum, and renders children with disabilities a marginalized group within schools (Gabel & Connor, 2009). From another perspective it is worth noting that even when students with disabilities are educated inclusively, they tend to be socially isolated, have few reciprocal friendships and are often at the margins of their classroom communities (Guralnick, Neville, Hammond, & Connor, 2007; Odom, 2002). Teachers may not be trained to take an active role in facilitating social interactions between children with and without disabilities (Buysse, Goldman & Skinner, 2003) and may not feel prepared to address the fears and prejudice of nondisabled children; indeed some view self-contained classrooms as “safe havens” in which children with disabilities are insulated from rejection or bullying (Lalvani, 2013). Thus despite the original emancipatory intent of IDEA to increase educational access and equity for all children, it may be fair to say that it has failed to fulfill its promise (Hale, 2013). Today, almost four decades later, the building of truly inclusive classroom communities remains an elusive goal in many schools, and special education has established itself as a parallel system of education based on the unquestioned premise of “separate but equal” for *some* children.

Institutionally Sanctioned Ableism

Problematic issues in the education of students with disabilities are situated in dominant assumptions which are, at their core, deeply ableist in nature. The term *ableism* refers to negative or prejudicial attitudes toward people with disabilities (Linton, 1998), or a societal devaluing of this group of individuals based on “beliefs that some ways of being are superior to others” (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012, p. 222). Ableist attitudes are implicit in cultural master narratives that center on notions of disability as undisputed *tragedy*, and on beliefs about people with disabilities as suffering, deserving of sympathy, or needing to be “fixed” (Linton, 1998; Shapiro, 1993). When applied in educational contexts, ableism manifests as a focus on the “normalization” of school children (Baker, 2002), i.e. efforts to remediate children with disabilities so that they may learn or behave in the same ways as nondisabled students (Hehir, 2005). In dominant educational discourses rooted in ableist assumptions about *which* children can be educated inclusively, placement in a general education classroom is understood as based on children’s abilities rather than as a fundamental right of all children to access their neighborhood schools, their natural community of peers, and the general education curricula (Slee, 2001; Valle & Conner, 2010). As such, special education remains entrenched in medical model perspectives which position disability as deficit or as limitations to overcome. Despite operating from a deficit-based model however, few teachers locate deficits in institutional structures and educational practices; rooted in notions of the *otherness* of students with disabilities, the practice of ability-based segregation is institutionally upheld and seldom problematized by teachers (Lalvani, 2013). Focusing solely on biological impairments, traditional special education locates the source of the “problems” related to disability within individual bodies, leaving structural and attitudinal barriers unexamined, and thus absolving society of any complicity in negative outcomes for individuals with disabilities (Byrom, 2004; Connor & Ferri, 2007)

In contrast, a growing body of disability studies scholarship posits that the experience of disability is not merely a natural outgrowth of impairments, but rather the “product of social and political processes” (Linton, 1998, p. 72). Drawing from a constructivist epistemological paradigm, critical disability studies (DS) petitions us to retract our collective gaze from individuals’ impairments, and to focus it instead on cultural and institutional practices which contribute to the systematic oppression of disabled people (Hahn, 1997; Linton, 1998). Drawing from this perspective, disability studies in education (DSE) scholars argue that problematic issues in the education of students with disabilities are rooted in ableism, and that inclusive education is better understood as linked to issues of democratic principles, civil rights, and social justice (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006; Ballard, 2003; Slee, 2001; Ware, 2003). This is *not* to suggest that inclusive education is about the mere physical placement of students with disabilities in general education classrooms while ignoring their impairments and learning needs; rather, within a DSE framework, inclusive education is understood as an educational practice wherein teachers take account of differences in abilities and functioning, and are responsive to the learning needs of diverse students through fundamentally altered pedagogical strategies. Indeed, as noted earlier, there is evidence that when done in this way, inclusive education is effective and associated with academic and developmental gains for students with a wide range of needs for support (Cole, Waldron, & Majd, 2004; Fisher & Meyer, 2002, Rea, McLaughlin, & Walther-Thomas, 2002).

The Silence Around the Topic of Disability in K-12 Curricula

Today, people with disabilities comprise the nation’s largest minority group and one that continues to face discrimination, oppression, and marginalization (Shapiro, 1993). Although there is a growing acknowledgement in social justice-based multicultural education of the need to directly confront issues connected to discrimination and prejudice (Nieto, 2013; Nieto & Bode, 2011) by infusing anti-bias (e.g., anti-racist, anti-sexist, etc.) curricula in K-12 schools, anti-ableist curricula are not typically included. Indeed it is remarkable that the topic of disability is often excluded in educational discourses on diversity and in multicultural curricula. In particular, there is a silence in schools around the topic of disability oppression, both in historical and contemporary contexts.

A growing body of critical scholarship which frames disability as a constructed category on par with race, class and gender (e.g. Kudlick, 2003), explicates that what unites these groups is the shared experiences of stigma, oppression, and marginalization (Gordon & Rosenblum, 2001). However, in social justice education there is little or no acknowledgement of the existence of ableism and its impact on students, schools, and society. As such, the ability-based segregation of students with disabilities in schools remains largely unexamined by educators. If the topic of disability is addressed in schools at all, it is usually done as isolated activities which are conducted during a designated “disability awareness” day/week and generally take the form of watered down and decontextualized information, presentations of “famous” people with disabilities, and disability “simulations” which aim to help children “put themselves in a disabled person’s shoes” (Lalvani & Broderick, 2013). Although such efforts may certainly be well intentioned, they have been long condemned by disability rights activists who argue that these activities perpetuate paternalistic notions about disability and reinforce feelings of fear or pity among the nondisabled (Brew-Parrish, 1997; Connor & Bejoin, 2007; Valle & Connor, 2010).

Additionally these activities are problematic because they equate disability with impairment, thus leaving the issues of *disablement*, i.e. cultural and institutional attitudes and practices which present barriers to full access and acceptance for individuals with disabilities, unexamined (Valle & Connor, 2010).

Framed within a CDT lens, the study described here sought to examine any shifts in the thinking of teachers who engaged in a teacher study group, the content of which was based in the radical/critical tradition of transformative pedagogies, counter-narratives, and social change (Friere, 1970; Giroux, 2011), and which explicitly aimed to confront cultural and institutionalized ableism and to explore the role of educators, in the marginalization of students with disabilities in schools. Consistent with Nieto and Bode's (2011) assertion that multicultural education should intentionally confront all forms of injustice, this project was based on a stance that if we are to prepare teachers to teach inclusively, they need to position disability oppression alongside other forms of injustice and to challenge ableism in addition to other forms of prejudice in educational systems, discourses, and practice (Lalvani & Broderick, 2013).

Ballard (2003) states that 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. Similarly, Slee (2001) asserts that if we are to create inclusive schools, it is important to provide teachers with the tools needed to critically examine institutional policies and practices, to identify personal complicity in systematic exclusion, and to redefine what needs to change. Grounded conceptually in these perspectives, the teacher study group discussed in this paper aimed to create a space for teachers to rethink dominant discourses and practices pertaining to the education of students with disabilities and to work toward establishing inclusive teaching practices and classroom communities.

Methodology

Participants and Recruitment

Five teachers (four general education teachers and one special education teacher) from two public elementary schools within the same school district participated in this study group facilitated by the author. The author is not employed by the schools and has no professional role within the school district; the project was initiated by the author and offered as a professional development opportunity for teachers. In order to establish the study group, the author met with the principals of the schools and discussed the aims and scope of the project. The principals subsequently invited teachers at their respective schools to participate, describing the project as an opportunity for teachers to engage in a semi-structured study group facilitated by a teacher educator. Five teachers responded to the invitation and volunteered to participate. The group met weekly during after-school hours to discuss critical issues in disability studies and inclusive education. The discussions were focused on specific topics each week, which included (but were not limited to): cultural and personal attitudes towards disability; ability-based segregation, the intersections of race, social class, and disability; disability culture; power, privilege and ableism; language and oppression; and barriers to teaching inclusively. Prior to each session,

teachers completed readings selected by the author from CDT and DSE literature (e.g. Connor & Ferri, 2007; Linton, 1998; Shapiro, 1993; Valle & Connor, 2010). The objectives of the study group were for members to: (1) Engage in critical thinking about the socioculturally situated meanings of disability, (2) Examine personal and cultural beliefs and attitudes towards individuals with disabilities and understand how these impact our work as educators, (3) Identify institutionalized discourses and practices which sanction ability-based segregation of students with disabilities in schools, (4) Problematize the omission of the topic of disability in K-12 curricula and in discourses on social justice education, and (5) Generate strategies to create inclusive classrooms and school communities.

Teachers engaged in weekly “journaling” throughout the duration of the study group. In their journals, reflecting on aspects of the readings and discussions which they found to be most compelling, they aimed to make connections to their own experiences, beliefs, and teaching practices. Through their journaling they also documented any shifts in thinking and interrogated their previously held assumptions. At the culmination of the study group each teacher generated ideas and a proposal to effect change in their own classrooms and schools.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study derive from the journal entries completed by the teachers throughout their participation in the study group. A discourse analysis of their written reflections was conducted, using qualitative research techniques (Bogdan & Biklen 2007). Teachers’ written reflections were reviewed thoroughly and all patterns and commonalities in their perceptions were initially recorded. Following this, codes were identified based upon frequency and consistency of particular perspectives or interpretations that existed across the data. This method is consistent with the Emergent Themes Approach (ETA), 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. This is consistent with the technique of identifying open and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Once the codes and organizing categories were identified, each teacher’s written reflections were coded. All of the data analysis was done by the author.

Findings

The data indicate that each teacher in the study group experienced significant and meaningful shifts in thinking with regard to the ways in which they conceptualized disability and approached issues related to the education of students with disabilities. Raising critical questions and concerns through their writing, teachers also demonstrated new understandings about educational equity and the ways in which the goals of social justice education (SJE) can inform their practices. The findings discussed here represent an analysis of the commonalities noted in teacher’s written responses, and are organized under three thematic categories of conceptual shifts which teachers believed they had experienced.

Problematizing special education practices

Questioning Ability-Based Segregation

Teachers in the group discussed their shifting interpretations of the practice of educating children with disabilities in separate learning environments and began to question dominant assumptions about its benefits. At the outset of the group, as indicated in data from journal entries completed during the first week, none of the teachers problematized ability-based segregation and all had considered it necessary for some students with disabilities, for example: those who struggle academically, are significantly delayed developmentally, or present challenging behaviors. For example, in her first journal entry one teacher wrote:

“I think the biggest challenge is when the student is significantly below grade level – they need direct instruction. Sometimes the pull-out classroom is less distracting for them.... Students who are significantly below do better in a pull-out.”

Journal reflections completed during the commencing weeks of the study group highlight teachers' dramatically altered views about this practice. For instance, they now expressed beliefs that children are sometimes placed in self-contained learning environments as a result of prejudice, an unwillingness on the part of professionals to teach students with disabilities, or a teacher's not knowing how to differentiate instruction. Their comments indicate that in discussing the removal of some children from general education classrooms, whereas in the beginning of the group, they had focused on *impairments*, locating the “problem” in individual minds and bodies, toward the end of the group, they focused on *disablement*; locating the “problem” in institutional structures and practices, and in a failure of educators to support all children in inclusive learning environments. For instance, in discussing the removal of some students from general education classrooms, the same teacher several weeks later wrote:

“I think it's the way the school handles it, and the way the teacher handles it, and how the system is handling the kids. There are so many roadblocks and people aren't even aware of the roadblocks....I think people just want to say: ‘well, it's the child's disability’ - but it's not like we've actually taught the child.”

Additionally, teachers in the group began to note discrepancies between institutional discourses on inclusion and the ways in which it is practiced, particularly as they pertain to students with severe or intellectual disabilities or those labeled with autism. For instance, two teachers commented that only “certain kinds of children with disabilities” are usually educated inclusively even within schools which are regarded as “inclusive” and that they were beginning to question why this may be the case. Whereas at the outset of the group these teachers had expressed beliefs about disability classifications or the severity of a child's disability as determining whether or not a child could be placed in a general education classroom, during the course of the study group they began to problematize disability labels, expressing new beliefs that these are sometimes used to exclude children or to deny them access to general education classrooms. For instance one teacher wrote:

“In our group this week, I questioned: Where are the kids who are more severely disabled? What types of kids do we see in inclusive classrooms? You don’t get a variety of disabilities... We must have other kids with disabilities in the district. Where do those kids go? How are we helping them? I’ve had many different kinds of disabilities in my class, but there were other kids who just weren’t there, and I wonder, who determines what’s the cut-off? It’s really interesting... I’m thinking about it differently, like, who is deciding who is being included and who is not?”

Questioning “Expert” Knowledge

As seen in the comments above, teachers began to ask critical questions about educational decision making and planning for children with disabilities. Additionally, rethinking dominant “knowledge,” some began to question the implicit ideologies which guide special education practices as well as professionals’ judgments often positioned as objective truths. For instance, one teacher wrote:

“Who has the right to say who should be in special education? Who really defines what special education is? ... People make assumptions based on some general rule. And no-one tells you why; they just say this is how it should be.”

Their reflections point to their increasing focus on the ways in which decisions about special education and inclusive education are situated in sociopolitical contexts. Whereas at the outset of the group, they had expressed beliefs that the “experts” in special education make decisions about programming and placement based on children’s levels of impairments, they later began to question “expert” knowledge and to ask critical questions about how or why so many students with disabilities end up in separate schools or classrooms. Thus, during the course of the study group teachers gained a heightened awareness of inequalities in schools and the ways in which professional judgments, cloaked in “scientific knowledge,” are inextricably linked with issues of power and control. For example, one teacher stated:

“I always trusted the experts in special education... You know, like, I’m not qualified and this is the qualified area at play. I knew something was wrong, but I had this belief that this is what the kids needed. I am just becoming aware that maybe that’s not what it is – maybe it’s just that we need to adjust.”

Redefining Disability

From Biological Reality to Sociopolitical Construct

The data indicate that the teachers in this group experienced transformations in the ways in which they understood disability; moving away from dominant conceptualizations of disability as deficits in physical or cognitive functioning, they began to understand the experience of disability as situated in sociopolitical contexts. In their journaling during the first week, teachers focused predominantly on deficits or biological limitations. For instance one teacher wrote that disability is “a condition that impacts a person’s physical, mental, social, emotional or educational abilities” and another described it as “an impairment that impacts your

daily life.” Additionally at the outset of the group, teachers understood disability to be a fixed and universal category, and in discussing factors which influence outcomes for students with disabilities, they focused largely on impairments. As such, they located disability within individual minds and bodies; in their initial writings, there was little to suggest that they took into account sociopolitical environments and systemic barriers which also influence outcomes for students with disabilities.

The data revealed that over the course of the study group, the meanings which teachers ascribed to the phenomenon of disability began to shift. Their journal entries completed toward the end of the group point to their understanding of disability as situated in the expectations and values in a given society and in culturally defined parameters of normative functioning. Additionally teachers began to understand the ways in which disability labels rely on the subjective interpretations of those in positions of power and control. For instance, one teacher questioned: “Who gets to decide what’s the norm - what’s acceptable and what’s not - who is determining that?” Their writings highlight their understanding of the fluid nature of disability labels and of the socioculturally constructed meaning of disability. This is seen, for example, in this teacher’s comments:

“What is/was an impairment or a disability might be controversial or questionable in a different time, place, or society... What role does society play? Society gives the guidelines of what is a meaningful life, and perhaps those who do not fit the guidelines are thought to be meaningless lives?”

One teacher discussed what she believed to be her transformed understanding of disability as a form of human diversity, or as an identity marker not unlike the constructed categories of gender, race or ethnicity. She also discussed her understanding of people with disabilities as members of a minority group. This following excerpt from her writing sheds light on her own awareness of the ways in which her conceptualizations of disability were shifting:

“It’s almost like the curtain has been drawn... Before, I never really thought about disability as a community of people, and I never really classified them in a cultural way in my mind.”

Shifting the Gaze: From Impairment to Ableism

Over the course of the study group, teachers became increasingly focused on examining ableist ideologies and nondisabled privilege. Their writings indicate an emerging awareness about the negative attitudes which exist in society toward people with disabilities. For instance, one teacher reflected on her heightened awareness of the ways in which people with disabilities are “being segregated, looked at differently and treated differently,” and another teacher commented that she believed people with disabilities are devalued because in society “people have a fear of disabilities.” Additionally, one teacher discussed her views about the more covert ways in which disability is negatively positioned, problematizing the assumptions of otherness implicit in the admiration which society confers on those individuals with disabilities who have “overcome” their disabilities and are therefore considered to be “heroes.” An excerpt from her journal is below:

“I’ve just become aware that people with viewing people with disabilities as inspirational/heroes or as superhuman is a form of discrimination as well. ...Putting people with disabilities on display, akin to heroes, it’s like the age-old slight of calling a black person articulate. In our praise/amazement is our bigotry.”

Similarly other teachers made connections between ableism and other forms of oppression, and compared people with disabilities to members of other historically marginalized groups. For instance, discussing her own shifts in thinking as a result of participating in the study group, one teacher wrote:

“I never before thought about people with disabilities as a segment of the population that’s been discriminated against, or as a group of people who have been advocating for change. I’m not sure what to make of it yet.”

In addition to cultural ableism, teachers also shifted their gaze to institutional practices rooted in ableist ideologies. When discussing inclusive education, they began to focus less on children’s inherent dis/abilities which they had previously believed would prevent them from participating in general education classrooms, and more on problematic institutional practices which define normalcy in narrow ways and deny children access to their civil right to belong. For instance, one teacher wrote:

“Removing kids from classes – I don’t think people see it as discriminatory practice, and I’m starting to see it as discrimination. And discrimination doesn’t always mean you’re bad or evil; it just means you have this preconceived idea and you’re drawing a line across this kid. ...There’s a bigger issue here - our communities are segregated. And we’re ignoring our self-contained rooms where it’s segregated. It’s like, separate but equal, but not quite! That’s what makes me uncomfortable... I didn’t want to make people feel bad at our last meeting, but I meant what I said. It doesn’t sound good, but we’re basically discriminating. We’re segregating.”

Whereas at the outset of the group teachers had expressed that certain disabilities and behaviors presented barriers to some children’s being educated inclusively, they now expressed beliefs that ableist attitudes and practices presented barriers for the full acceptance and achievement of children with disabilities in schools. This shift in teachers’ thinking, i.e. from a focus on impairment to a focus on disablement in the context of schooling suggest that these teachers understandings about *what needs to change*, was fundamentally transformed.

Redefining Teachers’ Role in Inclusivity

Interrogating Personal Complicity in Institutional Ableism

The data indicate that teachers in the group became increasingly more focused on examining personal complicity in negative outcomes for students with disabilities in schools. In their journals they critiqued their own previously held assumptions and personal biases, and questioned whether their own teaching practices were truly inclusive. Teachers who had

initially expressed support for ability-based segregation for some students with disabilities now began to problematize not only the institutional sanctioning of this practice, but also their own role in perpetuating it vis-à-vis their failure to question the removal or exclusion of some children from their classrooms. Additionally they raised critical questions about whether the “problem” may lie in teachers’ unwillingness to differentiate instruction or lack of training in creating accommodations and modifications for individual students; as such, they began to reflect on the ways in which their own teaching practices may be contributing to the difficulties experienced by some children. This is seen in the following excerpt from one teacher’s journal:

“When we first started, I always felt that pull- out was best for the students that were really struggling... Now, my first thought is - what have we done to support this child at school? Have we done everything? ...What are we doing to change to help make progress? ...I think the biggest shift in my thinking is - how can I adapt this curriculum to meet the child’s needs? It has pushed me as a teacher, challenged me to work with the regular teacher to make it happen so that kids can be part of the class and be successful.”

In their written reflections, two teachers in the group discussed their discomfort at exploring their own ableist assumptions; however, their discomfort did not stop them from engaging in critical self-reflection. The following excerpt from one of these teachers’ writings reveals her engagement in deep thinking about her previously held beliefs about children who present behavioral challenges. Placing the onus on herself, she discusses her altered beliefs that if she is to teach inclusively, she must examine her personal biases and responses to children with behavioral challenges:

“It’s really about examining ourselves...quite honestly, it’s uncomfortable cause then you think – wait, I obviously have some stereotypes or misconceptions about this....As a kid I remember that room full of “bad kids” - because it centered a lot on behavior. I believed it was because of some kind of negative behavior...And then when I became a teacher, again – it was this room full of “bad kids”... But the behavior’s not really an excuse for having them there - I have to pop that bubble in my head that they’re in a self-contained classroom because of their behavior.”

Positioning Self as Agent of Change

In addition to examining personal biases and attitudes with regard to students with disabilities, the teachers in this group began to view their role and responsibility as educators in very different ways; positioning themselves as agentic, they discussed the changes they were beginning to make in their own practices. As such, their writings indicate that their shifting perspectives were manifesting as “adjustments” in their expectations of students as well as in the ways in which they delivered instruction in their classrooms. For instance one teacher stated:

“My shift is just becoming aware that perhaps it’s that we need to adjust... There are adjustments I am trying to make. It’s hard. I’ve been trying to change the way I approach certain behaviors and how I teach... It’s made me think differently about my own teaching, my own perceptions on what’s acceptable and what’s not acceptable, what I

expect and don't expect in a classroom. It's kind of made me think differently about not just special education, but education as a whole."

Similarly other teachers in the group expressed their altered beliefs that in order to teach inclusively, they need to identify aspects of their own teaching which need to change and be willing to make these changes in their practices. As one teacher stated:

"You have to be willing to challenge each other and think reflectively about -is this what's best for me or is this what's best for my students? And then think about - how do we make it work?"

In their final journal reflections, teachers expressed their interest in continuing to work toward greater inclusivity at their schools. Their writings at the conclusion of the group point to their heightened commitment to teaching inclusively and to their beliefs about the importance of working with other professionals to collectively develop strategies for change. For instance, one teacher *wrote*:

"I believe our school needs to come up with strategies of how we should work together to create a curriculum to meet the needs of all students... I believe this is something that will take a lot of work, so we should be brainstorming now on how to prepare for this... I think as teachers we need to ask ourselves -"what can I do to adjust my instruction so they can access this work?" I think teachers have to start thinking. It's up to us to recognize that if we create an inclusive environment, I think this is going to make us better teachers because we're going to have to figure out how to adapt our curriculum."

To this end, the teacher quoted below discussed the need to create a "safe" space to keep the conversation on inclusive education ongoing at her school site and to have a community of support for teachers invested in inclusive teaching:

"It's important to explore that discomfort in a safe place, I don't think most people are willing to explore discomfort in a large group. You need to feel support... Having a group like this makes you feel like you're not standing alone... Knowing that I'm not alone makes me more willing to take a risk."

At the culmination of the study group each teacher generated ideas and proposals for changes they hoped to effect at their schools. These included: creating a resource guide on instructional accommodations and modifications for a variety of K-5 lessons for use by all teachers at the school; developing a workshop for teachers on the use of children's literature to teach children about disability, differences, and acceptance; developing an information session aimed at helping parents understand the benefits of inclusive education and learn strategies to support their children in inclusive learning environments; and developing a curriculum aimed at exploring identity and human differences through interactive video gaming technology and the creating of virtual "avatars." Teachers discussed their plans to fully develop and implement these projects during the next academic school year. Although at the conclusion of the study group these projects were in the formative stages and had yet to be implemented, the generating of these ideas and proposals may be taken as an indication of the specific ways in which

transformations in teachers' conceptualizations of disability and their heightened awareness of disablement can potentially lead to systematic change in practices in schools.

Discussion

The findings of this study point to the positive impact on teachers of participating in a discussion-based study group conceptually grounded in radical, constructivist paradigms and informed by critical disability studies scholarship. The teachers who participated experienced significant and meaningful shifts in their thinking about the constructed meanings of disability in society and the nature of disability oppression. Moving away from medical model based perspectives on disability as biologically defined or as limitations to overcome, they developed a conceptual understanding of disability as a sociopolitical construct and an awareness of the ways in which decisions pertaining to the education of students with disabilities are linked with issues of power and privilege. Resonant of the seminal work of Tomlinson (1982) who invited teachers to explore their own knowledge of disability and disablement, the teachers who participated in this study group developed the dispositions needed to disrupt dominant discourses on disability and to question ableist practices which lend institutional support to the marginalization of students with disabilities in schools. In exploring a range of misconceptions they had previously held about inclusive education and in interrogating their personal biases, these teachers perceived their belief systems to be transformed.

Giroux explains that critical self-reflection is an important aspect of social justice education, and that educators have an obligation not only to scrutinize public institutions but also to deeply interrogate their own role and complicity in the oppression of individuals or groups (Guilherme, 2006). These data indicate that in addition to problematizing institutional discourses and practices, the teachers in this study engaged deeply in critical self-reflection, identifying personal attitudes, beliefs, and practices which may contribute to the systematic segregation of students with disabilities at their school district. Examining what Giroux and McLaren (1986) refer to as *counter knowledge*, these teachers developed an understanding of inclusive education as a precondition for democratic societies (Bernstein, 1996) and as fundamentally linked to civil rights (Ballard, 2003; Slee, 2001).

According to Ayers (1988), critical teaching requires that teachers develop not only the dispositions but also *practices* which strive for social justice. The simultaneous nurturing of inclusive attitudes and practices among teachers is a key element in the inclusion debate. For inclusive education to be effective, transformations in thinking will not be enough; teachers also need to develop pedagogies that are responsive to the needs of each student. To this end, these data suggest that the transformations which teachers believed they had experienced in their thinking were indeed informing their practices; teachers believed that their changed perceptions were instrumental in leading them to explore inclusive teaching strategies. Additionally, they generated proposals to effect changes at their school sites with regard to greater inclusivity for all students. Although their proposed projects were in the conceptualization stages when the group ended, teachers' discussions of these projects, which they intended to implement during the upcoming school year, may be interpreted with optimism; they indicate that participation in a critical study group, grounded in a DS framework, can empower teachers to view themselves as agents of change and to seek ways to develop inclusive pedagogies.

These findings have implications for teacher education. They suggest that if we are to effectively prepare teachers for inclusive practices, they need to gain an understanding of the socioculturally constructed nature of disability and of inclusive education as a practice related to democracy, equitable societies, and social justice (Ballard, 2003, Bernstein, 1996; Slee, 2001; Ware, 2003). Consistent with Campbell's (2009) invitation to invert the traditional approach to disability and to shift our collective gaze to the "production, operation, and maintenance of ableism" (p. 4), this study is a call for teacher educators to prepare all teacher candidates to recognize and name ableist ideology at work in institutional policies and everyday school practices, and to make connections between social justice education and the need to confront *all* forms of segregation. The development of inclusive pedagogy, which should be an ultimate goal in teacher education, should be conceptually rooted in an understanding of the situated nature of disability and the nature of prejudice and oppression.

Although this study involved a small group of teachers and was therefore limited in its scope, those who participated in this project experienced significant and meaningful shifts in their thinking in a relatively brief duration of time. As such, these data support the need for critical pedagogies in teacher education and more opportunities for teachers to engage in professional development experiences that are transformative and empowering. Many scholars have argued for using a CDT lens in preparing teachers (Connor & Ferri, 2007) and for more engagement in critical dialogues in which "disability becomes entangled with other forms of oppression and revolutionary responses" (Goodley, 2013, p. 631). This study suggests that teacher education can benefit from coursework firmly grounded in a CDT framework which provides teachers with the tools to recognize and disrupt ableist discourses and practices in schools, engages them in a dialogue about their own complicity as educators in the continued marginalization of many students, and empowers them to position themselves as agents of change.

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