

Forum Research Article

Socially Just Educators Staying True to Themselves: The Role of Administrators Within or Outside of their Social Support Network

Carrie Eileen Rood, PhD
SUNY College at Cortland

Abstract: The paper will highlight the specific relationship between administrative support in either fostering socially just educators [with a specific focus on Disability Studies in Education (DSE) teaching identity] or disempowering and disenfranchising them. It will explore this phenomenon, and describe the connection between administrative support, teacher identity and resiliency.

Keywords: Teacher Support; Support Networks; Administrative Support

School leadership continues to play an integral role in teachers' lives (Billingsley, 2005; Luekens, Lyter, & Fox, 2004). Administrative support remains a crucial factor in teachers' experiences enacting and asserting their identities. Within situations where teachers feel supported, administrator support strengthens teachers' efforts and experiences in navigating systems, identity maintenance, and resiliency within the field (Jarzabkowski, 2009; Schlichte, Yssel, & Merbler, 2005). Conversely, teachers who encounter inauthentic and/or absent support from school administrators can feel increasingly isolated from their school communities, leading many to consider leaving the field (Billingsley, 2004, 2005; Schlichte et al., 2005). This phenomenon is particularly salient for teachers who choose to go against many of the commonsense notions of public schools and practice social justice teaching. Often, administrators and colleagues perceive individuals who choose to challenge these policies as unprofessional, leading to a plethora of social, emotional, and physical exclusions (Montaño & Burnstein, 2006). Feelings of seclusion from the overall school community can exacerbate individual teachers' understanding of their place in their particular school systems and in schooling more broadly. This paper will highlight how the lack of consistent and authentic administrative and institutional support in their underlying beliefs led teachers who had ideological commitments to Disability Studies in Education (DSE) and inclusion to feel increasingly isolated from their schools and from their work as teachers. The paper will highlight the specific relationship between administrative support in either fostering socially just educators (with a specific focus on DSE teaching identity) or disempowering and disenfranchising them. It will explore this phenomenon and describe the connection between administrative support, teacher identity and resiliency. I begin with literature that provides an overview of DSE, teacher identity and support theories.

Perspectives and Theoretical Framework

This study utilizes a Disability Studies in Education (DSE) framework and teacher identity theories to examine the correlation between participant's experience with administrative support, identity maintenance, and resiliency. DSE is an:

“Interdisciplinary field of scholarship that critically examines issues related to the dynamic interplays between disability and various aspects of culture and society. [It] unites critical inquiry and political advocacy...It promotes the importance of infusing analyses and interpretations of disability throughout all forms of educational research, teacher education, and graduate studies in education” (Gabel & Danforth, 2009, p. 378).

In this manner, DSE provides a foundation for social justice within special education. In particular, teacher education programs framed by a DSE perspective ask teachers to “share a commitment to education as a site from which to work toward greater equity, more pluralism, and less oppression” (Oyler, 2011, p. 4). Specifically, it seeks to engage with systems of education that perpetuate and reproduce stigma for students with disabilities (Cosier & Ashby, 2016). DSE unlearns socially legitimated notions of the perceived commonsense nature of disability and situates disability within a social constructivist viewpoint (Slee, 2011). By observing disability through a socio-constructivist framework, individuals begin to reimagine disability and attempt to deconstruct ways in which disability has become known. Key to the deconstruction is scrutinizing ableist tendencies that continue to subjugate individuals with disabilities within special education. Accordingly, DSE attempts to reconcile the interconnected ways in which individuals are oppressed, exposing the “white,” “middle class,” and “able-bodied” frames of reference (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2016; Erevelles, 2011). Thus, when teacher preparation exposes teachers to DSE they begin to unearth critically conscious understandings of who benefits from school, district, state, and federal policies within education, which may become a salient aspect of their teaching identity. At this critical juncture, DSE can provide teachers with language and tools to question taken-for-granted practices in education.

Teacher identity is tied deeply to teaching practice (Coldron & Smith, 1999). Foremost, “Teachers identities are central to their beliefs, values and practices that guide their actions within and outside of the classroom” (Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010, p. 459). Identity, therefore, provides individual teachers with a pedagogical compass. The compass is “something that teachers use to justify, explain, and make sense of themselves in relation to other people, and to the contexts in which they operate” (MacLure, 1993, p. 9). Identity thus, is “not something teachers have, but something they use in order to make sense of themselves as teachers” (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004, p. 123).

For teachers who have internalized transgressive or social justice oriented identities like DSE, their identity manifests within their daily efforts to reframe and resist dominant belief systems, while maintaining their own (Bushnell, 2003; Coldron & Smith, 1999; Parkinson, 2008). As Peters & Reid (2008) state, “For practicing teachers, opportunities will manifest themselves in the day-to-day tasks that they undertake with individual children and youth, in classrooms, in schools, and in the larger community” (p. 558). For teachers who espouse a DSE identity, this identity work may mean speaking back to and reframing deficit discourses. It may mean retaining commitments to critical discourses that honor individual students and differences, instead of aligning with performance goals attached to reform

initiatives. Since DSE offers an alternative framework to special education, individuals who commit to these types of pedagogical beliefs often butt up against current schooling contexts that do not often align with their beliefs (Broderick, Hawkins, Henze, Mirasol-Spath, Pollack-Berkovits, Clune, & Steel, 2011). Maintaining fidelity to underlying pedagogical commitments is therefore difficult. However, teachers leverage support networks, which can include administrators, to sustain their ongoing transgressive work (Lee & Shari, 2012).

Literature in teacher education notes that teachers utilize various types of network groups and professional communities within and outside of their schools to engage in dialogue, reflexive problem solving, and professional development to support their ongoing and continuing work as teachers (Lee & Shari, 2012; Montaña & Burstein, 2006). In the case of transgressive and social justice-oriented work, teacher and administrator network groups and professional communities provide an opportunity to legitimate teachers' critically conscious understandings of schooling and engage in sustained inquiry to support teachers' practicing of their critical identities (Coldron & Smith, 1999). Teacher and administrator network groups and professional communities often function to construct an area where politically aligned and like-minded educators come together to "collaborate with one another to prevent isolation, offer emotional support, and share teaching ideas around social justice themes" (Ritchie, 2012, p. 122). This study builds and expands on literature that has shown how teachers who practice social justice often leverage and rely on support as a means to maintain their transgressive or socially just identities (Lee & Shari, 2012; Montaña & Burstein, 2006; Ritchie, 2012).

Methods and Data Sources

This study was part of a larger study that explored the experiences and perspectives of public school teachers who self-identified as users of a DSE framework. Taking up and utilizing a DSE framework within schools is in itself a resistant activity; individuals who take up this identity make a clear commitment to talking back to and reframing special education and its construction of disability, in relation to both the current reform initiative and underlying mechanisms known as special education. The overarching study explored the resistant and transgressive work that participants used to enact their DSE and social justice-oriented identities. Part of this included participants' description and discussion of their experiences within schools and with administrators. For the purposes of this article, the research questions that I explored were (1) How do teachers understand their DSE identities within school cultures driven by standards and accountability pressures? and (2) What mechanisms of support do teachers describe and utilize to sustain themselves within today's public schools?

Participant Selection

As this project focused on teachers who identified with a DSE and social justice-orientation perform, participants were selected utilizing both purposeful sampling, where participants were intentionally chosen because of the specificity inherent to research questions underlying the study, and through snowball sampling, where individuals already part of the study recommended additional relevant individuals (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Flick, 2007). In order to more clearly delineate between participants, Table 1: Participant Chart is included below.

Table 1: Participant Chart

Participant	Current Position	Total Years Teaching	DSE Courses Taken	Self-identified identities	Other
Erika	Self-Contained Pre-school (Suburban)	12	PhD Disability Studies	White/ Female	
Molly	Self-Contained Elementary (Rural)	5	4	White/ Female	Graduate Assistant Center on Disability Studies
Nina	Inclusive Co-taught Elementary (Rural)	2	3	White/ Female	Graduate Assistant Center on Disability Studies
Ava	Inclusive Co-teacher & Self-Contained Secondary (Urban)	2	3	Latino/ White/ Female/ History of Anxiety/ Depression	Own k-12 experiences inclusive
Lyra	Self-Contained Elementary (Urban)	4	5	White/ Female	Brother identified with Autism
Angela	Resource Room Elementary (Suburban)	28	PhD Disability Studies	White/ Female	Inclusive experience
Norman	School Administrator Secondary (previously self-contained teacher) (Suburban)	11 3.5 months administrator	PhD Disability Studies	White/ Male	Adjunct instructor local college

Amelia	General Educator Secondary (Suburban)	16	5	White/ Female/ Physical Disability	Co-founded a disability committee and advocacy group
Anna	School Administrator Elementary (previously inclusive co- teacher) (Suburban)	7 1.5 years administrator	PhD Disability Studies	White/ Female	Adjunct instructor local college
Eric	General Educator Secondary (Suburban)	16	2 DSE focused dissertation	White/ Male/ Auditory Processing Disability and ADHD	Formed LD advocacy group during college
Yvonne	Co-teacher Elementary (Urban)	7	2 DSE focused dissertation	Bi-racial/ Black/ Female	Adjunct instructor at local college

Data Collection

In order to understand the meanings that participants conferred to their identities, I utilized repeated in-depth and semi-structured phenomenological interviews (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Like most phenomenological inquiries, interviews were semi-structured, which allowed “considerable latitude to pursue a range of topics and offer the subject a chance to shape the content of the interview” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 104). For the purposes of the study, I interviewed individuals twice. Each interview lasted between one and two hours. Interview questions included participants’ perspectives and experiences of their role as teachers, how they came to know and understand DSE, how they translated their DSE identities within their classroom, school sites, and in the community, and the ways they negotiated their identities within the increased focus on standardization and accountability.

Data Analysis

I conducted ongoing data analysis throughout the course of the study (Brantlinger, Klingner, & Richardson, 2005). Transcripts and supporting documents were uploaded onto Dedoose (Dedoose, 2015), an online cloud platform, where they were interpreted after each round of data collection and when data collection was complete. Analysis followed the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) process. IPA method provided me with a framework to analyze data inductively and across sources where I attempted to elicit the key experiential themes in the participant’s talk (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Analysis took on four interconnected aspects: (1) movement from what is unique to a participant to what is shared among the participants, (2) description of the experience which moves to an interpretation of the experience, (3) commitment to understanding the participant’s point of view, and (4)

psychological focus on personal meaning-making within a particular context (Smith et al., 2009). The coding framework followed the IPA framework. Coding categories were single words or phrases that represented overall topics and patterns (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Although this data was part of a larger study, for the purposes of this article I identified two large themes and several subthemes that represented participants' experiences with administrative support that I describe more fully below.

Findings

Administrative support was a crucial factor that impacted participants' experiences of enacting and asserting their identities. Support from leadership was a critical element to participants' emotional and professional well-being, along with their individual beliefs about longevity and retention within the profession. Participants in this study categorized experiences with school leadership in two primary ways: 1) meaningful supporters, and 2) superficial, inconsistent, and/or apathetic supporters. For participants who felt meaningfully supported by administrators, they positioned administrators as part of their social support network. Although this was a minority experience—only three out of the eleven participants reported administrators as part of their support network—in these instances, they experienced support from administrators and school leaders publically and understood it as genuine. Within these experiences, participants felt a sense of belonging. They also developed reciprocally beneficial collaborative and collegial relationships with their administrators that supported identity maintenance.

Administrators who were genuine were simultaneously open, honest, and encouraging toward participants about both the opportunities and limitations for change within their schooling contexts. In these situations, participants felt more positive about their ability to enact and work toward change aligned with DSE within their individual schooling contexts. Norman clearly stated how he had constructed the importance of ongoing administrative support in his work to promote change in his former role as a teacher:

“Yeah, sometimes it does get a little discouraging when you think you've made progress and then all of a sudden you haven't, or you've finally gotten an administrator at a school site to understand your perspective and to start to implement and the administrator leaves or is transferred to somewhere else to another district. It's like 'oh I got to do this all over again.'”

Norman reported administrative support as instrumental to facilitating meaningful school change. To him the relationships he built with administrators propelled his “perspective” forward; administrative support was imperative to his ongoing identity work. Yet a change in administration could erase the strides he had made.

Participants who experienced more superficial, inconsistent, or nonexistent support from administration were more apt to discuss administrators as barriers to their overall professional beliefs and goals. The lack of camaraderie from administration, even at the most minute level, left many participants feeling more constrained and distraught by their own

school systems and by the broader systems of schooling. Nevertheless, those who perceived their relationships with administrators as beneficial were deeply impacted and provided with more chances to enact their identities through administrators' underlying support.

Support(ed) From Leadership

Teachers who were visibly and consistently supported by their administrators expressed hope for change towards their values and beliefs, which provided a space for the cultivation and continuing development of their identities. Within these experiences, educators were also more likely to position their administrators as part of their social support network, as individuals whom they could seek out as reciprocal members of their critical communities of practice. As Anna stated:

“I really truly believe that the administrators that I work with have the students' best interest at heart. I know that they probably are not familiar and understand Disability Studies but they are very interested in finding ways to best support our students. Our Special Education Director, she's very interested in problem solving. If you come to her with a problem and you provide some approaches to make it work, she's very open to entertaining your ideas. Whether it be DSE or not...I don't know if other people think of her like that. But she's always been open to what I've had to say and she's always been willing to sit and listen to me...I feel really, really fortunate to have someone that's so open to listening. Now granted, there may come a time where she's going to say 'No, you know I don't agree with that' or 'I don't think that that's going to work, and you need to do it this way,' but I haven't run into that yet. But the best thing I could say at that point...and I feel like I'm at a point in my career where I don't mind saying in those circumstances that I have to respectfully disagree with you. I will do what you're asking me to do, however, I'm going to let you know that I don't know that this is going to work.

Luckily, I am fortunate enough to have that opportunity. I don't feel stifled by anyone. I know that some people aren't as fortunate as I am and they are much more limited in what they feel they can do and say.”

As Anna suggested, these relationships offered her—like other participants who experienced supportive relationships with administrators—opportunities to engage in active problem solving that resulted in a larger impact on their school communities. To Anna, her administrator provided the space to assert her beliefs, although Anna recognized that her experience with her administrator may be unique (“I don't know if other people think of her like that”). Nevertheless, Anna saw the relationship she cultivated with her administrator as beneficial to her continuing identity work.

Administrators who were publicly supportive also helped to position participants as resources within their buildings and districts. In such cases, participants were provided with opportunities to lead professional development and expose other individuals within their

communities to their underlying DSE and inclusive belief systems. Administrators and school leaders even looked to these teachers as trusted members of their own critical communities of practice. Administrators even sought out some participants to provide specific discussion on how to make their schools and communities more inclusive and supportive of all students. Nina recalled how such administrative support affected her:

“My first-year teaching I was doing a lot of pullout, which I didn’t really agree with. I decided to talk to my principal... I told her that ‘this [self-contained service] is not something that I support. I would do it for the first-year but then we could start talking about how we could change services and try to create a more inclusive school.’ She was really open to it. I mean she read a lot of the articles that I got in grad school from my professors. ...In our first conversation she said, ‘You know I don’t know much, but I’m willing to learn....’ I have gotten to make a lot of changes with her. The principal and I met twice a month...I got to speak freely as a first-year teacher and communicate all of my beliefs and why I feel the way I do. She learned so much last year, and now we’re trying to put it into practice. We’re not there yet... but we’re trying to take baby steps as a whole school.”

However, Nina later remarked how these conversations and professional development had been noticeably absent during the current year, following the implementation of a new assessment system that was aligned with the Common Core. As Nina recalled:

“I haven’t done any P[rofessional] D[evelopment] except one [session] at the beginning of the year... Last year we [the principal and her] met all the time to talk about inclusion, but this year we haven’t really sat down. We used to sit down every other week and talk about articles we were reading. But we haven’t had those structured conversations in a while.”

Nina noticed that the momentum and consistency of these planning meetings had slowed down, along with the progress on their whole-school inclusive initiatives. Although she did feel that they would begin to meet and plan again, much of their work halted. She attributed the dwindling collaboration with her administrator to the onslaught of demands that had begun since the school had adopted a new Common Core reading program.

At the same time, because of her sustained relationship with her principal, she continued to feel comfortable approaching her with issues and possibilities. Collegial relationships, like the one between Nina and her administrator, were an important factor in her identity maintenance." Positive and meaningful relationships with school administration continue to play an even more powerful role in the facilitation of inclusive schools as shared partners (Hehir & Katzman, 2012; Theoharis & Scanlon, 2015). As school leadership acts to facilitate the schools’ alignment between individual responsibility, collective expectations, and internal accountability in order to contribute to their success with inclusion (Hehir & Katzman, 2012; Theoharis, 2009). Nina’s dynamic, mutually supportive, and ongoing relationship with her administrator provided her with an opportunity to put her beliefs into practice and, therefore, the ability to stay true to her DSE

identity.

Similarly, Norman spoke of institutional opportunities he was provided because of the support and relationship he had with his administrators. Since his administrators trusted in his professional beliefs and values, he was afforded the space to enact practices that supported the inclusion of his students. He described what happened when he approached administration about the need for his students to be included within the school community:

“I went to the administrator and told him that we were going to include our students. I stated which specific classes I wanted them in and he said, ‘okay.’ So, we did it. I didn’t really get a ton of push back on that. I have the law behind me [and], if need be, I was willing to play that card. But when I told him the benefits of inclusion, for both general education and special education students, he just said ‘Okay. Let’s do this.’”

In Norman’s case, his reported experiences with school leadership afforded him the means to openly and sincerely express his professional beliefs, something not made available to all participants. The exchange with his administration even resulted in more of his students being included within general education. It is important to note that there was a noticeable difference in the manner in which Norman spoke about notions of administrative support. Norman’s positioning and identity as a white and significantly older male with many years of experience may have led to less opposition when asserting aspects of his DSE identity. Norman’s administration regarded him as positively asserting himself and his beliefs. Participants’ ongoing identity work was bolstered when administrators positioned themselves as a source of support. These instances also helped secure and preserve participants’ personal and ongoing beliefs in the possibility of school-level change.

(Un)support(ed) by Leadership

On the contrary, individuals in the study who perceived inconsistent, inauthentic or absent ongoing and public support reported feeling that their continuing work towards their DSE commitments was neither validated nor appreciated. I purposefully utilize the word “public” to describe administrative support because in some instances administrators privately stated to participants that they wanted more inclusive service delivery within their buildings and districts (one was even hired to facilitate this initiative), but did not provide this support publically. When administrators were in situations such as official, team, grade level, and/or school meetings that required them to demonstrate allegiance to inclusion and/or transforming their current school system with multiple school stakeholders, therefore publicly supporting the individual or initiative, they did not.

For example, Ava had been hired to facilitate inclusive service delivery. She was frustrated by the inauthentic support her administrator offered toward more inclusive service. His public support remained noticeably absent and was sometimes in direct contradiction to sentiments communicated to her when they spoke in private. She described,

[Ava]: “...Little things that kept happening... kept building and building. I realized I

would never get support from the principal. Only behind closed doors would he say you're doing a great job, you're absolutely right... you're on the right track. But then when the opportunity would come to actually back me up and he would chicken out and be quiet."

In these instances, participants deemed support from administration as "paying lip service" or, in other words, as insincere. Ava was hired to move the school toward more inclusive models, and took the job because it aligned with her commitments and beliefs about inclusion. However, her administrator provided little to no public support for these initiatives, which led her to pursue a position in another district. Participants' experiences like Ava's intensified and became aggravated when they felt that they received little to no support, even if only privately, from administration.

Some participants were deemed by administrators to not have "earned their stripes" or were characterized as simply being unrealistic about schooling, implying that they didn't comprehend what it meant to work and be in system. In these instances, educators' concerns were not addressed which further isolated and demoralized them from the school community. Three participants—Erika, Angela, and Anna—perceived their transfers to other schools within the same districts by administrators (as happened to Erika at multiple points in her career) as a repercussion for pushing for more inclusive services. When asked about the particular phenomenon of being moved or transferred after butting heads or not complying with an administrator around inclusion and/or disability Erika recalled, "Oh this has happened tons of times... I've moved nine times in twelve years... And it's always been because of an administrator." From Erika's perspective, the only reason administrators transferred her to another building was because of her identity work. Others in similar situations were unaccompanied and unsupported by administration in their vision for inclusion, indicating the consequences of an absence of shared understanding or legitimation of their belief systems.

Participants who felt unsupported by administration became increasingly disconcerted and hopeless about their ability to make change within the system(s) of schooling. They described experiencing a professional dismissal of their overarching ideas, beliefs, and values. To them, others positioned their identities as insignificant and/or as not contributing to overall systems of schooling. Molly described her administrator's lack of responsiveness or authentic acknowledgement of her belief systems by comparing her current non-relationship and non-supportive administration in her efforts to include her students to her past positive experiences with administrators:

"I could sum up the difference between where I was before and where I am now. I would say there's a definite difference in leadership... In my third-year I've had three different special ed. administrators in three years. My first-year there, I was bringing in our professional learning communities; I asked, 'how can we could get our kids out more? You know they were doing focused reading in my room, so they could do that in general education.' And my first administrator just couldn't understand why that would be important. He just said, 'well, they're going to be working on it here or out

there, what does it matter where they're working on that?'

My administrator last year she's actually the migrant coordinator of our district, so I think she got it a little bit more, but she kind of got thrown into the special ed. director's position and didn't really know she was going to be...she didn't really have a ton of background and she didn't really get it. She did work hard to get us some materials and curriculum and things. But it was just the beginning and she was replaced or moved or something.

...My new administrator this year, I went to him about a month after school started and said, 'I've been having a lot of frustration. I think that my frustrations are coming from the fact that I don't feel like what I'm doing is true to what I feel like these kids should or could be doing. I am not sure how to get them out in the classroom more. I don't know how to make that happen, and I don't know how to bridge that gap.' He was very understanding and he listened well, but again, he doesn't have any background in special education. He said, 'you know as much as we can, we get them out there... You know they participate in lunch, recess, specials, and maybe if I can get them up there for science lessons sometimes. Other than that, they're your kids, you take care of them. You're a classroom teacher, you're not a support service.' It's a different mindset, I think special education should be a support rather than a place."

Molly's experience with her last three administrators demonstrates a lack of consistency not only in the turnover of administration but also in their knowledge. Foremost, she had three different administrators within three years. Further, all of her administrators lacked knowledge about special education and inclusion. Her first administrator could not conceptualize why having her students work on the curriculum within the general education classroom with general education peers could be of any importance. Her second administrator still lacked special education knowledge, but was more helpful and had begun to support Molly's efforts in some way. However, this administrator was moved after only one year. Finally, her current administrator immediately struck down and delegitimized her concerns. He then positioned Molly as misunderstanding her role as a special education teacher, which in turn limited opportunities for her to create change towards inclusion, a critical aspect of her identity.

Like many other participants, Molly perceived the role of administration as vital to her continuing identity work. However, administration at her current school and district garnered no support. Within her current school, she felt as though her professional goals and values were being pushed aside. Without the space to enact ideological commitments that Molly espoused, she began to question her longevity within her school:

"On a personal level ... I just don't know how much longer I can do this job especially in the school that I'm in. If I had stayed in the school that I was part of before (an inclusive school), I could have probably done it for a long time but where I'm at now I just know I'm not doing what I'm supposed to be doing... you try, and you get a little ways but then you take three steps back..."

Similarly, Angela began to feel defeated in her ability to assert her beliefs. After presenting a plan to school and district administration to move the school towards inclusive services, she was transferred to another school within the district. She began to consider leaving the profession of teaching:

“I’ll be honest with you. I always used to say that I’d never quit teaching... But I was so devastated when we were all set to go to this ... I mean our school was going to be an inclusion school at my district and when that got shot down. I came home and I told my husband I think I’m getting old enough, I don’t think I have the fight left in me anymore...”

Molly and Angela’s dedication to their underlying ideology and the lack of vision towards inclusion at their respective schools made them question their place within it. When faced with little support and opportunities from administrators to enact their identities in meaningful ways participants began to lose a sense of themselves and their longevity within the field. Notions of public support were further exacerbated by many of their administrators’ responses to and public discussion of the standards and accountability-based reform as well as other initiatives.

Administrators Responses to and Support of Reform Movements

Perceptions of administrative support around accountability and standardization were significant to many participants’ feelings of either isolation or belonging within schools. For participants, administrators’ public responses to reform initiatives weighed heavily on participants’ conceptions of mutuality and collegiality. Every participant mentioned how their administration’s response to and/or acknowledgement of reform initiatives impacted their sense of belonging within their respective schools and districts. Administrators who acknowledged the challenges of reform on teachers, students, and the school culture felt a sense of kinship and community. However, participants who felt unsupported became increasingly frustrated by their administration’s disconnection from and blatant ignoring of the stressors and unrealistic demands associated with reform.

Amelia mentioned how she grew unsettled by her administration’s public displays of allegiance to accountability and standards-based reform movements:

[Amelia]: “The bigger piece is that there feels like there is a lack of solutions. It feels like nobody knows what to do ... I sometimes think I would feel differently if the administration was actively outspoken and supportive of its teachers. But they aren’t.”

[Author]: “They aren’t recognizing the issues?”

[Amelia]:” No, no. I do think there are certain places where this misery is being handled better because there is a structure in place, and there is more camaraderie, trust in the building, and administration itself. But that doesn’t happen in my building. [If they would] just be transparent about it and try to openly talk about our values and what we think makes a great education, while still checking those boxes. Really

talking about how we can support each other in this insane time. If there was any kind of that going on I think it would feel quite different.”

Amelia believed that her administrator did not demonstrate any shred of solidarity with educators’ experiences within the heightened and sometimes unattainable demands of reform. Instead, the administrator fed into the legitimacy of reform by “checking those boxes,” Amelia felt marginalized by the systematic limitations and expectations that had been placed on her in her role as a teacher. She felt that even just recognition of those feelings as valid might have helped maintain her.

On the other hand, individuals whose administrators openly and honestly discussed these demands as critical members of their school community felt increasingly supported by their administrators as colleagues who recognized of the pressures that schools and teachers faced. Nina recalled a conversation she had with her principal that exemplified this:

“The other day I was talking to my principal and we were joking, I said, ‘I want to go to work at Starbucks. I can’t even stress how much stress I’m under right now.’ She said, ‘I know,’ she said ‘what can we do?’ I said, ‘I don’t know.’ She said, ‘Oh, let’s just open our own school!’ and then we started talking about all the supports we’d have for kids in our imaginary school. She said, ‘what if these kids had a behavior problem, then we just bring them all together and we’d just talk about things. We wouldn’t be constrained by the system, having to teach the content a certain amount of minutes, and all these things Common Core. I mean they’re still going to learn and be taught but discussed how it would be different.’ It was just kind of fun and it was nice to know that other people, even her, feel like that.”

Nina’s administrators’ open and public expression about the impact that the demands and stressors of accountability and standardization **had** on their daily work significantly impacted her sense of collegiality and provided her with vital opportunities for camaraderie. Both stakeholders felt constrained by the demands. Even though the administrator would most likely not go through with these ambitions, developing a shared sense of place and positionality within the current demands of schooling helped support Nina’s sense of self. Both could commiserate about their frustrations with policies and practices that were contradictory to their underlying belief systems. By simply telling “her truth,” Nina’s administrator bolstered Nina’s own perceptions of belonging within larger systems. Nina was not alone or isolated by her feelings of bewilderment with reform efforts and practices.

Belonging (or not) within the larger school community became a considerable aspect of participants’ experiences and mediated the perceived validity of their identities within their respective schools. To participants, owning a DSE identity as a public-school teacher became increasingly more difficult, especially for those who felt unsupported. Leadership played a role in how participants traversed their individual schooling contexts. Although, when present, administrative support played an integral role in their work, the saliency of participants’ DSE identities were consistently challenged and made more complicated. The internal struggle to remain true to themselves in systems that were not supportive of their underlying values and

beliefs led many to reconsider the viability of their own tenure as public-school teachers. These experiences left many doubting and reconsidering their capacity to make any real or sustained change. Essentially, they expressed losing hope of maintaining fidelity to their identities within their everyday work.

Discussion & Final Thoughts

Participants' conceptions of the level of support demonstrated by administrators played a key role in their perceived ability to act as agents of change and retain commitments to DSE as public-school teachers. The support **that was** afforded **to** them by school leadership and administration was vital to their individual constructions of mutuality within their specific school and district contexts. Participants positioned authentic, open, and collegial school leadership as significantly affecting their overall satisfaction and longevity within the field. Too often however, participants felt at risk and isolated by the lack of cohesion between administrators' understanding and their own visions for their students and the school. Impressions of being supported or not (including the level, reliance, and authenticity of support) mediated participants' feelings of belonging and/or alienation in systems of public and special education. Support had a considerable influence on the perceived efficacy of their professional identities as teachers in public schools. Although it was not a straight or perfect cadence, their perceptions of support led the majority of participants to question their longevity and retention within the system as critically conscious, socially just educators.

Taking up alternative conceptualizations of schooling is difficult and arduous work (Bushnell, 2003; Parkison, 2008). In the case of DSE identity work, many of the key ideological beliefs are in direct opposition to the overarching discourses of special education within public schools. Special education relies on the dominant medical model of disability. Further, in the midst of standards and accountability-based reform, it has become difficult for schools and educators to envision student difference as an asset that contributes to the overall value of the school (Ravich, 2013; Sapon-Shevin & Schneidewind, 2012). Inclusion is not always endorsed or embraced, and even when inclusion is, it may not be understood and/or practiced with fidelity that aligns to DSE.

Participants had a framework limited by and reflected in their individual schooling contexts, often using language that positioned efforts towards inclusion as synonymous with enacting a DSE identity. When DSE is framed as the single issue of inclusion or exclusion, we fail to reconsider the larger systems of marginalization and suppression (Broderick et al., 2011). Nevertheless, participants were operating in schools where fostering inclusion was the resistance and identity work that was available to them. Teachers who resist overarching discourses can feel increasingly isolated and alienated in their work (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006). Without ongoing opportunities to engage in reflexive dialogue and to connect with like-minded individuals, they can begin to lose hope in their ability to do what they believe as teachers. Thus, teachers who take up these stances need more opportunities and access to both formal and informal networks of support in order to reinvigorate, inspire, and collaborate with one another (Ritchie, 2012).

The majority of participants' lack of administrative support or understanding towards inclusion mirrors one of Hehir and Katzman's (2012) overarching beliefs about building effective inclusive schools: when the responsibility to educate students with disabilities lies solely with special education teachers, meaningful opportunities to alter and transform schools are not available or viable. The dismissal of participants' beliefs may be attributed to the lack of consistent training and education that administrators have around disability and special education (Pazey & Cole, 2013). As research suggests, even administrators who are working toward social justice often do not place the needs or inclusion of students with disabilities to be included as a central issue of justice (Brown, 2004; Marshall, 2004; Pazey & Cole, 2013). Thus, school administrators must be educated in social justice and inclusive frameworks in order to better understand special education and disability as perpetuating marginalization. This might lead to more salient opportunities for collegiality and collaboration among administrators and teachers that support schools and districts working toward school change and social justice.

This research, like many studies informed by DSE, acknowledges the intersectional nature of identity. Although beliefs and commitments tied to DSE was just one aspect of the complex identities that participants took up, there could be evidence that supports the role that gender had on mediating participants' experiences with administrators. Some data might suggest that school leadership did not substantiate or legitimize female participants who attempted to practice and further align their schools and districts towards their underlying belief systems and DSE stance. In contrast, Norman—the only significantly older white male within the study—experienced little to no push back in his attempts to move the school towards his belief systems. However, given the data and methods I used, at this moment I am only able to suggest this. At the same time, the other identities (socio-economic status, age, disability, race, etc.) that participants occupied no doubt mediated their relationships with administrators and the power that was afforded or not.

“Strong caring leadership” that is open and well organized continues to be a major source of support for teachers in their professional lives (Howard & Johnson, 2004, p. 412). As stated repeatedly in the scholarly literature, school leadership plays an integral role in teacher's emotional and professional well-being as well as in their daily work and job satisfaction (Billeysley, 2004, 2005; Lueken et al., 2004; Wong, 2004). This finding further corroborates and expands on the role that administrators play in either fostering critically conscious and socially just educators or disempowering and disenfranchising them (Hehir & Katzman, 2012; Theoharis & Scanlon, 2015). Within situations where my participants felt authentically supported by school leadership, they placed their administrators as part of and central to their social support network. Participants who were afforded this type of relationship described feeling overwhelmingly supported and able to envision school-level and district-level changes that would support their overall belief systems. In these instances, participants believed that school leadership trusted and were responsive to their underlying belief systems. Conversely, participants who felt that the support from school leadership was either inauthentic or absent also felt increasingly isolated from their school communities.

Participants who lacked open and authentic support were significantly impacted by the lack of camaraderie and honesty that school leadership shared with them and the school community. Within these situations, participants described feeling an ever-increasing and incessant loss of any hope for social justice and DSE within their schools and districts. Under these assumptions, participants began to feel even less like their identities had a place in today's public-school contexts. Administrators remain crucial to teachers' experiences feeling supported and in asserting their underlying commitments and beliefs.

Carrie E. Rood, PhD is an Assistant Professor in the Foundations and Social Advocacy department at SUNY College at Cortland. Her research interests include socially just and disability studies teacher education, teacher identity, and teacher support and maintenance.

References

- Achinstein, B., & Ogawa, R. (2006). (In) fidelity: What the resistance of new teachers reveals about professional principles and prescriptive educational policies. *Harvard Educational Review, 76*(1), 30–63.
- Annamma, S. A., Connor, D. J., & Ferri, B.A. (2016). *DisCrit: Disability studies and critical race theory in education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Beijaard, D., Meijer, P. C., & Verloop, N. (2004). Reconsidering research on teachers' professional identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 20*(2), 107–128.
- Billingsley, B. (2004). Promoting teacher quality and retention in special education. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 37*(5), 370–376.
- Billingsley, B. S. (2005). *Cultivating and keeping committed special education teachers: What principals and district leaders can do*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. K. (2007). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods* (Vol. 5). Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Brantlinger, E., Klingner, J., & Richardson, V. (2005). Importance of experimental as well as empirical qualitative studies in special education. *Mental Retardation, 43*(2), 92–119.
- Broderick, A. A., Hawkins, G., Henze, S., Mirasol-Spath, C., Pollack-Berkovits, R., Clune, H. P., & Steel, C. (2011). Teacher counternarratives: Transgressing and 'restorying' disability in education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 16*(8), 825–842.
- Brown, D. F. (2004). Urban teachers' professed classroom management strategies reflections of culturally responsive teaching. *Urban Education, 39*(3), 266–289.
- Bushnell, M. (2003). Teachers in the schoolhouse panopticon complicity and resistance. *Education and Urban Society, 35*(3), 251–272.
- Coldron, J., & Smith, R. (1999). Active location in teachers' construction of their professional

- identities. *Journal of curriculum studies*, 31(6), 711–726.
- Cosier, M., & Ashby, C. (2016). *Enacting change from within: Disability studies meets teaching and teacher education*. New York, NY, Peter Lang.
- Dedoose Version 6.1.18, web application for managing, analyzing, and presenting qualitative and mixed method research data (2015). Los Angeles, CA: SocioCultural Research Consultants, LLC (www.dedoose.com).
- Erevelles, N. (2011). *Difference and disability in global contexts: Enabling a transformative body politic*. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Flick, U. (2007). *Designing qualitative research*. London, UK: Sage Publications.
- Gabel, S. L., & Danforth, S. (2009). Theorizing Disability: Implications and Applications in Social Justice in Education. In W. Ayers, T. Quinn, & D. Stovall (Eds.), *Handbook of Social Justice in Education* (pp. 377–399). New York and London: Routledge.
- Hehir, T., & Katzman, L. I. (2012). *Effective inclusive schools: Designing successful schoolwide programs*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.
- Howard, S., & Johnson, B. (2004). Resilient teachers: Resisting stress and burnout. *Social Psychology of Education*, 7(4), 399–420.
- Jarzabkowski, L. M. (2009). The social dimensions of teacher collegiality. *Journal of Educational Enquiry*, 3(2), 1–20.
- Lee, D. H., & Shaari, I. (2012). Professional identity or best practices? An exploration of the synergies between professional learning communities and communities of practices. *Creative Education*, 3(4), 457–460.
- Luekens, M. T., Lyter, D. M., & Fox, E. E. (2004). Teacher attrition and mobility: Results from the teacher follow-up survey, 2000-Tabs. NCES 2004-301. *US Department of Education*.
- MacLure, M. (1993). Arguing for yourself: Identity as an organizing principle in teachers' jobs and lives. *British Educational Research Journal*, 19(4), 311–322.
- Marshall, C. (2004). Social justice challenges to educational administration: Introduction to a special issue. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 40(1), 3–13.
- Montaño, T., & Burstein, J. (2006). Maestras, mujeres y mas: Creating teacher networks for resistance and voice. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 5(3), 169–188.
- Oyler, C. (2011). Teacher preparation for inclusive and critical (special) education. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 34(3), 201–218.
- Parkinson, P. (2008). Space for performing teacher identity: through the lens of Kafka and

- Hegel. *Teachers and teaching, theory and practice*, 14(1), 51–60.
- Pazey, B. L., & Cole, H. A. (2013). The role of special education training in the development of socially just leaders building an equity consciousness in educational leadership programs. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 49(2), 243–271.
- Peters, S., & Reid, D. K. (2009). Resistance and discursive practice: Promoting advocacy in teacher undergraduate and graduate programmes. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 25(4), 551–558.
- Ravich, D. (2013). *Reign of error: The hoax of privatization movement and the danger to America's public schools*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Ritchie, S. (2012). Incubating and sustaining how teacher networks enable and support social justice education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 63(2), 120–131.
- Sapon-Shevin, M., & Schniedewind, N. (2012). *Educational courage: Resisting the ambush of public education*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Schlichte, J., Yssel, N., & Merbler, J. (2005). Pathways to burnout: case studies in teacher isolation and alienation. *Preventing School Failure*, 50(1), 35–40.
- Slee, R. (2011). *The irregular school: Exclusion, schooling, and inclusive education*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Smith, J., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method, and research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Sutherland, L., Howard, S., & Markauskaite, L. (2010). Professional identity creation: Examining the development of beginning preservice teachers' understanding of their work as teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 26(3), 455–465.
- Theoharis, G. (2009). *The school leaders our children deserve: Seven keys to equity, social justice, and school reform*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press
- Theoharis, G., & Scanlon, M. (2015). *Leadership for increasingly diverse schools*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Wong, H. (2004). Induction program that keep new teachers teaching and improving. *NASSP Bulletin*, 88(683), 41–58.



Socially Just Educators Staying True to Themselves: The Role of Administrators Within or Outside of their Social Support Network by [Carrie Eileen Rood](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#). Based on a work at <https://rdsjournal.org/index.php/journal/article/view/801>. Permissions beyond the scope of this license may be available at <https://www.rds.hawaii.edu>.