

Research Article

A Critical Disability Studies Approach to 'Inclusive' Early Childhood Teacher Education

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Abstract: Critical Disability Studies (CDS) focuses on how normalcy is constructed and offers an important framework for questioning 'inclusive' early childhood practices. This article proposes a CDS approach to early childhood 'inclusive' teacher education that (1) develops a CDS pedagogy, (2) identifies ableist practices, and (3) questions and redefines 'inclusion'.

Keywords: Critical Disability Studies; Inclusive Education; Early Childhood Education

Introduction

Within the United States, when the term 'inclusion' is used in an educational context, it most often refers to the practice of placing children with disabilities into mainstream classrooms alongside their typically developing peers (e.g., Buysee & Hollingsworth, 2009; NPCI, 2009; Soukakou, 2012). The practice of educating children with disabilities within the least restrictive environment was made a legal requirement with the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (P.L. 94-142). While this legislation ultimately makes it possible for children to be legally excluded from the general education classroom, it has also led to an increase in the number of children with disabilities in 'inclusive' classrooms (Kliewer & Raschke, 2002). The increasing number of children with disabilities in the general education classroom resulted in a research agenda focused on (1) parent and teacher perceptions of challenges and barriers to inclusion (Robertson, Chamberlain, & Kasari, 2003; Sainato, Morrison, Jung, Axe, & Nixon, 2015); (2) the impact of inclusive education on academic success and social development (Robertson et al., 2003; Sainato et al., 2015); (3) the development of procedures and best practices for inclusion (Barton & Smith, 2015); and (4) the implications of this body of research on inclusion for teacher education and professional development (Buysee, 2012; Buysee & Hollingsworth, 2009; Soukakou, 2012). Critical special education and disability studies in education (DSE) scholars began to call attention to the idea that 'inclusion' must be more than just a physical placement (Ferri & Bacon, 2011). The resulting critical studies demonstrate that teacher attitudes towards disability (Huang & Diamond, 2009), classroom dialogue and interactions (Franck, 2018; Naraian, 2011; Watson, 2017), and curriculum (Kilderry, 2004), all impact the 'inclusive' schooling experience of children with and without disabilities.

Over the past decade, the definition of 'inclusion' has broadened to mean the implementation of support to ensure that all children are able to physically, socially, and academically have access to, and participate in the general education classroom

(DEC/NAEYC, 2009). However, even with this broader understanding of ‘inclusion’, research from scholars in the field of critical disability studies (CDS) indicates that the value of ‘inclusion’ does not necessarily translate into practice as intended or described. Children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds continue to be disproportionately represented in subjective disability categories (Connor, Ferri, & Annamma, 2016; Ferri & Connor, 2006; Losen & Orfield, 2002). Children with disabilities, and children from non-dominant backgrounds, continue to experience social, physical, and academic exclusion in the ‘inclusive’ classroom (Franck, 2018; Watson, 2017). The academic field of CDS “expands the understanding of disability from a health science perspective to consider it as a civil and human rights issue, a minority identity, a sociological formation, a historic community, a diversity group, and a category of critical analysis in culture and the arts” (Garland-Thomson, 2019, p. 12). CDS provides an important framework for preparing future teachers to implement critically inclusive practices.

This paper describes three foundational elements of a CDS approach to early childhood ‘inclusive’ teacher education programs: questioning and redefining ‘inclusion’, identifying ableist practices, and developing a CDS pedagogy. I’ll begin by describing why a CDS approach to ‘inclusive’ teacher education is necessary in the first place. Then, I’ll explain how I arrived at the three proposed elements of a CDS approach to early childhood ‘inclusive’ teacher education. I will describe each element, using theoretical vignettes to illustrate the translation into practice. Finally, I provide my suggestions for future work that incorporates a CDS approach to early childhood ‘inclusive’ teacher education.

Why Teacher Education?

Based on the 2017–2018 child count data, approximately 45% of children with disabilities between the ages of 3 and 5 years receive special education services within regular early childhood programs in the United States (USDE, 2018). In other words, almost half of preschool and kindergarten children with disabilities are educated in ‘inclusive’ environments, where ‘inclusion’ is defined as an educational placement that integrates students with and without disabilities. Barton and Smith (2015) compare 1989 and 2014 surveys about perceived barriers to effectively implementing ‘inclusion’ in preschool classrooms. They note that the attitudes and beliefs about ‘inclusion’ were rated the greatest challenge in the 2014 survey, a finding supported by the research of Huang and Diamond (2009) and Kwon, Hong, and Jeon (2017). While the category of attitudes and beliefs contains a number of concerns (e.g., lack of collaboration, lack of preparedness), both special educators and general educators expressed the belief that children with and without disabilities are more effectively educated in separate settings (Barton & Smith, 2015). Concerns about educating students with and without disabilities together in the same classroom are generally attributed to a lack of preparation (pedagogical and collaborative skills), resources (material and staff), and administrative support (Barton & Smith, 2015). This points to the importance of all early childhood teacher education programs preparing pre-service teachers for the ‘inclusive’ classroom. In the following section, I’ll explain why CDS provides a useful framework for reconceptualizing early childhood ‘inclusive’ teacher education.

Why Critical Disability Studies?

While teacher education research described above provides one story as to why CDS might be a useful tool for the early childhood ‘inclusive’ classroom, it is important to take a look at how ‘inclusion’ is defined and described by the field of early childhood. The Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) define early childhood ‘inclusion’ in their joint position statement:

Early childhood inclusion embodies the values, policies, and practices that support the right of every infant and young child and his or her family, regardless of ability, to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members of families, communities, and society. The desired results of inclusive experiences for children with and without disabilities and their families include a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and development and learning to reach their full potential. The defining features of inclusion that can be used to identify high quality early childhood programs and services are access, participation, and supports (DEC/NAEYC, 2009, p. 2).

This definition communicates a more progressive definition of ‘inclusion’, which focuses not only on the placement of young children with disabilities in the general education classroom, but also on the importance of providing all young children with the support they need to access and participate in the classroom. If the field of early childhood ‘inclusion’ has adopted such an approach, why is it necessary to consider what a CDS perspective might suggest about early childhood ‘inclusive’ education? In order to provide a brief answer to this question, I will draw on an example of how inclusion is described in the Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children’s (2017) video, *Because it Matters*, published on their YouTube channel. In this video, a group of young children sit facing their teacher. Text appears on the screen, showing the labels of various children in the classroom (e.g., autism spectrum disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, social emotional delay). Then, the text poses a question to the audience, “Can you tell the difference?” The video concludes with the statement, “Inclusion: Because it matters.” The Division of Early Childhood’s video implies that inclusion is important because it renders difference invisible. Despite articulating a more progressive approach to ‘inclusive’ education, the field of early childhood ‘inclusive’ education continues to construct difference as negative, and as something to be eliminated.

Towards a CDS Approach to Early Childhood ‘Inclusive’ Teacher Education

In this paper, I will propose three foundational elements of a CDS approach to early childhood ‘inclusive’ education: questioning and redefining ‘inclusion’, identifying ableist practices, and developing a CDS pedagogy. I offer these specific elements based on my analysis of the ongoing divide between the fields of early childhood ‘inclusive’ education and CDS (Eilers, in press). This analysis reveals that the field of CDS is perceived as offering little practical application, while the field of early childhood ‘inclusion’ continues to make incremental shifts towards embracing a more critical approach to ‘inclusive’ education without being fully open to all that such a critical approach would require. The academic work

that does merge the fields of CDS and early childhood ‘inclusion’ informs the three foundational elements I propose. First, this work highlights the taken-for-granted idea that ‘inclusion’ is best practice, and as such, falls outside the realm of practices that might need to be critiqued, indicating a need to explicitly introduce why it might be important to question and redefine ‘inclusion’ within early childhood ‘inclusive’ teacher education programs (Watson, 2017). Additionally, work by Burke (2015), Naraian (2011), and Watson (2016, 2017, 2018), demonstrates how a CDS perspective highlights ableist practices that impact the ‘inclusive’ schooling experience of young children. It is important for future teachers to develop the skill of being critically reflexive within the classroom, so that they might identify and respond to “the changing structures and meanings that define and restrict emancipation” (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009, p. 64) within the classroom. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, programs that have incorporated disability studies into teacher education (Ashby, 2012; Naraian & Schlessinger, 2017; Oyler, 2011) suggest the need for future teachers to understand not only how to be critically reflexive, but how to use this reflexivity for the development of a more critical pedagogy. In other words, it is important to be able to critique the underlying meaning of ‘inclusive’ education, and to identify practices that are ableist, but it is essential that this critique leads to action.

Element One: Identifying Ableism in Dominant ‘Inclusive’ Practices

A CDS approach to early childhood teacher education “shifts attention away from the problems of disablism (‘the Other’) to the problems of ableism (‘the same’ or ‘the dominant’)” (Goodley, 2013, p. 637). Hutcheon and Wolbring (2012) provide a useful definition of ableism:

Ableism as a concept describes, and is reflected in, individual and group perceptions of certain abilities as essential. Ableism can be treated as both a *hegemony* which promotes ability preference and as *an analytical tool* used to understand these preferences and their impact (p. 40).

Drawing on Hutcheon and Wolbring’s definition, it is important that future teachers are prepared to recognize ableism as a hegemony, understanding the ways in which “ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and pan-national identities converge around the problems of disability as a consequence of attempts to maintain...ableist normativity” (Goodley, 2013, p. 637). Additionally, future teachers need to be prepared to use ableism as an analytical tool, examining the impact of how understandings of ability impact the schooling experiences of young children within the classroom. In order to develop these two competencies, pre-service teachers must first “be fluent in the discourses of special education” (Oyler, 2011, p. 209). Indeed, as pre-service teachers enter schools and classrooms that employ dominant methods of ‘including’ young children, they need to understand the structure and processes of these dominant methods in order to recognize and challenge ableism. This will allow pre-service teachers to understand the “tensions...between an inclusive philosophy and the meritocratic structure of schools” (Rice, 2006, p. 260). In this section, I will discuss how a CDS approach to ‘inclusive’ early childhood education might provide pre-service teachers with both a

thorough understanding of dominant methods of ‘inclusive’ education, and the tools to recognize ableist practices.

Barton and Smith’s (2015) book, *The Preschool Inclusion Toolbox: How to Build and Lead a High-Quality Program* introduces the text as one that could be used to develop “program-level policies and procedures that promote preschool inclusion” or “as a text for graduate students in early childhood special education programs and early childhood programs” (p. 1). A CDS-informed teacher education program might utilize such a textbook in order to introduce pre-service teachers to current methods of ‘inclusive’ education, and to engage pre-service teachers in the practice of identifying ableist practices. Pre-service teachers could be assigned to read portions of the text alongside corresponding CDS literature. For example, pre-service teachers might read Barton and Smith’s (2015) definition of ‘inclusion’, as well as their recommendations for socially including children with disabilities. Watson’s (2016) article, *Talking Tolerance Inside the “Inclusive” Early Childhood Classroom*, could be simultaneously assigned in order to encourage pre-service teachers to problematize dominant methods of social ‘inclusion’, which “create a narrative about the marked child as Other, as lacking or deviant” (p. 4). Barton and Smith (2015) explain that the field of early childhood has transitioned away from using the term mainstreaming, and now utilizes the term ‘inclusion’ in order “to promote the full acceptance of each child as an engaged and participating member of his or her family, classroom, and community” (p. 36). The textbook primarily uses the term ‘inclusion’ to describe how to advocate for the placement of children with disabilities in the general early childhood classroom, and how to support children with disabilities using evidence-based practices. The following anecdotal example is given to demonstrate how a teacher, Elena, might make accommodations for a student with disabilities named David:

Elena notices that David often has a difficult time initiating interactions with peers. She decides to include ‘peer buddy’ activities during center time so he gets more opportunities to interact with peers one to one. In peer buddy systems, the teacher intentionally pairs up children who have more advanced social skills with children with disabilities who are learning social skills... (Barton, Pribble, and Joseph, 2015, p. 118).

This vignette illustrates how the ‘inclusive’ and evidence-based practice of peer-modeling is meant to facilitate the social ‘inclusion’ of students with disabilities. When considering this vignette through the lens of CDS, the practice of peer-modeling can be problematized as an ableist practice. Specifically, a CDS perspective triggers the questions: in what ways does peer-modeling “permit the Normal to exercise power” (Watson, 2016, p. 8)?; how does David’s disability come to explain how he “might act and think” (Watson, 2016, p. 8)?; and what does the practice of peer-modeling suggest about the meaning of ‘inclusive’ education? Through this line of questioning, it becomes possible to see that the practice of peer-modeling, when framed as socially inclusive, “conceals power relations, the power of authority, and the power associated with discourses of the Normal” (Watson, 2016, p. 11).

Simultaneously reading Barton and Smith's (2015) text on dominant methods of 'inclusion' and Watson's (2016) critique of such methods allows pre-service teachers to identify how ableism "create(s) an environment that is often hostile to those whose physical, mental, cognitive, and sensory abilities...fall out of the scope of what is currently defined as socially acceptable" (Rauscher & McClintock, 1996, p. 198).

Not only is it important for pre-service teachers to be able to identify ableism in daily classroom practices, but also it is essential for pre-service teachers to understand how ableism is entwined with race, class, and gender. While many traditional pre-service teacher education programs include coursework related to cultural competence, "few scholars actually practice it because the process of challenging traditional views often includes harsh and personal discourse" (Carter, 2002, p. 309). Additionally, early childhood teachers often hold beliefs that position children as 'too young' or 'too innocent' to actively negotiate ideas about dis/ability, gender, race, and class (Robinson & Díaz, 2006). A CDS approach to early childhood 'inclusive' teacher education must work to counter these beliefs, and to demonstrate that children come into the classroom with "a myriad of perceptions of difference that they have taken up from their families, peers, the media and other social sources and negotiated in the representations of their own identities" (Robinson & Díaz, 2006, p. 4).

One example of particular relevance to the field of early childhood 'inclusive' education is the disproportionate representation of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds within the special education system (Losen & Orfield, 2002; Reid & Knight, 2006). The special education eligibility determination process has long been critiqued for lacking cultural sensitivity, resulting in a disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse children, particularly within subjective disability categories (e.g., learning disability, developmental delay) (Ferri & Connor, 2006; Losen & Orfield, 2002). In response to this issue, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1997) requires that assessments are "selected and administered so as not to be discriminatory on a racial or cultural basis" (1414.E.A.i). However, this statute has not made an impact on the disproportionately high representation of minority students in special education (Harry & Klinger, 2014). Additionally, once classified as a child with a disability, students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are more likely to be placed in segregated settings (Kozleski, 2016). In other words, the decision of "*what* category to place a student in is followed by another kind of decision in which constructions of race interact with disability to determine *where* a student will be educated" (Kozleski, 2016, p. 114–115). Fergus (2016) explains that, "the research on disproportionality focuses mainly on the structural components of schools and less on the role of practitioner beliefs about race and cultural difference" (p. 119). After analyzing the results of a survey designed to measure teacher perceptions related to disproportionality, Fergus (2016) found that "as deficit thinking increased, cultural responsibility awareness, and knowledge decreased" (p. 126). A focus on practitioner beliefs about race and ability is of particular relevance for early childhood educators, as IDEA (1997) included a child find mandate, creating an environment in which teachers are expected to "hunt for disability" (Ferri & Bacon, 2011). The 'inclusive' early childhood classroom aims to

'include' students who have already been given a disability label, and students who are considered 'at-risk' because they come from culturally and linguistically diverse families and/or low-income families. Pre-service teachers must be exposed to literature that describes how "ability is constituted as property" (Ferri & Connor, 2014, p. 472) which is used "to justify segregating students with disabilities, as well as disproportionate numbers of students of color, English Language Learners (ELLs), and poor students (Ferri & Connor, 2014, p. 472). A CDS approach to early childhood 'inclusive' teacher education must explore the ways in which the 'inclusive' classroom can "unmask and expose the normalizing processes of racism and ableism as they circulate in society" (Connor et al., 2016, p. 14).

Vignette: Active participation in circle time

Olivia is beginning her student teaching practicum in an 'inclusive' preschool classroom. She spends the first week observing the classroom, participating in the daily routines and activities, and writing both anecdotal notes and reflections. In one reflection, she writes:

There are three students in the class with Individualized Education Programs (IEP). The teacher keeps a clipboard with each student's specific IEP goals. One goal that all three students have in common is that they participate in circle time by remaining with the class and engaging in activities (e.g. songs, read aloud) for ten minutes with no more than two redirections for five consecutive days. I notice that many of the students have a difficult time participating in the way that is expected of them during circle time. Students are directed to sit with crossed legs, but many need to be reminded several times. Also, the teacher uses the rhyme "One, two, three, eyes on me," and tells students that she knows that they are paying attention when she can see their eyes looking at hers. I think about what this direction suggests about the ableist norm of eye contact, which assumes vision as the only acceptable tool for accessing the classroom environment and indicating participation. Another thought I had, was that while many of the children in the class need reminders and redirections during circle time, the teacher is specifically tracking these reminders only for children with IEPs. What impact does tracking instances of redirection for just three children have on the teacher's perception of these students – of the other students? I notice that even though some students do not look at her while she is reading, they still seem to be listening and respond to questions at the end. These observations are making me wonder whether it might be important to allow for different types of active participation – Some students might need to sit in different positions, and some might need to stand. Some students might demonstrate that they are listening by looking, but others might be listening while looking at an object that they are feeling in their hands.

Olivia uses the data from this reflection when she begins to take over activities in the classroom. She tests out a different approach to circle time, allowing for variable means of active participation. Before beginning, she has a discussion with the classroom teacher in

order to explain her rationale for trying out something new. It is important that Olivia has the opportunity to practice these types of conversations, as she will likely continue to encounter practitioners who might not take the same critical approach to 'inclusion'. Olivia is able to explain that she wants to understand what happens when the children are given the opportunity to participate in different ways during circle time. She leads circle time for a week, each day modifying the activities that she includes based on what she notices about the interests of students. Initially, the classroom teacher feels discomfort watching as some students lay on the ground, others held squishy toys in their hands, and one stood. However, Olivia is able to point out that the students contributed in ways that demonstrated their active engagement, despite the evidence of their participation taking a different form. Olivia's knowledge of dominant 'inclusive' practices, combined with her understanding of ableism as a hegemony and an analytical tool, allow her to navigate a complex situation.

Element Two: Questioning and Redefining 'Inclusion'

If we listen to teachers, education administrators and academics as they discuss inclusive education and the range of kids who present for schooling, we soon hear that we are a long way from where inclusive schooling should take us. There remains a firmly embedded notion of what a regular school is and more particularly, who it is for (Graham & Slee, 2008, p. 280).

As Graham and Slee (2008) explain, the process of including children into the 'regular school' is heavily laden with ideas about who the 'regular child' is, and what the 'irregular child' must do in order to be successfully included. McDermott (1993) asserts that in the absence of some 'normal' definition of learning, there would be "no such thing" as an abnormal learner (McDermott, 1993, p. 272). However, pre-service early childhood teachers are rarely encouraged to ask questions about 'inclusion'. In her book, *Inside the 'Inclusive' Early Childhood Classroom: The Power of the 'Normal,'* Watson (2017) reflects on twenty years of teaching:

My knowledge and teaching practice was built on clinical and 'scientific' 'truth', and my understandings of the child were entrenched within 'the medical model of disability'. I did not know at the time that my knowledge, and my formidable allegiance to it, produced considerable constraints and limitations on the children I had taught. I lament the unquestioning and uncritical way I performed as a teacher and how I positioned myself (p. 4).

Watson's (2017) story demonstrates that the 'roles' of the teacher, the child, and the field of child development are highly engrained, and not often subject to critique. A CDS approach to early childhood 'inclusive' teacher education must encourage pre-service teachers to question how 'inclusion' "is framed by the political predisposition of exclusion" (Watson, 2017, p. 191). In this section, I will draw on the work of CDS scholars in order to conceptualize pedagogical activities that would encourage pre-service teachers to explore how the 'inclusive' classroom is constructed, and to consider a new way of defining 'inclusive' education.

Connor (2015) describes how he structures a disability studies course about 'inclusion,' which also serves as the only required special education course for pre-service general education teachers. His course begins with the history of special education and disability studies, as well as the analysis of media portrayals and real life observations of dis/ability, which encourage students to consider "What is normal?" (Connor, 2015, p. 135). While thinking about dis/ability as a social construction is often an unfamiliar task, Connor notes that, "Most people...are intrigued by looking at a familiar phenomenon such as dis/ability in a radically different way that triggers a deep, personalized response" (p. 125). Connor (2015) explains that this initial focus on theory is essential as "without the theoretical grounding of [disability studies/disability studies in education], practices appear to be understood on a very superficial level- as if 'what works' is largely free of theory and ideology" (p. 136). Drawing on Connor's (2015) approach, I conceptualize a CDS approach to the common practice of conducting classroom observations during pre-service training.

Early childhood teacher education programs often include a number of classroom observations, which help the pre-service teacher develop the skills to "assess developmental levels, interests, and the curriculum concepts and learnings that follow" (Vartuli, Snider, & Holley, 2016, p. 508). During these observations, pre-service teachers are often asked to focus on some specific element of teaching or learning, which coincides with the course material (Vartuli et al., 2016). For example, pre-service teachers might be asked to observe and reflect on the teaching practices used to facilitate the 'inclusion' of students with disabilities while reading about evidence-based practices for 'inclusion'. A CDS approach to this activity might begin in a similar manner, asking pre-service teachers to take a written record during a classroom observation, and to reflect on the observed 'inclusive' practices. After this initial observation, students would read Watson's (2018) article, *Interrogating the 'Normal' in the 'Inclusive' Early Childhood Classroom: Silence, Taboo and the 'Elephant in the Room,'* and conduct a secondary analysis of their observation data to explore how children are positioned as included/already included/excluded within classroom activities and discourse. Watson's (2018) article provides an example of how to critically analyze 'inclusive' practices, and also presents an argument for critically thinking about the goals and practices of 'inclusive' education. In other words, this activity facilitates conversations about how to "further examine, understand and dismantle exclusion as it is present in education" (Watson, 2018, p. 143). This activity is aligned with CDS as its aim is to draw focus away from disabled children, and onto 'the abled' in order to identify how "Ableist processes create a corporeal standard, which presumes ablebodiedness, inaugurates the norm and purifies the ableist ideal" (Goodley, 2013, p. 640). This activity is, of course, just an introduction to a CDS approach to 'inclusion', and this line of deconstructive questioning must also lead to a reconstruction of 'inclusive' education.

From a CDS perspective, what is 'inclusive' education? After questioning 'inclusion', a CDS informed approach to teacher education should equip pre-service teachers to consider how they might redefine 'inclusion'. Given that 'inclusive' education suggests the need for the not-yet-included to conform in order to attain the status of 'included', should the term

'inclusion' even be used? It is important for these questions to be introduced as pre-service teachers engage with CDS theory and consider the implications for practice. I envision these questions serving as the topic for a final reflection, and culminating class discussion, within an introductory course on 'inclusive' education. I also view these questions as ones that must be revisited, within and beyond the confines of coursework, as it is essential to "continuously re-evaluate our analyses as both process and product" (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009, p. 64).

When asking pre-service teachers to question 'inclusion', and to consider what this line of questioning means for practice, it is important that teacher educators engage in this same type of reflection. As I construct my own CDS-influenced definition of 'inclusive' education, I take note of Meekosha and Shuttleworth's (2009) reminder "that our understanding of what constitutes the modes of critical analyses we employ is not set in stone" (p. 64). In other words, the definition I set forth must be revisited in order to remain "in concert with contemporary lives, the complexities of alienation and rich hopes of resistance" (Goodley, 2013, p. 641). For me, the continued use of the term 'inclusive' education allows the term to signal "a political message, a dimension of criticality that a whole new word would fail to achieve" (Graham & Slee, 2008, p. 279). The use of quotations around the term 'inclusion' also aligns with the CDS goal of shifting the focus to "the centered-ness implicit in tokenistic attempts to 'include' the marginalized Other" (Graham & Slee, 2008, p. 279). Additionally, I would define a CDS approach to 'inclusive' early childhood education by drawing on Deleuze's (1987) notion of interdependency, which poses a challenge to the "conventional distinctions and separations between whole and 'broken' bodies" (Shildrick, 2012, p. 39). Shildrick (2012) elaborates on a Deleuzian approach to CDS, suggesting:

indeterminacy and instability are not unique to the anomalous body but stand as the conditions of all corporeality in as much as the finality and integrity of the normative subject are merely features of a phantasmatic structure. As such, the 'disabled' body signals not some exceptional lack or failure, but simply one mode among multiple ways of becoming (p. 39).

My definition of 'inclusive' education focuses on de-centering the normal, or able-bodied, through ongoing reflection on teaching practice and procedures (e.g., special education eligibility processes, methods of assessing progress, and curriculum content), resulting in "imaginative approaches to teaching and learning" (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010, p. 287). With this approach to 'inclusion', "By refusing to accept, and entertain as 'truth', the psychologizing and pathologizing stories, that are assigned to children, it may be imaginable to think and act differently within education, and see the child as a becoming subject" (Watson, 2017, p. 199).

Vignette: Critically defining inclusion.

A cohort of undergraduate student teachers are finishing the first year of coursework. They have spent five hours each week observing and student-teaching in 'inclusive' early childhood classrooms. They have read and reflected on work written by CDS and disability

studies in education scholars, considering how this work might connect with what they are noticing in the classroom, and discussing these connections during seminars. In the following final reflection, a student connects her observations and course readings to how she is now thinking about defining ‘inclusion’:

One thing that I can't stop thinking about is how obvious it is that the students in my classroom who have disability labels are the ones who have to be included into the classroom community. I am noticing this the most when I observe how children with disability labels are supported to engage in social interactions with peers. There is a student in my class who has an autism diagnosis. He often gets very engaged in some activity on his own, but then is redirected to do the activity in a way that involves another student. It's clear that his play is not seen as acceptable, and the goal becomes to try to include him into the way that other children are playing. The other day, he was on the playground playing by covering his eyes, counting to ten, and saying "ready or not, here I come!" He then ran around the playground for a bit, and started the same process. It was clear that he was really enjoying this activity. After a little while, a few of his peers saw what he was playing, and joined in. I wondered - if his peers had not joined this activity, would he have been allowed to continue, or would he have been redirected? It seems that 'inclusion' is really about ensuring that children demonstrate behaviors, whether social or academic or physical, that are viewed as being acceptable within the classroom. This makes me think of Hutcheon and Wolbring's (2012) definition of ableism: "Ableism as a concept describes, and is reflected in, individual and group perceptions of certain abilities as essential" (p. 40). When I think about how I would like to define 'inclusion' moving forward, I want to be sure that I am constantly thinking about the 'why' behind any type of inclusive strategy: Am I asking a student to modify behavior because it might make me or others uncomfortable? If so, how could I instead focus on making difference valued. What I mean is, I want the 'inclusive' classroom to be a place that welcomes and normalizes the co-existence of many different ideas about what counts as a valuable skill.

This reflection will inform Anna's planning as she moves into her full-time student teaching. It will help her to think about what a CDS pedagogy might look like, and to reflect on the activities that she implements within the classroom. At the end of her student-teaching, she will look back at this piece and consider whether there are revisions that she would make after having put some of her ideas to the test. Having developed a practice of ongoing reflection, Anna will continue to revise and reconsider how she critically defines ‘inclusion’ as she moves into the field, beginning her work as an early childhood ‘inclusive’ classroom teacher.

Element Three: Developing a CDS Pedagogy

As the field of CDS receives criticism for its lack of practical application (Oliver & Barnes, 2012; Watson, 2012), it is imperative that CDS informed early childhood ‘inclusive’ teacher education prepare teachers to do more than just critique the current system of early

childhood ‘inclusion’. Teachers must have the opportunity to develop the skills to actually implement a CDS approach within their teaching. A CDS pedagogy is one that responds and adapts to context, constantly reflecting and evolving, responding to the ever-shifting notion and impact of ableism. In other words, to develop a CDS pedagogy is to develop the skills to think critically, to respond creatively, and to reflect regularly. Such an approach cannot be prescribed, and must give teachers the trust and autonomy to develop “imaginative and responsive forms of educational provision” (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010, p. 287). However, in order to effect change within the system as it presently exists, a system that highly values clearly defined procedures and competencies, it is important to provide a clear picture of what a CDS pedagogy would look like, and how teachers should be prepared to develop such a pedagogy. In order to provide such a description, this section will include an extended vignette that describes the aspects of both teacher education and teaching practice.

Vignette: Within the system

This vignette captures what it means to develop a CDS approach to early childhood ‘inclusive’ education. First, teachers must be prepared to use CDS theory in practice – to draw on theoretical work in order to disrupt ableism within the ‘inclusive’ classroom. Next, teachers must be critically reflexive, continually asking questions about their approach to ‘inclusion’, and identifying what needs to change in order to challenge the dominant idea of the ‘normal’ child within the classroom. The semester begins, and it is time for a group of pre-service teachers to take on the role of full-time student teachers in their assigned early childhood ‘inclusive’ classrooms. They have spent time reading traditional ‘inclusive’ early childhood texts alongside critical approaches. They have grappled with hard questions: what does it mean to include?; what *is* disability?; what is *ability*?; how do multiple identity markers impact the schooling experience of young children?; how has ableism played a role in the development of the field of early childhood education; and how does this history continue to shape approaches to ‘inclusion’ in the early childhood classroom? They have reflected on their experiences in the field-identifying ableism, considering how their pedagogical practice might challenge the construct of ability, asking questions after testing out ideas. They have written down their current way of thinking about critically approaching the ‘inclusive’ classroom. Now, it is time for them to put all of these ideas into practice during their student teaching practicum.

Jon, a student-teacher in an ‘inclusive’ preschool classroom, is observing a group of three children in the block area. Two children are building a tower together, and the third child comes over to the pair and holds up a picture card, which indicates that he is asking to join their activity. One child responds, “Yes,” and moves over to make room for his peer to sit nearby. The other child looks over to Jon, and asks, “But why doesn’t he just talk? Is he stupid or something?”

Jon later writes about this interaction in an analytical reflection paper:

When I heard the question, “But why doesn’t he talk? Is he stupid or something?” I noticed my own discomfort. I felt discomfort because, ultimately, I wished that this

question had not surfaced in the first place. This question was one that I knew needed to be answered, and answered well. After all, ignoring or redirecting would only perpetuate the problem described by Watson (2018): “The children learn to separate from, and ignore difference, and feel awkward discussing it, as they have no sanctioned way to talk about it. The ‘normal’ discourses create the ‘natural’ and ‘right’ way to be, that is so taken for granted, that other ways have no expression and no legitimacy” (p. 153–154). But, I felt fear. I felt afraid that I would not give the right answer. And I realize now that a part of this fear was also related to the idea, which I am still working to challenge, that young children might not be ready to talk about complex issues like difference and disability. I remember the work of Robinson and Díaz (2006), which explains that the early childhood ‘inclusive’ classroom is heavily influenced by “the discourse of childhood innocence” (p. 171). This discourse of innocence limits the opportunities children have to “question, analy(z)e, test, and critique” (Robinson & Díaz, 2006, p. 171) ideas about diversity and difference. Instead of making space for the exploration of difference, early childhood teachers often communicate the idea that all children are to be welcomed and accepted without question (Naraian, 2011; Watson, 2017). In this type of environment, children learn not to ask questions, and opportunities are missed to “support children in voicing their ideas and concerns about different social issues...” (Robinson & Díaz, 2006, p. 172).

In the moment, I chose to try my best to answer this question, and this is what I said: “Some of us use our voices to communicate with each other. Some of us communicate using sign language, pictures, computers, or other ways. All of these ways of communicating allow us to share our ideas, thoughts, or questions with other people. One way is not better than another. But, what I noticed, and what I think that we should talk more about, is that a lot of times communicating using spoken language is seen as the ‘smart’ way of communicating, and other ways of communicating are seen as being less smart. Why do you think that is?” While I felt the urge to tell the child that I would not tolerate the use of the word ‘stupid’, I did not want to close down the conversation, I wanted us to be able to work through where this idea comes from, and why this language is so harmful. We eventually talked through the use of the word ‘stupid’ and decided as a group that it was one we did not want to allow in our classroom. After our conversation, the child who initially asked the challenging question talked to his peer, asking if his words had hurt the child’s feelings, and asking how he could repair this damage. The pair then spent time together because Jeremy wanted his peer to understand how his communication book works, a topic that he then introduced to the whole class.

My main take away from this experience is that I need to continually be aware of how my own fear or feelings might get in the way of allowing children to explore topics of difference. I also need to be willing to try, to get it wrong sometimes, and to trust that the children are capable of leading and participating in conversations that, to me,

seem tricky.

Moving Forward

How to do inclusion better...is not the challenge. It is instead recognizing and understanding that inclusion is framed by the political predisposition of exclusion (Watson, 2016, p. 191).

The field of early childhood 'inclusive' education articulates a more expansive understanding of 'inclusion', but continues to shy away from taking up a CDS approach. While CDS may appear to threaten the very existence of 'inclusive' education, Slee (2011) suggests that "inclusive education needs to be decoupled from special education" (p. 155). If we can reconceptualize 'inclusion' as a practice of continually interrogating "the power of the Normal" (Watson, 2016, p. 12), then a CDS approach to 'inclusive' early childhood education becomes possible. While a CDS approach can certainly be imagined, an exercise I have briefly carried out within this paper, it is essential that this imagination be paired with action. The 'critical' component of CDS instructs scholars to be engaged in ongoing reflection, paying attention to how changes in society require changes to approaches and analyses (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). At the same time, criticality must not only produce theory, it must translate this theory into action. In other words, "the task is always to balance the activist's cry for accessible conceptualization with the scholar's understanding of the complex, interwoven but continually changing fabric of human societies" (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009, p. 64). Future work should apply a CDS approach to early childhood 'inclusive' teacher education and present the affordances and challenges of developing and implementing this type of program. Additionally, this work must consider the role of the child within a CDS-informed 'inclusive' classroom. Children should be central to decision-making about educational goals and the processes for reaching their goals in order to "create a culture where they can be viewed as a person who is expert in their own life and not someone who needs help because they 'can't do it'" (Rodriguez, 2016, p. 255). Indeed, as Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2010) explain, "Disabled children are queer children: with the potential to subvert, rethink and reject normative, narrow, dull, limiting, disablist, respectable, middle of the road, conservative, traditional and exclusionary schools, classrooms and pedagogical practices" (p. 275).

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