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Diversity, Difference, and Disability: Conceptual Contradictions and Present Practice in Inclusive Schooling for Students with Disabilities

Summary: *Debates about diversity, disability, and inclusive schooling redound in the contemporary field of special education. The argument in this paper holds that disability stands apart from other forms of diversity and cannot be viewed as simply one cross-cutting issue to be pursued alongside race, gender, ethnicity, language, and culture. Disability is governed by numerous contexts. The complex, variable, and contingent nature of disability demands different approaches and different remedies than those apt for other identity markers. We ground these ideas within the context of inclusive schooling for students with disabilities and conclude that the nature and needs of disability preempt the current stress on diversity and general classroom placement.*

Keywords: *Diversity, disability, inclusion, special education, inclusive schooling*

Резюме (Маргрет Винзер & Каз Мазурек: Разнообразие, различие и ограничение: концептуальные противоречия и существующая практика в инклюзивном обучении людей с ограниченными возможностями): *Дебаты о многообразии, ограничении и комплексном обучении имеют обеспечивающее воздействие на современную область специальной педагогики. Аргумент данной статьи состоит в том, что ограничение отличается от других форм многообразия, и не может быть рассмотрено просто как сквозная тема в отношении расы, рода, этнической принадлежности, языка и культуры. Ограничение определяется многочисленными контекстами. Комплексный, переменный и обусловленный природой вид ограничения требует иных подходов и средств, чем те, которые подходят к другим основам идентичности. Мы обосновываем эти идеи внутри контекста инклюзивного образования детей с ограниченными возможностями и приходим к выводу, что природа и потребности ограничения в рамках комплексного обучения не принимаются во внимание в контексте современной нагрузки из-за многообразия и общего направления класса.*

Ключевые слова: *многообразие, ограничение, инклюзия, специальная педагогика, инклюзивное образования*

Zusammenfassung (Vielfalt, Differenz und Behinderung: konzeptionelle Widersprüche und die derzeitige Praxis in der integrativen Beschulungsagenda für Menschen mit Behinderungen): *Debatten über Vielfalt, Behinderung und integrative Beschulung haben unterstützende Wirkung auf den gegenwärtigen Bereich der Sonderpädagogik. Das Argument dieses Beitrages basiert darauf, dass sich eine Behinderung von anderen Formen der Vielfalt unterscheidet und nicht einfach betrachtet werden kann als ein Querschnittsthema entlang Rasse, Geschlecht, ethnischer Zugehörigkeit, Sprache und Kultur. Behinderung ist durch zahlreiche Kontexte bestimmt. Die komplexe, variable und naturbedingte Art der Behinderung erfordert andere Ansätze und Mittel als jene, die sich für andere Identitätsmarker eignen. Wir begründen diese Ideen innerhalb des Kontextes der inklusiven Beschulung von Kindern mit Behinderungen und kommen zu dem Schluss, dass die Natur und die Bedürfnisse der Behinderung im Rahmen integrativer Beschulung vernachlässigt werden im Kontext der aktuellen Belastung durch Vielfalt und allgemeine Klassenzuweisung.*

Schlüsselwörter: *Diversität, Behinderung, Inklusion, Sonderpädagogik, inklusive Beschulung*

Introduction

Diversity is particularly relevant to special education. Increasingly, the contemporary field finds itself involved in debates about diversity, social cohesion, identity, exclusion, and patterns of minority achievement, generally embedded in ongoing and contentious discussions about the value, philosophies, and practices of inclusive schooling for students with special needs.

In today's special education, inclusive schooling is the grand narrative. Rights-based education has become the dominant ideology to the extent that the values and assumptions underlying the para-

digm are now thought to be self evident. In Canada and the United States, diversity, equality, and inclusion are often critical principles in legislation, as well as in social and education policy, and inclusive schooling is fairly standard practice. In the EU, inclusive schooling is recognized as “one of the most important education imperatives for the development of quality and equity in education” (European Agency, 2013, p. 11). Similarly, in many developing nations the principles of inclusive education are seen as “an important contribution to the agenda for achieving EFA and for making schools educationally more effective” (UNESCO, 1994).

Inclusive schooling for persons with disabilities has been a central focus of our research. We have generated a body of analyses on multiple aspects, most recently focusing on the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD, UN, 2006) and disability within Education for All (e.g., Winzer & Mazurek, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017). What catches our interest here is the issue of what counts as *disability* or *special education need* and how it relates to wider visions of *diversity*. The topic is critical because, as Leo and Barton (2006) point out, the “meanings and interpretations of diversity and inclusion expose deeply politicized tensions and different meanings related to democracy, school reform and social justice” (p. 170). Still, although many advocates have made diversity fundamental to versions of inclusive schooling, and considering how profound these foundational assumptions are, exploration of the area is recent (e.g., Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011, 2012; Winzer & Mazurek, 2017) and remains inadequate.

In this paper we look at diversity within common identity markers such as race, ethnicity, language gender, and culture (see Ghosh, 2012) as opposed to disability that draws attention to individual differences and individual needs, all placed within the context of inclusive schooling. We do agree that the rights of the disabled are connected to a larger debate about the place of difference in society. However, we argue that disability stands apart from other forms of diversity and cannot be viewed as simply one cross-cutting issue to be pursued alongside gender, ethnicity, language, and so on. To treat disability as part of cultural diversity and apply a minority group model to disability rights makes the concept of diversity more fundamental than the concept of difference. This denies the complexity of disability by reducing it to a few simple nostrums and offers remedies incompatible with needs. If pushed to excess, the danger is, as James Kauffman (2002) observes, “the focus on diversity becomes another example of the art of the stupid” (p. 160).

Diversity, disability and inclusive schooling

Inclusive schooling is often embedded within a human rights argument and conflates disability with diversity, erected on a complex web of overlapping concepts, a number of which are salient to our discussion. First is the notion of diversity as a phenomenon arising from culture, gender, race, ethnicity, and language, which is then extended to accommodate diverse aptitudes in abilities, learning styles, and rates of learning. Second, the *social model*, a generic term for a broad conception of disability, shifts the balance from bodily functioning to the ethical, legal, and social implications of disability. This leads to viewing disability as less biological than shaped by external social forces and inevitably speaks to oppression, inequality, and exclusion. There is also the equation of inclusive schooling and general classroom placement that has become a kind of mantra in the continuing conversation. Advocates speak to the “full inclusion of children with diverse abilities in all aspects of schooling that other children are able to access and enjoy” (Loreman, Deppeler, & Harvey, 2005, p. 2). Accordingly, no provision for instruction outside the regular classroom in special classes or schools exists (Kauffman & Badar, 2014). It follows that the special schools and classrooms that have traditionally been the backbone of special education are seen as taboo forms of discrimination, synonymous with limitations, exclusion, and low status (Tomlinson, 2013). And, because “All

forms of segregation are morally wrong” (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000, p. 192), special placements should be abandoned and special education dissolved entirely (Slee, 2014).

Denying disability

Taken together, the above perspectives and arguments can be understood as a critique of the premises of traditional special education. Assumptions about deficits in individual students are downplayed and it is assumed that disability does not really mean special needs. In fact, the denial of the differences related to disability has become part of the popular rhetoric of inclusive schooling (Kauffman, 2002). As an example, in our home province of Alberta a recent reform document articulated a vision for an inclusive education system that meets the learning needs of all students, including those with diverse learning needs. At its core was “the concept of making differences ordinary so that all students have a place, feel valued and welcomed, and are equipped for success” (ATA, 2014, p. 7, emphasis added). The neutralization of disability to make students with disabilities ordinary means that such pupils are seen as little different from their typically developing peers and entitled to access to the same curriculum and standards in general classrooms, enhanced by efficient teaching and adequate supports.

The CRPD broadly describes persons with disabilities as “those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments” (UN, 2006, Article 1). While the concept of disability rights has expanded enormously around the globe, many specific aspects of the scope and functioning of disability remain insufficiently explored (see Winzer & Mazurek, 2015). Yet, the essential reality is that disability cannot be subsumed under umbrella concepts of diversity, difference, and disadvantage. The conditions constituting disability are grounded in biological difference. They “describe any severe restriction or lack of ability to perform a usual, critical activity of human beings” (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011, p. 375) so that disability limits functioning and implies limited aptitude in a task.

Disability is multi-layered, affects every sphere of human existence, and involves an array of services spanning health, education, social welfare, and employment. It intersects common markers of identity, denoted in the CRPD as “race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national ethnic, indigenous or social origin, property, birth, age, or other status” (UN, 2006, Preamble). The effects of organic and physical disabilities are interwoven with social difference and magnified- often distorted- by other multiple identities. Mutually reinforcing layers of disadvantage can then lead to severe deprivation. For example, disability is systematically related to poverty in countries across the economic spectrum and persons with disabilities experience poorer education and labor market outcomes (Winzer & Mazurek, 2015).

Disability is important to, but more than, common versions of diversity. Remedies for disability are not the same as remedies for other forms of difference. The deficits associated with disability are large compared to other sources of inequality and cannot be solved by mechanisms designed to combat discrimination and stigma that may be apt for racial, ethnic, cultural, and other variants that relate to marginalization. The barriers faced by various disability constituencies often require differentiated policy responses to adequately take into account the unique conditions faced by disabled persons (IDA, 2010).

In education, the nature of disabilities calls for policies quite different from those used to address other differences (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2012). Ethnic and other identities do not translate into interactions between bodily, cognitive, physical, and other functions. Those with disabilities, how-

ever, have differences that substantially change the way they learn, respond, or behave so that their needs are additional to or different from those provided to peers of the same age. As Kauffman (2002) notes, "In the case of children differing only in ethnicity, fairness demands that they be given the same thing. In the case of children who differ dramatically from the norm in ability to learn, fairness demands that they be given instruction different from what is normative" (pp. 117-118). Students with disabilities need explicit, carefully controlled, intensive, and sustained instruction, and the effectiveness of instruction overtakes issues of diversity and preempts the place of education.

Present status

Many nations such as Canada and Australia, and developing nations beholden to UNESCO and the Education for All initiatives, have hopped on the disability as diversity bandwagon and proposed or implemented models anchored in culture that are designed to safeguard the rights of all students and to function within multicultural anthologies. In Canada, for example, inclusive schooling is defined as "an approach that looks into how to transform education systems and other learning environments in order to respond to the diversity of learners" (Canada, Council, 2008, p. 1). Alberta has twice the level of classroom complexity compared to the average of all other OECD jurisdictions (ATA, 2015) so it is not surprising that a recent reform document on inclusive schooling was aired as a "value-based approach" dedicated to altering the dynamic of diverse students' co-existence in schools by moving "from tolerating difference to valuing diversity" (Alberta Education, 2010).

This begs two questions. How successful are efforts to blend disability and diversity? What is the progress in providing appropriate education for all students with disabilities? Answers are, at best, depressing. Despite more than 30 years of experimentation and morphing of the agenda, the inclusive attempt to recreate common schooling to accommodate disabilities reveals changing and mounting, not diminishing, challenges, together with a lack of a body of credible evidence attesting to its value. The universalized norms have not translated to effective action and the expressed ideology is not reflected in practice. Inclusive schooling shows little success in both industrialized and developing nations. Indeed, in the vast majority of education systems around the world, it remains extremely limited, if not non-existent (Inclusion International, 2009).

The original intent - all students within general settings - is far from being realized. There is presently a significant increase in the identification of special needs and referral to segregated settings in many educational jurisdictions around the world (Graham & Jahnukainen, 2011). Support for special placements has not diminished; many nations are actively building more special schools (see Winzer & Mazurek, 2015).

Across Canada, for example, some of the largest school districts are not only maintaining the number of students in segregated placements but increasing them (Porter, 2011). In Alberta, joining diversity to disability created "seemingly confusing positions on inclusion" (Gilham & Williamson, 2014, p. 554) and "Segregated special education programs have flourished" (Loreman, 2014, p. 461). In Europe, many students with special needs still receive their education outside general classrooms and many nations show an ongoing increase in the percentages of pupils educated in special schools or special classes (Miejer, 2010). In many developing nations, there are differing views about which inequalities are the most important to address and gender has accrued the most interest. UNESCO speaks to the perceived failures to date of EFA for students with disabilities (UNICEF, 2015) and it is suggested that other groups of disadvantaged children, rather than those with disabilities, have been the focus of the drive to inclusive education (Bines & Lei, 2011).

Conclusion

This brief paper is situated at the center of debates about diversity, disability, and inclusive schooling. We stressed that for many parties inclusive schooling is an article of unshakeable conviction; indeed, the ideas seem to be ingrained into the psyche of special educators. At the same time, many agents conflate diversity and disability and all too often the terms and concepts are used interchangeably and advocated as a solution to the increasing diversity seen in contemporary school systems. However, varied perspectives on disability and diversity render an inclusive landscape characterized by paradox. Diversity stresses the commonalities among children as learners and social beings, creates an intention to treat all learners as essentially the same, and favors universal and homogeneous systems. Disability stresses the differences related to disabling conditions and creates an opposite intention- to treat some learners differently with individual planning and individual support.

Actual practices fall far short of intentions. Culprits, although by no means the only ones, are the shaky and contentious conceptual underpinnings that misapprehend the nature of disability, bolster mistaken assumptions about inclusion, and deny the validity of both special education and segregated special instruction. Saying that disability is merely a social construct and we need only change the social context to eliminate discrimination and segregation simply denies the problem. Indeed, many of the problems which are said to be ingrained in segregated special education- legitimization of school failure, promotion of feelings of inadequacy, and contributions to the discrimination experienced by students with disabilities- are flawed and not livened by empirical research (see e.g., Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011; McLaughlin, 2010). Saying that disabled students are ordinary has the effect of deemphasizing the supports that are necessary to meet their needs. And saying that disability is simply another form of diversity cannot dissolve impairments and their consequences. While a diversity agenda sets the heterogeneity of learners as the starting point for education endeavors, not all differences are equal and not all respond to the same remedy. When learners have special needs resulting from disability, the prescriptions of inclusive schooling are insufficient in meeting all needs.

We cannot change the nature of disability simply by changing the way we talk about it. It is not enough to categorize it, conflate it with diversity, assimilate it into a multicultural frame of reference, or deal with it by employing only generic prescriptions of universal inclusive schools. It is mistaken to assume that all students must be included in general classrooms. Schooling must be reasonably calculated to confer educational benefit and the stress on access as equity skims over relevance and quality. As Kauffman and Bader (2014) point out, "Inclusion is not the key to improving special education's quality or improving the lives of all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities" (p. 14). In essence, the right to education should be instruction based, not place based. Special education, therefore, should worry less about whether or not disability is a form of diversity and worry more about making special education an appropriate mechanism through research-based practices and empirically demonstrated approaches.

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