The Nature of Inclusion in a Blue Ribbon School: A Revelatory Case

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This 2-year qualitative research study examined the decisions teachers made about their teaching practices in an inclusive professional development elementary school. Findings of the study revealed that the individual school community mutually negotiated a common definition of inclusion that was fundamentally grounded in students’ active participation in classroom settings. Based on this common definition of inclusion, teachers constructed contexts of interaction such as student grouping practices, role responsibilities, types of instructional modifications, and student assessments that revealed unrecognized beliefs about legitimate access to cultural knowledge. One powerful and consistent process that evolved from the interactive nature of inclusive practices was the phenomenon of “benevolent collusion” among students with disabilities and teachers.

The inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms has grown markedly over the last few years (McGregor & Vogelsberg, 1998). This increase can be attributed to current school reform efforts in regular education and special education. Although debates continue to focus on the extent to which children with disabilities should be educated in general education classrooms (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1988a, 1988b, 1994; Reynolds, Wang, & Walberg, 1987; Wang & Walberg, 1988), there seems to be a general assumption that inclusion is a positive intervention for students with and without disabilities (Manset & Semmel, 1997; Marston, 1996; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1994). Research on inclusion as an intervention, however, is clearly limited. Aside from a few notable exceptions (Baker & Zigmond, 1995; Zigmond, 1995a, 1995b), much of the literature on
inclusion consists of conceptual papers, reports of educators’ perceptions, and anecdotal accounts of individuals who experienced positive outcomes with inclusive models. Although these reports are helpful in giving us clues as to what inclusion looks like, they are more often than not described in ad hoc fashion (i.e., as a list of positive characteristics). In addition, testimonials and descriptions of programs tend to focus exclusively on the surface structures within the social domain (i.e., researchers tend to focus on observable social behaviors rather than the deeper meaning of that interaction as interpreted by the participants). In addition, the emphasis seems to be on the affective components of inclusive practice with an assumption that mere socialization will improve academic performance. This disposition to view inclusion exclusively within the social domain is not surprising, as inclusion is seldom defined as a specific teaching strategy, like direct instruction, but as a teaching philosophy.

Smith (1998) defined inclusion as “welcoming children with disabilities into the curriculum, environment, social interaction, and self-concept of the school” (p. 18). Others talk about the value of diversity and connecting students in natural ongoing and supportive relationships (Giangreco, Baumgart, & Doyle, 1995; Stainback, Stainback, & Jackson, 1992). In nearly all the literature, inclusion is viewed ideologically, a belief system rather than a set of actions. Inclusion is “a way of life, a way of living together, based on a belief that each individual is valued and does belong” (Falvey, Givner, & Kimm, 1995, p. 11).

Defining inclusion as an ideology is both advantageous and restrictive. Certainly in the United States this ideology is consonant with our ideals of democracy. Few would argue that all students have a right to learn and to be included. However, the nature of “belonging” and “valued” is particularly ambiguous. What does it mean to belong and to have value in a classroom? It is not enough to be invited into a community. Rather, it is the nature of the position within a community that empowers all students (Gergen, 1991). If a teacher includes a child in a group project, but that child’s contribution to the project is only to get supplies for the group, is he or she valued or devalued by the nature of this role? If this occurs during a science experiment where getting the supplies entails some degree of skill, the child might be viewed by others as highly valued. If, however, it means always getting the crayons and scissors for the other students, the group may view his or her role as inconsequential or devaluing. The difficulty in defining inclusive practice, then, lies in the ever-changing, dynamic renegotiation of meaning that takes place among participants within a classroom and within the larger community of school.

We argue that a way of living is comprised of a set of actions, albeit one that is continuously changing and responding to the contextual features of social interaction. Some sets of action become habitualized or routine and may appear on the surface to be indexical markers of inclusion when they are not. Educators and students mutually shape and negotiate ways of acting to signify inclusive practice. How they interpret these actions and how these actions fit into the larger context of a school organization determines whether inclusive practice benefits or limits children with disabilities or those “at risk.” Relying on persuasive slogans and ad hoc descriptions of inclusion can be problematic as unintended consequences of inclusive practice go unrecognized. Our purpose in this investigation was to (a) uncover the beliefs of teachers and students concerning inclusion within an elementary blue ribbon school, (b) uncover the types of actions (i.e., teaching strategies) used to
signify inclusion, and (c) understand how these actions position students with disabilities in relation to others within the school context.

**DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

In this investigation, we examined the decision-making processes, teaching strategies, and interactions of educators and students within a blue ribbon inclusive school. We selected a school district known for its mission to create professional development schools. We chose one elementary school site that was nationally recognized for its excellence in teaching and identified by school faculty and staff as an *inclusion school*. Within that school, we examined 12 different classrooms from kindergarten through fifth grade, which were nominated by the school principal as positive exemplars of inclusive classrooms. Factors that influenced the principal’s nomination of teachers included (a) the teacher’s past participation in faculty development projects, university and public school partnership workshops, and mentoring programs; (b) commitment and interest in participating in the research study; (c) number of years teaching; and (d) positive teacher evaluations conducted by the principal. We also observed three different resource rooms for students with disabilities and high-ability students. Our overall guiding research questions included (a) How does the philosophy of inclusion as defined by teachers and students influence the decision-making and teaching practices of general and special educators? and (b) What are the underlying structures, practices, and outcomes of these inclusive practices adopted by educators and students in general and special education classrooms?

**METHOD**

**Settings and Participants**

Marvel Springs, the research site, is a predominately White, middle-class school situated in the lower midwestern United States. The student population contains a diversity of advanced learners and those with disabilities. Here, advanced learners are defined as those students identified as gifted through the formal evaluation procedures developed by the school district. Students with disabilities are defined as those students receiving special education services through an individualized education program. During the 2 years of this study, 6% to 8% of the school population was identified as advanced, whereas 8% to 12% of students were identified with disabilities. Within the population of special education students, 4 were identified as deaf or hearing impaired. Faculty included 1 full-time teacher for the gifted, 2 full-time teachers for high-incidence disabilities, 1 part-time speech therapist and occupational therapist, 1 full-time teacher for students who are hearing impaired, and 1 full-time interpreter. Of the 26 general education faculty, 11 held master's degrees. The average number of years teaching was 20 with 8.6% of the educators teaching at Marvel Springs School for 5 years or more, whereas the building principal had been there for 18 years.
Procedures

We conducted on-site fieldwork collecting interview data with participants (i.e., students, educators, administrators, and university faculty liaisons), observations across various contexts, and school documents. In addition, we videotaped 10 hr of observation, a permanent data source revisited by us periodically and analyzed interactively with educators. We collected 40 hr of field observations, an additional 10 hr of videotaped observations, 6 hr of interactive analysis with educators viewing the videotapes, and 10 hr of face-to-face formal interviews over a 2-year period.

Our observations were conducted across multiple settings and contexts. Table 1 identifies the type and number of settings we observed. Conducting observations across settings and contexts was not problematic because students and faculty were accustomed to having university faculty and preservice teachers visit and teach in the classrooms. However, gathering permanent product recordings (i.e., videotaping) was not common, and although some educators expressed an interest in being recorded, others did not. Therefore, we conducted videotaped observations of volunteer educators in the following classes: 1 kindergarten, 1 first grade, 2 second grades, 2 third grades, and 1 fourth grade. All 7 of these educators reviewed and analyzed their videotaped teaching with Nancy Stockall.

All general education classrooms included children with and without disabilities. Three classrooms were designated as resource rooms. These included the gifted classroom, the special education resource room (for high-incidence disabilities), and the class for students who are hearing impaired. Special educators taught in resource rooms.

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and in the general education classrooms. However, their roles changed depending on the nature of their working relationship with the general education teacher. Although special educators frequently taught in the general education classroom, students generally regarded them as educators for the students with disabilities. As one student remarked, “Well Mrs. Coat is our teacher, but Mrs. Hammer comes in to help the kids who have trouble. She uses sign language with Cory cause he’s deaf [pseudonyms used].”

Analysis

Our primary and secondary data sources provided the units for analysis. These multiple data sources are identified in Table 2. Passive participant observations included watching, listening, and minimizing interaction with students while collecting fieldnote data. Full participant observations included actively engaging in activities with students during guided practice exercises. Teacher analysis of self-teaching videos consisted of the primary author and teacher reviewing her videotape in an interactive manner to determine her understanding of the interactions taking place. Nancy Stockall met with teachers on a one-to-one basis to view the videos at the university rather than in their school building.

We used the “constant comparative method” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) throughout the study. This technique involves several steps. First, raw data are coded. Codes are labels that attribute meaning to particular units of descriptive information. The codes may be descriptive or interpretive. In our initial coding, we identified folk domains (Spradley, 1980) that included terms from the language used by participants in the school. For example, one early descriptive code was identified as hands-on learning. Later, we used interpretive codes. Interpretive codes are generated as the researchers’ awareness grows regarding the dynamics of interaction. Therefore, the descriptive codes are clumped together to form an interpretive category. One of our interpretive categories was coded as socially active participation. The next step involves a

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comparison of incidents applicable to each category. As new data were collected and coded, it was compared “to the previous incidents in the same and different groups” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 106).

Next, we used analytic memos to define relations among various categories, properties, and functions thereby assisting us in extending theoretical notions. Gradually, we uncovered particular patterns or themes that ran across our data segments. The emergent patterns helped us to identify educators’ personal meanings in practice. In our study, an example taken from an interactive dialogue between a participant and the primary investigator while viewing a videotaped observation illustrates the participant’s attribution of meaning:

[The teacher and researcher are reviewing a videotape of the teacher facilitating several cooperative groups in a second grade classroom. Several children in the class are identified as having a learning disability. James is one of these children.]

Interviewer: When you look at this (part of the videotape), what stands out for you?

Teacher: Well, I was thinkin’ that if I got James started, he would keep going. But as soon as I walked away, he stopped. I thought that he was working with the group, but I guess not.

Finally, grounded theory emerged as we integrated and compared the phenomena in a continuous analysis of data. Our theoretical framework guided the search for particular trends in the coded data. Specifically, we took a semiotic perspective, one that focuses on the transient nature of signs and sign interpretations. For example, our decision to collect interviews in formal and informal contexts, across settings, and over a 2-year period was related to our focus on uncovering the signs that teachers marked as important. It also helped us to understand how these signs were interpreted in one or more contexts. In addition, the semiotic perspective influenced our decision to view videotaped observations of teachers and students in an interactive manner. For instance, when we examined the teacher modifying the curriculum (i.e., a sign) it often engendered a new meaning or belief (i.e., some content is not necessary for some students). These new meanings guided educators’ actions in the didactic or preactive planning stage and the pedagogic or interactive planning that occurred within the dynamic of teaching. The comparison of the trends allowed us to reach some conclusions about how and why participants made changes in their teaching practices and why some practices became preferred methods of instruction over others. However, our conclusions are also part of our construction of the big picture of inclusive practice. Therefore, our interpretations are based on the perceptions of the participants, but filtered through our own impressions of how their beliefs guided their practice. Our understandings came from attending to the institutional and individual beliefs of educators and their transmutations of inclusive practices. We are presenting our interpretations of the beliefs and teaching practices of Marvel Springs School educators and students.
Three major findings emerged from our study. The first is how the educators at Marvel Springs School perceived or defined inclusion. The second are contextual features that engendered particular meanings and consequently the actions of participants (students and educators). The third is a tacit process of benevolent collusion that occurred between educators and low-achieving students.

It is important to keep in mind that all three of these constructs are interacting and interrelating signs that contribute to a continuous ongoing process of negotiation over time. For the purpose of clarity, we chose to categorize each of these findings, separating them to define and provide illustrative examples from our data. These examples are not representative or random, rather they are ones that we believe best illustrate the constructs presented. We will reintegrate the constructs within the Discussion section explaining how the process of benevolent collusion functions within this particular school.

The Meaning of Inclusion

It is common knowledge among educators at Marvel Springs Elementary School that inclusion of children with disabilities in general education classrooms is an obligatory condition. When the building principal interviews prospective educators, inclusion is one topic that takes a predominant place in the interview. Prospective educators are told that Marvel Springs is an inclusive school, and that all educators will work with children who have disabilities. Teacher candidates are queried about their beliefs on inclusion, and only those candidates who state a positive position toward inclusion are considered for hire. Although teacher candidates seldom share their definitions of inclusion or their concerns about inclusive practices publicly, they gradually take on the school community’s definition of inclusion. This definition of inclusion is illustrated by the following teacher’s comment:

Inclusion is when everybody in the classroom is included in the activity to the level of degree that they can be included in an activity, intellectually, um, for say the gifted child, they may be going and doing some extra research for some project that you’re doing and, or they may be helping someone else through the process, the thinking processes. For the child with more severe needs they may be working on different objectives for whatever activity that you’re working on as far as, um, they may have a job that helps them focus on whatever it is that you’re teaching.

The school’s organizational definition of inclusion rested almost exclusively on the social domain. However, educators were quick to clarify that inclusion was more than just the physical placement of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. As one teacher explained:

Um, I think in a lot of places inclusion and the old folk mainstream are somewhat confused and meshed together, where people think that they’re working on inclusion, where what they’re doing is the old traditional mainstreaming, the child is there, but not necessarily an
active participant in the group. They go to science, I mean they go to PE, they go to lunch, they go to recess, so they’re being mainstreamed or they’re being included, but um, I think being more of an active participant in the subjects is more what inclusion means.

The educators believed that “active participation” was the critical signifying marker of inclusion. Active participation meant that students, at the very least, had to be physically close to each other and “doing something.” This something was defined along a continuum of passive to active behaviors. These included listening to someone read, watching the teacher, helping in a group activity, drawing a picture, finding information, writing a story, reading a story to a buddy, and solving problems. As several educators commented, “We do a lot of hands on learning. You have to get the kids involved.”

**Facilitating active participation.** To facilitate active participation, educators recognized that they had to vary their teaching routines. First, they organized students’ desks and teaching centers to accommodate small groups of students. Next, they made deliberate decisions to form mixed ability groups that supported the teaching strategies most frequently used by educators. These included peer tutoring, cooperative group projects, computer assisted learning, and large group instruction. Although these teaching strategies helped the students with disabilities gain entrance into a social group, it often placed them in marginal roles.

**Everybody has a job.** Whether educators used a cooperative group project or peer tutoring to structure a lesson, they often reminded students to make sure that each member of the group had a turn or a responsibility. At the beginning of the year, the assigning of roles was a highly structured process. For example, the teacher identified and assigned roles that included a recorder, a facilitator, a timekeeper, and several research assistants. Over time, this formal role assignment deteriorated into an informal process and the group became responsible for “making sure that everyone participates.” The more advanced students often emerged as group leaders and children with minimal academic skills usually took the role of what we informally termed the *go-fer* (“Go [ask the teacher] for the markers, Jimmy”). In large group activities, children with disabilities became scorekeepers or helped to distribute or collect materials for the teacher. When asked how educators included students with moderate learning disabilities in the general education classroom, one teacher explained:

I can give an example. We were working on long division and one student was keeping score for the two teams, but he was right up at the board as the process of the division was going on so he could see each step by step going on and he (pause), it made him maintain focus throughout the entire activity and game that the children were doing, whereas if he had been sitting back at his seat supposedly working the division problems, he wouldn’t have been working ’em, but he was focusing more on those problems standing at the board keeping score and watching the two people who were competing on the board than he would have if he were doing the problems at his seat. So including to the greatest extent possible that you can in the classroom where you’re giving him the maximum amount out of the activity.
Some students with moderate disabilities helped the teacher by serving as instructional aides or models, as illustrated in this example:

In a kindergarten class, David [who has Down Syndrome and is identified as having a moderate disability] was selected by the teacher to help demonstrate how the earth revolved around the sun. David was the sun and each of the other students was to represent the earth. During the demonstration, the teacher put her hands on David’s shoulders and slowly turned him around and around. She instructed the other students to walk around David one at a time.

Educators believed that involving students in activities meant that each was learning. The key was to identify what role and function the individual student could successfully fulfill. Marvel Springs School faculty and staff consistently promoted the idea that every student had a talent to offer and that these talents should be recognized and valued. As one teacher commented, “All kids can learn, its just a matter of making some adaptations for them.” One administrator said, “In this school we all look for ways to recognize the progress of every student.” Having a job or responsibility in the group was believed to be the best way to increase students’ self-esteem and to build tolerance for others. When asked what she wanted most to accomplish with her students, a fourth-grade teacher said:

I guess basically I want my students to come out of my room with good self-concepts, not only have them learn the skills that they require to learn during fourth grade, but have them care about themselves and feel good about themselves. I think that’s so important.

If students with disabilities participated in an activity, regardless of that role, the educators believed this led to high self-esteem and nondisabled students would more likely accept the students with disabilities. However, students with disabilities tended to take on roles that serviced the learning of other students. The following excerpt from our field-notes illustrates this phenomenon:

Tim was in first grade. His physical features indicated a genetic disorder, Down syndrome. We never left the school without at least three hugs a piece from Tim. With a smile that was contagious, Tim would call out, “Have a nice day” as he helped us gather up our things whenever we left the room. It didn’t seem to matter if we were just going to use the restroom or get a drink of water, one move toward that classroom door set off a call to duty for Tim. He rushed to help us pack up our notebooks, purses, and video equipment. But this ritualized and royal escorting behavior was not limited to just our visits. Tim rushed to help the classroom teacher find her belongings, coats and lunch boxes of fellow students, itinerant educators, and visiting students. We soon learned to steer clear of the door unless we really wanted to leave.

In some instances, the student’s overgeneralization of this servicing behavior interfered with the teacher’s attempts to engage him in more academic tasks as indicated by this educator’s attempt to redirect a first grader named Frank:
[The teacher is standing by the chalkboard getting ready to review the names of the months. She assigns some students to collect the work they just finished and directs everyone else to come and sit on the floor in front of her.]

Teacher: Who would like to help me pick up your journals? OK, anybody else if your work is complete. Leave your pencils on your journals because someone is going to pick them up. OK, everybody else come into a circle.

[The children all come forward except for Frank who starts picking up books and pencils on the other students’ desks.]

Teacher: Frank, you should not be picking up.
Female Student: Frank he’s still picking up.
Teacher: Frank, thank you for your help, but there are two people already supposed to pick them up. Everybody onto the floor except for Zane, Jenna and Carl who are picking up journals and pencils. Frank, come here. [Frank slowly walks to the circle sits down, but continues to watch Zane picking up the journals.]

Teacher [to the group]: Now we’ve had a long weekend since we’ve been at school on Friday so you’ll be really rested and ready to begin our calendar lesson today. Are you ready? I want to hear you sing [the names of the months].

[Frank continues to watch the three other students. He points to a journal on another desk in an attempt to get Zane to collect that journal. Frank watches Zane, Jenna, and Carl as they finish collecting the items and placing them on the teacher’s desk. He smiles at them until they come and sit down with the other students.]

When we interviewed nondisabled students, they often commented on how some students were not very good at academics, but that they were very good helpers. Moreover, nondisabled students frequently talked about how helping others was a very important and positive thing to do. When we asked students to tell us about students they knew who had learning problems, they frequently commented on the helping role. One fifth grader explained:

Fifth Grader: Well, I know one kid that has mental retardation, he can’t read or anything, but everybody helps him, and that’s OK.
Interviewer: How does everybody help him?
Fifth Grader: Well, sometimes if we’re all reading out loud, then the teacher will help him read it.
Interviewer: Can you give me an example of how she helps him read it?
Fifth Grader: Yea, like if he can’t read … um … the words or says, th th th the cap-i-tals [sic]. Then she will just read it for him.
Interviewer: I see, well can you tell me anything about this kid’s friends?
Fifth Grader: Well, he doesn’t really have friends, just people who help him out.

In an effort to demonstrate and recognize the strengths of all students, educators deliberately searched for positive attributes of each child in their classroom. They publicly recognized these positive traits by nominating particular students and posting their names on cards in the main hallway. The school secretary explained, “Each week the teachers chose one student from the class to be on the wall. They read off the names on the intercom and the students come down and get their picture taken.” We watched week after week, documenting the names and comments displayed on the wall. It was interesting to note that although many students were publicly recognized for their academic work (“Tommy won third place in the spelling bee” or “Samantha got an A on her math test”), we saw a pattern of public recognition emerge for children who had disabilities. These public comments consistently recognized improvement in the social rather than academic domains. For example, “Tommy had a great day on Friday. He worked hard in following classroom and school rules. He was extra good while in the hall. Good job Tommy!!!,” or “Jack Diamond for adjusting so well to having a wheelchair. He has a great attitude,” and “Tonya always works hard in speech class. Her hard work shows in her terrific speech. I also appreciate her being a great helper.” Over time, it was apparent that the essential focus of learning for some children (particularly those with disabilities) was in the development of social rather than academic skills. This is not to say that these students did not have academic goals, but we did not observe the actualization of these goals in the general classroom teaching routines.

Inclusive Teaching Routines

As perceived by the teachers, heterogeneous grouping was the most efficient means for meeting the needs of all students. When we asked educators how they dealt with the wide range of academic ability in their classrooms, they talked about the different ways students could assimilate information. Peer tutoring and cooperative group learning activities became the most frequently used teaching routine. One teacher stated, “I’m a big believer in group work. I feel that each student can benefit from watching and learning from other’s learning styles and knowledge.” Still another teacher responded:

I like to use a lot of group work … I think group work gives the kids with higher achievement the ability to relate to the students with disabilities, learning how to work with them and learning how not to be critical of them. It also helps the students with disabilities to not, maybe, feel so stigmatized, more accepted.

Our field and videotaped observations revealed many different grouping strategies including large group instruction, quad groups, and peer buddies. These teaching routines provided support for the physical and social inclusion of students with disabilities. However, when we examined the nature of interaction that took place within these social
groups, we found that the information learned was, once again, more focused on the social rather than cognitive domains.

Although students with disabilities appeared actively engaged in group work, we found that the type of instruction, particularly for children with disabilities, was academically limiting. In the area of reading, educators used peer tutoring by matching advanced students with lower ability students. The teachers believed that peer tutoring provided a type of guided practice that allowed lower achieving students to practice their reading skills. The use of “reading buddies” was a preferred teaching strategy because it appeared to be individualized instruction, a term used frequently by the special educators to describe the educational needs of children with disabilities.

The reading buddies strategy consisted of an informal peer tutoring session that extended for approximately 20 to 30 min and allowed students the opportunity to read orally to another peer. Peer buddies were assigned by the teacher and as stated previously, involved a higher achieving student with a lower achieving student. Generally, the text used in the tutoring was matched to fit the independent reading level of the higher achieving student. Less attention was paid to the reading level of the lower achieving student; however, it appeared that the lower achieving student generally functioned within or below his or her instructional level.

The idea of the reading buddy strategy did provide students with individualized attention, but because the peer tutors did not have the benefit of any type of training, there was no corrective feedback provided to the lower achieving student. The peer tutoring was implemented as a way to provide unskilled readers with much needed practice, but without corrective feedback, it became a listening activity for them. Skilled readers received more practice in reading, whereas unskilled readers learned to listen.

Modifying Instruction

Marvel Springs School educators believed that grouping students was an efficient and efficacious way to meet the needs of all students in the general education classroom. Because it did not specifically change the content of the academic material, it gained strength by virtue of its “fairness.” Educators viewed these changes in routines as “equitable” for everyone. This is exemplified by the following educator’s comment:

Generally, I find that groups of my students have similar abilities, and therefore you end up with several groups in a classroom. Occasionally you end up with a couple people that have different needs and you deal with them as gently as you can, but still provide them with the support they need. I try to make their experience in my class as normal as possible and normally there is at least some way they can fit in the regular classroom.

Other Marvel Springs School educators talked about adjusting the curriculum for students with disabilities or students at risk of school failure. In addition to multiple grouping, they provided modifications for these students. Modifications consisted of changing the quantity of workload assignments or reducing the number of practice problems. One fourth-grade educator said, “I have found techniques of modification,
modifying with those [inclusion students]. I think it’s important that they stay in the same textbooks, but yet modify their work assignments.”

Marvel School educators learned about modifying instruction in a variety of ways. The school administration provided in-service professional development training and hired substitutes to cover classes while special educators attended conferences and workshops. Educators reported that they followed the state’s educational frameworks in regard to what content to teach, but their knowledge of instructional strategies was obtained primarily from other educators and magazines. Several teachers made statements like this one: “The school recommends the curriculum, then I get my ideas from certain education magazines, and observing other teachers.” Many general educators told us they relied heavily on the advice of the special education teacher to make modifications for students with disabilities. Statements such as the following were very common:

I am fortunate to have a wonderful working relationship with the special needs teachers in my building. One special education teacher makes sure the children with learning disabilities have the right answer. Overall, I respect and appreciate these people and would be a fool not to utilize their expertise in these areas.

Although educators seemed to have a plethora of teaching “tricks,” there was no theoretical base to integrate these strategies. No distinction was made between research-based teaching techniques or folk knowledge.

Modifying Assessment

Educators believed that students learned by actively participating within groups. They believed activity was a fundamental sign of learning and that students could learn from each other. Educators assigned students to small, mixed-ability groups or paired lower ability students with higher ability students to complete a given project or assignment. They scanned for and marked particular student behaviors as evidence of this active participation. These markers included sitting up in the chair as opposed to laying one’s head on the desk, sitting in close proximity to other students, displaying manipulatives or supplies, talking with other students, and an absence of disruptive group behavior.

Marvel Springs educators seldom sat at their desks to scan or monitor group learning. They did not occupy themselves with paperwork or nonteaching duties during this time. Rather, they spent considerable time walking among the groups, often stopping to assist children with the completion of a task. Whereas the advanced students generally volunteered to demonstrate the accomplishments of the group to the teacher, children with disabilities did not. Recognizing the reticence of some children to respond voluntarily, educators acknowledged the “reporter” in the group and then turned their attention to the child with disabilities. The following excerpt from our fieldnotes illustrates this focused attention:

Anne, a second-grade teacher, stops to talk to a group of students working on a cooperative group game. She nods to Kevin, clearly the leader of the group, after he shows her
how many cards they have matched. Anne turns her attention to another child in the
group, James [a child identified as having a learning disability]. She asks James to show
her how he should do the first part of the task. James sits up in his seat, picks up an index
card with the word “out” printed on it. He taps the card softly on the desk and looks at
the other cards on the table. After approximately four seconds, Anne takes the card from
his hand and places it below an index card containing the word “side.” After modeling,
Anne pats James on the shoulder, smiles and walks over to another small group. As she
steps away from James, he slouches down into his seat and starts rolling a pencil back
and forth across his desk. The other children in his group appear focused on the card task,
encouraging each other to find a match.

Educators also provided whole- or large-group instruction and incorporated cues to
elicit the engagement of all students. Nonverbal cues also gave teachers information about
who understood the content and who did not. For example, we observed several teachers
modeling the computation of math problems and asking students for feedback. Students
were ask to “give her a thumbs up” if they understood and a “thumbs down” if they did not.
Scanning the group response was a way to verify that students were actively participating
and determine if students believed they understood. In other cases, the teacher might
model how to compute a problem and then direct students to solve another problem at their
seat. When the group was finished, the teacher computed the problem while projecting it
on a screen. She encouraged students to compare their answer with hers.

To differentiate instruction for students with different reading levels, teachers modi-
fied their instructional strategies for groups of students. It was not unusual to see some
students reading silently at their desks, others reading aloud to the teacher or using head-
phones to listen to a tape-recorded story.

Making Inclusion Work: The Phenomenon
of Benevolent Collusion

There is no doubt in our minds that educators at Marvel Springs School believed in the
philosophy of inclusion and worked diligently to construct contexts of interaction
among students with and without disabilities. They varied their teaching routines, en-
couraged active participation, and frequently monitored student feedback. However, this
monitoring of signals to verify students’ engagement was not as effective as they had an-
ticipated. Much of this was not because educators were inattentive or distracted by non-
teaching activities. Rather, it was a direct result of a mutually constructed social inter-
action process between educators and children with disabilities. We called this process
benevolent collusion, which was a tacit form of communicative interaction that was ne-
gotiated between educators and students who were academically challenged to create a
context of superficial social inclusion. Students with academic deficits tacitly agreed to
take a passive role in collaborative groups and to service the needs of higher ability stu-
dents to be a part of the group. Because the students with disabilities generally appeared
happy and content with their assignments and “got along well” with others, inclusion
appeared to be successful. The focus for educators was to mark and publicly promote the
social contributions of the students who were academically challenged.
When general educators monitored the activity of students with academic limitations, it appeared that these students were actively engaged in learning. Only when the teachers looked at the videotapes did they recognize the way students changed their behavior to fit the teachers’ expectations. For example, in our earlier illustration of James working in a group, Anne thought that he was engaged in the activities, but when she reviewed the videotape she responded, “I guess he really wasn’t getting it. Sometimes I wonder if what we’re doing is really meeting these kids’ needs.” After reviewing the videotapes, the kindergarten teacher remarked, “giving him [child with Down syndrome] different materials keeps him busy, but he doesn’t get all the information that the other kids get.” A fourth-grade teacher explained, “It’s frustrating because I think these kids need more attention than others. I mean he needs a lot of hugging whereas the other kids are listening.” Although Marvel Springs general education teachers expressed lower academic expectations for students with disabilities, they consistently emphasized the positive social aspects of their classrooms. This teacher stated:

This activity is wonderful, my favorite in fact, because everybody participates helping others. It is important for self-esteem and for students to learn to be good hearted and help others. It’s not a strong academic, but it’s most important for self-esteem.

Students with disabilities played a critical part in reducing the visibility of their academic limitations. Whereas educators looked for signals to indicate that all students were on task, students with disabilities learned clever ways to “duck and cover.” We saw students who seemed to know just the right moment to turn a page and run their finger through the text when the teacher asked for an example. Although it appeared that the student was actively engaged, searching the text, the videotape revealed that the student was in the wrong part of the book. When these students went to the listening centers, they often went to the center without a text in hand or failed to attend to the written text when listening. In large group settings, like the one presented earlier, educators instructed students to solve a problem on paper first and then they did it together using the overhead. It was common for older students with high-incidence disabilities to write the problem and then pretend to write the answer. These students knew to write the answer ever so discreetly after the teacher solved the problem on the board. When the teacher said, “Thumbs up if you got that one right,” these students immediately raised their hand. We also observed students with disabilities who repeatedly chose to complete less complex activities when given a choice of tasks. They downloaded pictures from Internet sites for reports rather than summarizing information or writing reports. They drew illustrations for book reports, they listened to books on tapes and retold stories, delivered or gathered supplies, greeted and hosted visitors, listened to stories read to them by peers, and relied on peers to help them complete academic tasks.

On the other hand, when students with disabilities attempted to let educators know that they did not understand the material, teachers often tried to divert the students’ attention from the issue by encouraging the students to “not worry about it.” Rather than provide direct instruction, teachers sometimes focused on trying to discount a student’s difficulty or reassure the student that learning would take time. It certainly was not that
Marvel Springs School educators failed to notice that children were frustrated. Rather, it was because they had invested so much time and energy building a protective social context that they believed fit the prototype of inclusion. Unfortunately, this protective context inadvertently devalued some students by restricting their access to high-status cultural knowledge. Students with disabilities had gained entrance to the social group, but it was a tenuous position.

DISCUSSION

Teachers at Marvel Springs School negotiated a shared meaning of inclusion that built a unique school culture. A learning community was established that embraced children with disabilities and students at risk and created a school world that embodied specific cultural rules. First, no child was excluded from opportunities to socially interact with others. Second, school faculty modeled ways to mark signs of ability in all children and actively searched for positive markers of success. Finally, they established a context of caring and cooperation among all students. These subcultural rules guided teachers’ actions and decisions about their teaching practices. They consciously attended to and marked signs of social interaction that supported these beliefs.

When Marvel Springs educators attempted to provide children with disabilities equal access to valued cultural knowledge, they focused on changes in classroom routines and emphasized the social routines rather than cognitive domains. Their teaching practices focused on collaboration strategies and group projects. They adapted their teaching to include tape recordings, videos, and curriculum projects. This finding is consistent with those of Baker and Zigmond (1995) who examined the instruction within five case studies of children with high-incidence disabilities across the United States. They found that “most accommodations consisted of changing an approach to instruction for the whole class” (p. 173) rather than for a single student. Peer-mediated strategies were utilized extensively and much of the reading instruction became the responsibility of untrained peers.

Although these peer-mediated strategies helped students with disabilities at Marvel School gain important general knowledge (i.e., basic factual knowledge across disciplines), it did not address students’ deficit skill areas. Whereas the inclusion models described by Baker and Zigmond (1995) appeared to function as ways to provide “service without labels” (p. 177), Marvel Springs teachers’ practices were based on the notion that active participation in collaborative or cooperative groups would not only create a context of belonging, it would also address skill deficits for all students. They believed that social learning in itself would provide students with disabilities a more centralized position within the cultural world of public school. Unfortunately, an overcoding of social activity rather than diagnostic and prescriptive interventions tended to place these students in marginal roles.

The dominant culture in the United States emphasizes and rewards those who are highly literate, disciplined, and capable of thinking critically and creatively. To be considered an integral part of society one has to have enough power to challenge, change, or sustain the social structures that currently exist (Gardner, 1999). One
must be able to actively engage in discussion about new discoveries and choices. However, active engagement means more than watching others or servicing those in power. Individuals must acquire a certain level of literacy and mastery of disciplines (Gardner, 1999) to establish a position that is within the dominant culture rather than on the edge of it.

Without a corresponding emphasis on intensive, diagnostic, and individualized direct instruction, students with disabilities and teachers unknowingly created a system that kept some students from gaining the skills they needed to empower them. Although students with disabilities gained personal attention through additional support personnel, had considerable opportunity to learn from others in integrated classrooms, and had access to new materials and new roles, their power came from a position of weakness.

Although teachers sometimes worried about students’ with disabilities not getting enough instruction, they often discounted these signs as they became immersed in the collusion drama. Teachers and students attended to and marked particular signs of social acceptance as evidence of a successful inclusion. Furthermore, the management of all students in the general education classroom was also regarded as a tribute to their success. Students and faculty became invested in the continuation of this school world of inclusion, so much so, that students with disabilities and teachers worked together to mask indicators of academic weakness.

Almost 16 years ago, Johnston (1985) documented the strategies that nonreaders used to hide their reading disabilities in school to avoid social rejection. The coping strategies nonreaders used then (i.e., complementing authority, enlisting the help of more able peers) are not unlike the social skills taught to students with disabilities in this school. In addition, reading strategies like relying excessively on context clues, use of prediction, memorization, idiosyncratic strategies (guessing), and avoiding print are strikingly similar to the accommodation strategies suggested by special educators at Marvel Springs School. Students with disabilities and their teachers at Marvel Springs School became emotionally invested in securing their students’ tenuous position within the social group.

It can be argued that the data collection process, which was conducted intermittently, rather than in one or two continuous semesters, limited our access to instances of individualized academic remediation. However, toward the end of the study, Nancy Stockall deliberately selected times to observe the special education teacher in the resource room where direct instruction would most likely take place. Unfortunately, what remediation did take place was not data driven or research based. The emphasis was on strengthening students’ compensatory skills and was frequently referred to as “test-taking strategies.”

This study revealed the dynamic web of interactive signs that created a context for the inception of benevolent collusion. If inclusion means being valued as a member of a learning community, then it is imperative that children with disabilities contribute to the group by acquiring the core cultural knowledge of the community. In this country, it means learning to read. Unless students with disabilities learn to read, they cannot gain legitimate power within the world of school or in the larger community.
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