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Promoting Inclusion in a "Struggling School": Supporting Co-Teachers Through Critical Appreciative-Inquiry Based Professional Development

Louis Olander
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PROMOTING INCLUSION IN A “STRUGGLING” SCHOOL:
SUPPORTING CO-TEACHERS THROUGH CRITICAL APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY-BASED
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

by

Louis Olander

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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Louis Olander

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

Promoting Inclusion in a “Struggling” School:
Supporting Co-teachers Through Critical Appreciative Inquiry-Based Professional Development

by

Louis Olander

Advisor: Terrie Epstein

This dissertation explores the extent to which the beliefs and practices of teachers who work in a “struggling” school can be shifted towards inclusiveness through an action research based professional development program. The school was struggling in that it was charged with the education of children who are marginalized by a range of social forces while simultaneously accountable to institutional priorities. Broadly speaking, these institutional priorities preferred behaviorist punishment and technocratic approaches to meeting student needs, devaluing and decontextualizing students’ proficiencies as test scores and special education labels, in turn impeding inclusive change. Over the course of four months, an action research project invited four co-teaching pairs of general and special education certified teachers to inquire into their students’ positive experiences in school, as a way of reimagining inclusive education such that it was authentic to their context. Using case study methods, this dissertation is an evaluation of the outcomes of that project. Broadly speaking, teachers’ beliefs and practices significantly shifted towards inclusivity, though our attempts to promote school level inclusive changes were limited.
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CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

Who Am I In This Work?

In this chapter, I try to give context for this study by explaining who I am in this work and what specific issue this dissertation seeks to address. I begin this with an acknowledgement of my positionality with respect to the work that I wish to pursue. Patel (2015), in particular, urges novice researchers working in communities that are historically marginalized to carefully consider their relationship to that which they hope to research from the outset. In the first place, I consider my relationship to dis/ability, a social construction imbued with heavy subjectivities. I then consider my relationship to students in urban settings, as an often-unwitting oppressor—surely well-intentioned, but also clearly complicit in deeply problematic educational practices situated well above my own individual locus of influence or even awareness. Finally, I consider my co-teaching relationships with other urban educators. In foregrounding my positionality, I hope to give the reader a sense of how I approach this work that it is deeply connected to both who I am and how I have come to understand what it has been possible for me to do in this dissertation project.

My Own Dis/Ability

I have a complicated personal relationship with dis/ability. Following the lead of Waitoller and King-Thorius (2015), as well as many others, I am opting to use a slash to separate the two parts of the word in this chapter, in order to indicate that disablement is not a simple individually located process, but rather is the complex and problematic product of structural factors in tense conversation with individual differences that often produces marginalization and exclusion. Following this tradition of understanding dis/ability as a situational process means also recognizing that ability, and the things that individuals have capacity for are placed at the
forefront of how we understand people with dis/abilities, instead of their subjective deficits which
are often the focus of they are understood by a society that values individual achievement
(Dudley-Marling, 2004).

I was as much of a draftee as you might ever find in a volunteer army - I never had much
inclination towards joining the military but needed to find a way to pay for college. When I
graduated high school in 2001, the National Guard was offering free tuition at public universities
in New York. I enlisted for a six-year part-time commitment, and after a summer of working in a
convenience store, I began basic training at Fort Sill, Oklahoma in early September. I had
expected a difficult few months of training as a medic followed by a few years of weekends that
would teach me discipline and pay my way through school. The National Guard had rarely been
called to active duty since World War II, so I thought the most action I would see would be
sandbagging or shoveling snow. The events of the following day, September 11, 2001, would
change those plans dramatically.

I was sent to Iraq less than three years later, withdrawing from the classes that I had joined
the army to pay for. As a front-line medic in an infantry unit, I cannot say I have any fond
memories of my time in that country. I do not, to this day, know how to express the sadness and
pain that I carry with me from that time, and I would far rather leave it to the reader’s imagination
to conceive of what might have happened there than I would to insufficiently explain.

Nevertheless, two months after I returned to New York from Iraq, I bought a studio
apartment across the street from Brooklyn College with the money I had saved during my time on
active duty. I had hoped to finish my schoolwork and become a teacher. The day after I got the
keys, I took a break from painting my new place to grab lunch in my desert camouflage uniform,
which I was more than happy to ruin with the leafy green color I was putting on the walls of my
new home. Walking just around the corner, I remember a group of teenage boys from the high school nearby running past me, one yelling, “That shit’s fake—That’s a BB gun!” followed by a series of very real gunshots. Without thinking or even acknowledging what was happening, I tended to the wound of a middle schooler shot in the leg and an older boy who had been shot in the abdomen until ambulances arrived. I walked away from the scene, and began to feel an intense itch in my shoulder. Realizing that I too was bleeding, I asked the ambulances on site to take me to the hospital.

In the coming months and years, I graduated with my bachelor’s degree, and tried to start looking for work that would support me while I gained teacher certification. However, I no longer ever felt safe outside my apartment, so I hunkered down inside for days on end, sleeping as long as I could to avoid being awake. When I finally found a job working in human resources at a university, I was unable to hold on to it, as at least one of my co-workers found my body language to be threatening. At the same time, the Veterans Administration had determined that my Post Traumatic Stress Disorder was a severe enough barrier to full employment that I should receive financial compensation.

Yet I still felt the need to work, not exactly for money, but for myself. I found comfort in knowing that human resources had not been the work I desired to do anyway. I wanted to teach kids, as I always had. Having been shot by a Black teenage boy had made me generally reclusive and fearful. Paradoxically, the same experience made me want to teach in an urban setting even more. In this time, I learned a great deal about myself - that I have, even in the darkest times, a deep care for children and for learning.

I am wary about framing the transition from my situation at that time to where I am now, healthy and happy, as a story of overcoming dis/ability. I did not “pull through” because of any
great strength or merit of my own. Instead, I attribute how different things are for me now to the 
love and patience that I have been lucky enough to receive, the sense of purpose that I have 
gained as an educator, and to concrete changes in the context of my life. More than any other 
single thing, my current well-being is due to the love of my wife, Barbara, who never allowed me 
to feel unworthy or broken. As I am unable to fully articulate the value she continues to bring into 
my life, I will again leave it up to the reader’s imagination. Beyond that, I owe my current well-
being to the profound sense of purpose that being an educator gives me, a hope to improve lives 
through learning. However, even those powerful factors were not enough to drive away the 
nightmares and panic attacks. It took actually moving away from the place where I was shot to 
feel better. These three factors, love, purpose, and concrete structural change drive the way I think 
about educational change, especially for students with dis/abilities.

So my relationship to dis/ability is complicated. While I certainly have experienced 
physiological and cognitive changes as a consequence of my time in combat, the expression of 
those changes is broadly mediated by context. While I once certainly thought myself to be a 
disabled veteran, I now hold a much more complicated view of my own abilities as well as their 
relationship to the world around me. Most critically, though, as a white, heterosexual, cisgender 
man, whatever experience or identity I have around dis/ability is distinctly unidimensional, and 
does not lie at any intersections with other markers for structural oppression. Therefore, I cannot 
claim that my experience is remarkably akin to that of any of my students, who do exist at the 
intersections of multiple vectors of oppression; however, I do think that it helps me frame a 
potential avenue to help them.
A Teacher Who Never Quite Got There

To continue the story, two years later, I was accepted into an alternative certification program for career changers and new college graduates to become new teachers. Because of my background with medicine, the program told me that I would become certified and employed as a special education teacher. In fact, the program’s overall disposition towards students with dis/abilities may be described as medical in nature in that it treated human difference as deviance in need of fixing (Valle & Connor, 2010). As such, the way I understood my job as a special educator was to diagnose and treat deviance—especially “emotional disturbance”—as it manifested itself within children. My understanding of the job was therefore to control students with disturbed behavior; not to care for, give purpose to, or materially empower kids being naughty. I was not introduced to a perspective that that misbehavior may actually be reasonable, even if self-injurious, reactions to injustice or unfairness or as the contemporary resistance to historical disenfranchisement enacted on the bodies of young children (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). I was to leverage the disciplinary mindset that I had in order to train students.

Once I had started teacher training, a close friend of mine who had been in the military with me and who had grown up in a dangerous neighborhood in Brooklyn warned me about taking the job. He told me about the one time he went down to the “SPED floor” of his school as a child: “Man...there was blood everywhere...you don’t want to work like that” (Ironically, he is now a policeman). On one of my first visits to a high school I turned a corner to see two boys punching each other just after I had passed through the metal detectors. Consequently, I came to initially understand urban schools as places in need of strict controls, especially in special education settings, as places of violence—not in the figurative sense used when describing
structural inequalities—but as places of literal violence where children acted viciously upon each other when left to their own deviant whims.

My teacher education program did little to disrupt this. I finished my master’s degree in Special Education with a strong medicalized understanding of the myriad ways that children in special education in urban schools were pathologically different from “normal” students. In our teacher education classes, we used metaphors of zoos and asylums to describe the contexts in which we worked. It should not be surprising, then, that after completion of the degree program and two years teaching, nearly a majority of those who I entered teaching with quit teaching and moved on to other professions or law school. For me, it was finishing and moving away from my alternative certification teacher education program that began to spur the kind of thinking that actually taught me to work to be helpful to children.

It took a few years to identify the ways that my students’ interactions with dis/ability were similar to my own, particularly in how physiological differences became dis/abilities in context. Most importantly, I came to realize that the things they needed were not tighter controls, and that my students benefited most from the very things that I had when returning from war: love, purpose, and concrete contextual change. I had come to enjoy working in a self-contained special education classroom where I had built loving, reciprocal relationships with my students. In those contexts, the importance of care and positivity mirrored my family life - that my own patience and love for my students allowed growth in new directions for them. When working in a collaborative inquiry project with a team of other teachers, we identified ways in which giving students concrete, meaningful feedback on their work, and explicit explanations about why they were asked to do specific tasks, therefore giving their assignments purpose. This project dramatically changed the way that students approached learning in the classroom, as well as the way we
understood our roles as teachers of students, many of whom had dis/abilities. Additionally, in the cases that I was successfully able to advocate for students to move out of my self-contained classroom and into more inclusive settings where they sat alongside their peers without dis/ability documentation, my students went on to be the most successful in the school. In one group, ten of the twelve students that started in my self-contained ninth grade graduated high school in four years, far better than the school average for general education students.

Which is not to say I had figured it all out - I certainly had not. The same alternative teaching program that promoted medicalized understandings of dis/ability also certainly preached white saviorism (Aronson, 2017). The ahistorical perspective that brought me into teaching insisted that student underachievement was the function of ineffective teaching, not the cumulative effects of the wide range of racist institutional structures over generations. The “achievement gap” was just that - a deficit without precedent or prologue - that could be ameliorated by heroic teachers armed with powerful constructivist pedagogical innovations. Even after seven years of teaching, I still struggled mightily at times because of this, particularly when race became a confounding factor in my relationships with students. Many of the most painful and regrettable moments of my teaching career came courtesy of racial conflict. I must bear the blame that I deserve in this regard, an all-too-often colorblind educator who insisted that hard work and persistence would yield college degrees and middle-class lifestyles for students. I somehow missed that these students had been repeatedly and unrelentingly injured by pedagogies and policies that would not see them in a light appreciating who they were and what they could do. To borrow Kendi’s (2016) term, I was a consumer of the racist ideas of the educational system, even though I believed myself to be above them.
Perhaps most importantly, I was unaware of the co-constructions of race and dis/ability. I knew that almost all of my special education students were black boys, even in otherwise racially and ethnically diverse schools, yet I failed to see the broader racist system that my classroom and I were merely a part of. Even in my seventh and final year teaching, I pushed for suspensions of students that would not respond to my interventions, unaware of the positionalities and subjectivities that literally colored my relationships with those I taught.

My Co-Teachers

Over the course of my seven years as a teacher, I had the dis/pleasure of co-teaching with no fewer than twenty different teachers. As a special education teacher, I was often assigned to quasi-inclusion classrooms that featured an unhealthy mixture of students with documented dis/abilities and other students who were believed to be too difficult to keep in “regular” classes (Olander, 2016). These classes, officially called Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT) classrooms, featured a special and general educator who were assigned to work together to plan and deliver instruction together for a student body comprised of forty percent students with IEP’s and sixty percent without. In some cases, positive mentoring relationships developed with partners, with me initially serving as the mentee, and then eventually becoming a mentor to new teachers, many of whom came from the same or similar alternative certification programs that I had. However, in many other cases, I was involuntarily paired with teachers who wanted neither me nor “those” kids in their classrooms.

It was a struggle that I never successfully resolved. In some cases, their resistance to ICT was probably little more than racially-tinged ableism - that my students were not capable. In others, it was a much more benign defense of professional autonomy. In still others, interpersonal dysfunction probably came from a fear of being exposed as under qualified or incompetent by
having another educator in the room. On my end, meaningfully collaborating with up to four partners at a time was not possible, particularly because of the bureaucratic responsibilities that were increasingly heaped upon me as the senior special education teacher. For what it is worth, I would argue that I should not have been assigned those responsibilities as early as I was, but given the pace of special education teacher attrition I was one of the most senior special education teachers in my school after my third year.

I ended up in a compromised state, creating time to collaborate with willing partners and entirely eschewing contact with resistant ones. In the latter situation, I often favored pull-out alternative or parallel teaching models in which I took a handful of “my” students back to “my” class to work on lessons. This was not an entirely unfruitful way of managing the barriers to productively co-teaching, but much of the promise of co-teaching in leveraging and combining the strengths of two professionals remained broadly unfulfilled, undoubtedly at the expense of student learning.

I also resisted co-teaching because it seemed injurious to children with dis/abilities to throw them into quasi-inclusive general education classes without adequate preparation, transition, or support. In 2011, my fourth year of teaching, an initiative of then Mayor Bloomberg mandated moving students with dis/abilities into less restrictive classrooms began, perhaps in response to reports that indicted New York City’s high rate of educational segregation of students with dis/abilities (Hehir et al., 2005) or perhaps because of simple cost-saving (Wheaton, 2011). Whatever the intentions, my team and I were often forced by my principal to “amend” student instructional programs and then seek parental consent after the fact instead of taking the time to hear and address parental concerns regarding those program changes.
In the end, my co-teachers were sometimes my greatest allies and sometimes my greatest enemies, and inclusion (which I had not distinguished from ICT) was a deeply problematic idea. Now, five years away from the classroom, I see the immense unfulfilled potential that both practices have. I contend that that unfulfilled potential comes from bureaucratic mandates for each without support for the development of attitudes and dispositions that are key to making inclusive co-teaching work. Valle and Connor (2010) note that while we can legislate policy, we cannot legislate attitude, just as Danforth (2014a) cites a broad need for teachers to develop supportive dispositions towards inclusive practice in the US. Specifically, I believe that a great deal more support is needed in New York City to realize the unfulfilled promise of inclusion by more proactively addressing teacher beliefs who are assigned to quasi-inclusive settings. This is acutely true in the cases when teachers struggle due to inexperience, difficult workloads, and students who are often thought to be “difficult” or dis/abled because of contextual factors.

**Framing the Problem**

To take Patel’s (2015) consideration of positionality further, in which she obligates researchers to not just consider the question of “why me?” as I have just attempted to, but also questions of “why this?” and “why now?” which I will presently address. First, I will seek to frame the landscape of urban education in terms of test-score based accountability and market-style reforms. Next, I will discuss how New York City-based policy initiatives led to a quasi-inclusion based on technocratic conceptions of inclusion. Finally, I give a local account of the school that I will conduct my research in, accounting for these factors.

**Neoliberalism and Test-Score Accountability**

Test-score based accountability and related market-based educational reforms have driven attempts to improve educational outcomes in “underperforming” schools, but the mechanisms that
have been used to try to address underperformance are as problematic as the ways in which that it is understood. Following in the ideological tradition of Frederick Taylor’s *Scientific Management* (1911), the goals of accountability reform have been greater homogeneity of educational outcomes based on principles of efficiency. Underlying both scientific management and accountability based education reforms is *behaviorism*, grounded the ontological understanding of human behavior as driven primarily or even exclusively by external stimuli. Foundational scientists in behaviorist psychology include Ivan Pavlov who investigated the physiology of reward and punishment, Edward Thorndike who leveraged reward and punishment in the service of learning, and Burrhus Skinner who directly applied external reinforcement to schooling, experimenting with what we would now consider to be crude learning machines on his own daughter who appeared to have learning delays (Bjork, 1997).

Behaviorism has been attractive to education policy makers because it is also particularly consonant with the capitalist economic paradigm. Spring (2015) highlights this “rational choice” paradigm in the work of economists Milton Friedman and Gary Becker’s work in connecting the idea of rationality to calculation of external costs and benefits, analogous to punishments and rewards. Adherents to this paradigm have designed experiments to influence urban education policy, in one notable case suggesting that taking pay away from urban school teachers whose students perform poorly may have “significant potential for exploiting loss aversion in the pursuit of … optimal public policy” (Fryer, Levitt, List, & Sadoff, 2012, p. 18).

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 enshrined principles of behaviorist accountability in the law, and in so doing reframed the role of the federal government as guarantor of educational standards instead of provider of a modicum of equity, a role taken by the federal government since the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. One of
the key provisions of NCLB is that it requires that states hold schools and districts accountable for closing the so-called “achievement gap” by requiring that schools make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Title I holds that:

Each State plan shall demonstrate that the State has developed and is implementing a single, statewide State accountability system that will be effective in ensuring that all local educational agencies, public elementary schools, and public secondary schools make adequate yearly progress ... Each State accountability system shall ... include sanctions and rewards, such as bonuses and recognition, the State will use to hold local educational agencies and public elementary schools and secondary schools accountable for student achievement and for ensuring that they make adequate yearly progress. (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001)

Clearly evident in the text of the law is the emphasis that it places on reward and punish behaviorist stimuli to drive educational improvement.

As the core legislation of the accountability movement, NCLB has received a remarkable degree of bipartisan consensus. NCLB passed 381-41 in the House, and 87-10 in the Senate without dissent along clear partisan lines, itself an anomaly in voting patterns of both those years and the years since. Such widespread support may be attributed to its appeal to nationalist sentiments, which struck a chord with conservatives and moderate Democrats across the aisle. Liberal Democrats found much to like in the promise of equal opportunity, as well, as NCLB targeted the racial achievement “gap” explicitly and forcefully.

Eight years later, Race to the Top (RTT) expanded the application of accountability-based reforms in education. Housed within the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, RTT extended the reach of the federal government into state education policy by attaching 53.6 billion
dollars of funding, ostensibly for economic stimulus, to accountability-based educational reform. Just like NCLB, RTT ahistorically targets educational inequalities and the achievement gap. The most recent reauthorization, Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) follows suit, maintaining disciplinary sanctions for underperformance with little provision for new supports. All of these federal policies have led to a trickling down of ideologically compliant state and local regulations that have been passed to maximize federal funding for states and municipal school districts.

New York State has held New York City accountable, and in turn New York City has held its schools accountable, among other ways, through report cards. These report cards measure a range of student achievement and school environment characteristics, and until very recently, they have been almost exclusively informed by standardized test data and surveys. This quantitative data has been analyzed at the city level and comparisons have been drawn between schools that are sorted into “peer groups” by common features, such as student body size, number of students with documented dis/abilities, and other seemingly objective measures. Poor performance on tests has led to intense scrutiny of schools and districts not making AYP or receiving poor letter grades. Additionally, schools not meeting AYP benchmarks are threatened with closure or transfer of management to external entities, including private corporations (EngageNY, 2015). Schools with students that consistently failed to meet somewhat arbitrary targets set by the state and city have been put on intervention lists by New York State, as well, and therefore have often had to contend with two jurisdictional bodies threatening to close them. Ironically, placement of a school on one list or another has rarely yielded extra resources to support learning; instead, it has meant intensification of the scrutiny that the school faces by bureaucrats. This pattern continues into monitoring of teacher performance through test-score algorithms that claim to be able to
measure the “value added” by individual teachers through statistical analyses, meanwhile purportedly “controlling” for the effects of poverty, dis/ability, and race (see, for example, Hanushek, 2011; Chetty, Friedman, & Rockoff, 2011), as if those things were meaningfully quantifiable or able to be controlled for. This set of philosophical assumption about measurement of academic achievement and statistical analyses has led to a broader obsession over collecting quantitative test data as a means of surveilling and controlling teachers, schools, and communities. While the effects of this have been relatively benign in communities where students do well on tests, educators that serve impoverished communities of color have been scrutinized and incentivized as a way of improving their performance through punitive behaviorist interventions.

In the words of Paasi Sahlberg, the former Finnish Minister of Education, “Accountability is something that is left when responsibility has been subtracted” (Partanen, 2011). Further, Mark Tucker (2014) of the National Center on Education and the Economy reminds us that accountability means to “bear the consequences for failure to perform.” Therefore, a school improvement system that is based in the idea of accountability necessitates and is fueled by failure. There is further irony in that Tucker, who is an economist and often perceived to be a conservative, cites the failure of test-based accountability in schools – “The damage that test-based accountability has done goes far deeper than a missed opportunity to improve student achievement. It is doing untold damage to the profession of teaching” (p. 12).

Many of the behaviorist reforms in education seek to influence teacher, student, and parent behavior as if those members of school communities were mules who just need to be whipped to work harder. Teacher evaluation systems provide incentives for teachers to teach harder, grades and discipline systems incentivize children to learn harder, and suspensions are even sometimes
used as ways of punishing parents for their kids’ naughty behavior, just as free coffee and snacks provide incentive for parents to “be active” in the parent association. And, in truth, these reforms have not significantly mitigated or reduced the scale of inequality or improved the disparities in educational outcomes between the advantaged and disadvantaged in this country. In fact, a recent study found that there was “no support for the hypothesis that NCLB has, on average, led to the narrowing of racial achievement gaps” (Reardon, Greenberg, Kalogrides, Shores, & Valentino, 2013, p. 1). Conversely, there certainly is evidence that the accountability movement has had a detrimental effect on the curricula of schools, namely in narrowing the curriculum of schools to only that which is tested, English and Math (Froner & Michelli, 2015).

Applying behaviorism to education policy requires a great deal of reliance on measurement, as there needs to be some criteria on which the reward and punishment are based. Garrison (2015) critiques the regime of education policies on the grounds that the tests employed by accountability regimes are designed on operationalizations of achievement that effectively serve as “measurement’s political impostor”:

Based on the operationist framework, tests of academic achievement define effective education. Thus, differences in test scores between schools or school systems are, *ipso facto*, taken to represent differences in school quality, because school quality has been operationally defined as student performance on tests of academic achievement. (p. 42)

In other words, failing schools are operationalized as schools that fail tests. Such operationalizations are a profound problem when the real failure belongs to the tests capacity to capture any nuance or description of schools’ real assets or real struggles. Indeed, they do not measure the growth of students outside of a very narrow band constructed around contested
standards that are ever-changing and may not even be reflective of what is actually valued by communities, employers, or families. So-called “good schools” are similarly operationalized as schools that do well on tests and, particularly in urban contexts, may be places where what was traditionally recognized as learning by most people is now replaced by preparation for tests. Even more troublingly, individual students have come to be represented by a condensed version of their previous year’s test score, as in “She can do it, she’s a four,” or even, “He should be referred to special ed. He’s a one.”

Urban schools with diverse populations are also likely to be underfunded and to end up repeatedly falling short of AYP targets, despite their best efforts. These schools are then repeatedly punished, without attending to the root causes of the low scores: linguistically and cognitively diverse students whose aptitudes are unacknowledged by many tests, inequitable systems of municipal school funding, and an over reliance on tests that privilege the types of social, cultural, and intellectual capital available to middle-class white populations. In particular, Patel (2015) argues that, given how the U.S. has from its beginnings been invested in dispossession of indigenous peoples’ wealth, chattel slavery, and redistribution of opportunities in favor of settlers, some Americans are rendered invisible, some subhuman, and yet others to be endowed by their creators with the inalienable rights of citizenship. Over the long term, she argues, white students’ educational competencies have come to be conceived of not only as normal, but as desirable for all. The benchmark for achievement is therefore a white benchmark - in some ways what many tests measure is assimilation to norms that are determined by those at the top. This is not new - IQ tests have, from their inception, been used to classify whiteness as superior (Kendi, 2016), and a pessimist may be forgiven for assuming the worst - that these tests are intentionally a tool to maintain educational inequality.
Inclusion v. Technocratic Integration

The story of reforms that purport to be inclusive in New York City is characterized by a technocratic, managerial approach that is consonant with the behaviorist paradigm found within federal legislative mandates. At the local level, accountability report cards have been used to collect quantitative data and award points for moving students with dis/abilities into Less Restrictive Environments (LRE), as defined by the federal special education law, IDEIA\(^1\) (2004). The 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) followed in the footsteps of NCLB, enshrining the principles test-based accountability in special education. While the original intent of the law’s focus on accountability was to raise expectations for students with dis/abilities (Danforth, 2014b), doing so has had some particularly nasty consequences. Notably, tying the placement of students with dis/abilities to points on accountability measures has meant that placement decisions are outsizedly influenced by the desire to earning tokens for accountability measures and maximize at the school level, and undersizedly based on actual student needs. Just as placement on state priority lists for low test scores yields greater scrutiny of schools and the threat of school closure but very little material support, accountability related to placement of students with dis/abilities yields managerial solutions to special education “problems” that are disconnected from their educational needs.

Danforth describes technocracy as the “dominant administrative apparatus” towards educating students with dis/abilities in the accountability era (2014b, p. 146). In contrast to a social justice argument for including students with dis/abilities in general education, the technocratic approach embodied in IDEIA has “recast the inclusive education movement within a

\[^1\] I have stylized the i, which stands for “improvement” in the 2004 reauthorization, as a lowercase letter to indicate the law’s connection to its predecessor, IDEA, as well as to criticize the extent to which the more recent authorization actually improved special education.
complex set of administrative prerogatives designed to systematically produce higher academic test scores among children” (p. 149). It is grounded in a philosophy that sees itself as rational, scientific, apolitical, and objective, one which eschews “understandings of social meaning derived from experience or cultural practice...in favor of mathematical algorithms” (p. 153). Consequently, critics of technocracy - particularly those interested in social justice arguments for inclusion - are able to be easily dismissed for irrational thinking outside of the positivistic, quantitative paradigm on which technocracy relies. This has often meant that what has been promoted by quasi-inclusive policy is actually a hollow inclusion, marked by the “bifurcation of means and ends” (p. 159) of inclusion, which separate the ethical rationale for inclusive education from technical solutions for achieving it. Hollow inclusion is a top-down process, based on the “assertion that the greatest knowledge of all - technical expertise - resides at the top of a bureaucratic hierarchy” (Danforth, 2014a, p. 314). Indeed, “it seems as if the whole operation involves no children, no humans at all. Just charts and graphs and statistics” (p.313).

In New York City, we can see the thumbprint of technocracy clearly in the design and implementation of special educational reform that purports to be inclusive. While it would be fair to see the dysfunction of the special education reform as a product of the turnover in the administrative and teacher ranks (as well as through a lens of simple under resourcing), I hope to highlight the relationship between systemic dysfunction and the technocratic features of the reform—the disregard for the opinions of advocates, including parents, as their perspectives were dismissed as naive, as well as the elevation of bureaucrats with quantitative systems management knowledge to manage the change, despite their lack of specific awareness of the unique features of urban special education and the people who live in that reality.
In a 2005 comprehensive review of special education in New York City, Hehir and colleagues found that “students with disabilities are overly segregated in special education classes and programs, despite the existence of a few promising, yet underutilized, models of inclusive education” (p. 69). Such heavy reliance on segregated special education settings was acutely problematic for African-American students and English Language Learners who were more likely to be placed in restrictive special education settings. ICT\(^2\) classes were identified as promising venues for greater inclusion, yet were noted to still be viewed as special education placements for students without dis/abilities, resulting in some interviewees seeing ICT as a “‘dumping ground’ for general education students who have demonstrated behavioral difficulties. Consequently, some [ICT] classes have become low-functioning tracked classes” (p. 77).

However, when the policy response to the Hehir report was designed four years later, the means of inclusion were bifurcated from the ends, with emphasis on creating some quasi-inclusive structure without attending to the moral imperative for inclusion. This is very clearly the case with respect to the problematic tracking function of ICT, which was employed as the primary vehicle for inclusive reform despite several significant problems with the model. In the first place, the 60:40 ratio between kids without and with documented dis/abilities is not reflective of the ratio of people with identified dis/abilities in society, measured at 19% by the 2010 US Census (US Census Bureau, 2012\(^3\)). Moreover, Hehir et al.’s (2005) concern that the 60% of students without IEP’s were in many cases general education students who had the most urgent behavioral needs is echoed in my own experience, wherein ICT classes were treated as “big dumping ground for kids who were unwanted, even though [they] masqueraded as an inclusion setting” (Olander, 

\(^2\) Then termed CTT for Collaborative Team Teaching. For these purposes I use the term ICT as interchangeable with CTT, as I do not believe the renaming substantively changed the model actually employed by schools.

\(^3\) Census figures measure for the entire population. It is likely that amongst children this number is probably even lower, as identification of dis/ability is often related to advanced age.
Moreover, it was my experience that teachers who lacked any ethical commitment to inclusive teaching were often paired with novice special educators without the pedagogical skills of inclusion, and were given little to no time to actually collaboratively develop curricula. Nevertheless, ICT became the primary vehicle by which reforms were to be enacted.

As part of a broader efficiency-based organization of the New York City Department of Education under New York City Schools Chancellor Klein and Mayor Bloomberg (Green, 2009), Garth Harries was appointed as the senior coordinator for special education, having been promoted to that post after supervising the Portfolio Office of the Department of Education, the very office tasked with closing schools with low test scores. Tasked with “figuring out ‘how to clear up all the clutter’” the McKinsey alum with a JD and MBA after his name had clear proficiency in technocratic management, but no experience in anything related to special education (Cramer, 2009a). A mere six months later, Harries, who had “built a tough reputation as a ‘systems guy,’” (Zelon, 2009a) left the city for another promotion in the New Haven, Connecticut schools. His plan nevertheless was the blueprint of the mayoral special education reform that would take place over the next few years, despite vocal opposition from parents (Cramer, 2009b, 2009c). His departure was just one of many at the top level of the special education bureaucracy (Zelon, 2009b), leaving a different team to implement the changes that the one that had designed them. Advocates expressed concerns about the vagueness of the plans (Cramer, 2010), especially given the transition to new special education leadership under Laura Rodriguez, a career ESL educator (InsideSchools, 2009), and called for increased resources to support parental involvement in the process (Walz, 2010). At the same time, principals expressed concerns about the degree to which schools would have flexibility to program students based on
their students’ needs (Gaines-Pell, 2010). Despite these concerns, the first phase of Harries’ plan went into effect.

I worked at one of these “phase one” schools. Faculty were told that we were to begin to move students out of self-contained classes and into ICT settings when we rewrote IEP’s. In practice, we often changed students IEP’s when annual reviews were due, not prioritizing student needs, but following guidance from administrators about which programs and services would get the school the most money put into our budget and the most “points” for our school report card - an issue of particular importance as a school on the priority list. When I remarked in a meeting that this was a violation of student and family rights under IDEiA, an administrator remarked to me that we might have to cut special education teachers if we did not get enough money by reshuffling student programs. She added that my seniority would not protect me. Having taken this as a threat to my job, and with a newborn baby at home, I reluctantly toed the line. In quiet private conversations with parents, I tried to urge them to resist the placements, but they rarely did, and only once successfully. For the groups of students that came in after the aforementioned successful cohort in which ten out of twelve students graduated on time, students were placed in ICT classes, in which more experienced general education teachers were ill-equipped to meet their needs, especially given that most of the special education teachers they were paired with were neophytes. Many of the students placed in ICT classrooms languished because of dysfunction between co-teaching pairs that did not know how to work together to support student needs.

Interim Chancellor Walcott, who took the post after the scandalous appointment of Cathie Black as Klein’s successor (Cramer & Decker, 2013), announced that phase one would end and the Mayor’s special education reform was to be implemented citywide, beginning in the 2012-
2013 school year (Wheaton, 2011). Without data showing any clear successes or lessons learned from phase one, and with advocates expressing broad concerns about a lack of transparency (Cramer, 2012b), the Department of Education nevertheless rushed the reforms out the door. At the same time, Laura Rodriguez resigned from her post as head of the special education department, mere months before the changes were to take effect. Her successor, Corinne Rello-Anselmi, was described as “walking into a buzz-saw...the questions and concerns about the special ed. rollout are mounting and there are no answers at all” (Cramer, 2012a). In particular, advocates and parents were concerned about schools’ ability to provide adequate supports for students with dis/abilities in less restrictive settings, even though there was a general support amongst those same groups for dismantling of segregated special education settings (Decker, 2012).

In the years since, I have often heard from teacher friends in schools about their ongoing concerns about the reforms - specifically that though they are generally in favor of including students with dis/abilities more widely, the resources have not been there to support the success of these reforms. Stories of schools that want to be able to support students with dis/abilities in inclusive settings, but do not have the resources to realistically do so are common (Wall, 2014, for example). Additionally, the same problem of bureaucratic leadership that is technically proficient in the mathematical tools of the state, yet unaware of the particulars of special education remains (Lore, 2015). In turn, more families have won lawsuits against the Department of Education that allow them to send their children to private special education schools at cost to the City than ever before (Zimmerman, 2016). At the time of writing this, a new broad lawsuit has just been filed by two families and a Bronx-based nonprofit against the Department of Education for violating
students’ rights under IDEIA for not providing needed services that are no longer available within their schools (Taylor, 2017).

**Middle School 2222**

Middle School (MS) 2222 is where the rubber of these behaviorist, technocratic reforms meets the road of real people's lives. I have come to understand this school as a place where decades of failed urban policy has combined with the more recent educational reforms to manufacture a “struggling” school. This is not to say that the school does not have real challenges of their own; rather, that the most profound issues that the school struggles with are imposed upon it externally. This is fairly analogous to a social model of dis/ability, in which individuals with impairments are actually disabled by the failures of society to embrace their differences. Charged with serving the children in a neighborhood largely populated by historically minoritized communities and without equitable resources, the school’s students’ and teachers’ abilities are broadly unappreciated by a system that only values technical proficiency and quantitative data that privileges middle-class students’ cultural capital.

The school is located in a particularly low-income area of an outer borough of New York City. Until the 1940’s this neighborhood was farmland but was rapidly developed as waves of immigration from Puerto Rico, the “great migration” of Black people from the south, and an influx of mostly White WWII veterans with subsidized home loans moved into the area. Over the decades since, those who were most economically upwardly mobile—mostly White—were able to move out of the neighborhood to suburban settings, leaving behind a “ghetto.” It would be a mistake to interpret this as a natural process. Rather, as has been the case in many Northeastern cities, this process was aided by irresponsible and malfeasant public policies that have been the catalyst deep stratification in housing markets—and consequently schools—especially along racial
Promoting Inclusion in a “Struggling” School

lines (Anyon, 1997). Consequently, MS 2222 is what Kucsera and Orfield (2014) call an “apartheid school,” with fewer than 1% of all students identified as White. As such, the dynamics of race, language, gender, and special education are not clear. Certainly, there is a remarkably high number of students receiving special education services (approximately one-third of all students), but how these dynamics are related to broad patterns of overrepresentation remains to be explored at this local level, within an intensely racially segregated school.

The hallmarks of technocratic, behaviorist reforms are all over MS 2222. “Data boards” in the principals office - with student test scores posted publicly and highlighted in red for those students “not meeting standards,” yellow for those “approaching standards,” and green for those “meeting standards.” Even though student names are not included in these displays - numbers stand in their place - there are no students in this school who are “exceeding standards,” and the boards are almost entirely red and yellow. As such, it is in a “struggling school.” In the day-to-day life of the school, district-level audits are sprung, teacher observations are conducted under surprise conditions, and teachers are assigned to patrol duties in the hallways to enforce school rules.

Yet MS 2222 is also a place of caring and love, even if it is not emphasized in the reports. Recent department-mandated metrics indicate that trust amongst teachers, parents, and administrators is high, and that the school culture is characterized by caring interactions. News stories about the school in local outlets describe community engagement programs and tailored supports for the school’s large number of students living in temporary housing shelters (perhaps as many as one third of students). The metrics and news also miss the central place that the school played in the development of hip hop music in the early 1980’s, with numerous alumni making
significant contributions to the culture, and the school grounds serving as sites for some of the earliest concerts and parties.

**Research Question**

All of this personal, organizational, and historical and contemporary policy context has been provided in order to frame the question around which this project is organized:

*To what extent can action research-based professional development that is based on magnifying existing strengths shift the practices and beliefs of co-teaching pairs working towards inclusion in a school facing pressure to improve test scores?*

In the next chapter, I will develop a conceptual framework for inclusive education that will help to frame the approaches that have been taken by previous studies and that guide this dissertation.
CHAPTER 2 – CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Conceptual Framework - Inclusive Education

In this chapter, I will outline a framework for inclusive education that will make up the theoretical core of this paper. Inclusion and inclusive education are widely contested concepts, with little consensus about what they mean and many varying interpretations of terms. In fact, I think that much resistance to inclusion actually arises from quasi inclusion. (Valle & Connor, 2010). To that end, I propose a conceptualization of inclusive education that encompasses five closely interrelated domains: that inclusive education is (a) an abstract “principle of practice”

![Figure 2.1 - Conceptual Framework](image)

4 (to borrow phrasing from Kozleski, Yu, Satter, Francis, and Haines, 2015)
that is, like the horizon, elusive; (b) based in a civil rights agenda; (c) is a vehicle for improving general education by attending to the multiple ways in which exclusion is expressed, not least of which by dis/ability; (d) is marked by a community endeavor for change; and (e) is marked by a pedagogical disposition that takes care to address student needs without stigmatizing difference (see Figure 1).

**Inclusion is a Principle of Practice**

In the first place, I argue for a conceptualization of inclusion that is abstract - a principle of practice - that contrasts with both technocratic policies that underemphasize ethical concerns of exclusion the concrete series of recommendations that others (particularly those opposed to inclusion) employ. To this end, I will develop a metaphor which likens inclusive education to the horizon. This is apt in three ways - how each look depends on where you are, each is impossible to fully arrive at yet certainly possible to move towards, and that each is perhaps best understood in relation to where we are - far from here. To elaborate on the final point, which involves understanding inclusion/the horizon in contrast to exclusion/where we are, I identify and address some common misconceptions about inclusive education.

Inclusion, like the horizon, can appear to be different depending on context vantage point. Just as the horizon may be clearly defined in places where there are few obstacles, complications, and developments, so to may inclusion seem simple when overlapping social forces are unaccounted for. Conversely, in some places both human-made and naturally occurring features exist that obscure our vision of inclusion. In these areas, including cities, where multiple obstructions exist, the pathways towards the horizon and inclusion are harder to identify and agree upon. Contextual differences that affect inclusion may vary widely:
Context describes the conditions in which schools exist. Context involves the school district’s approach to supporting and resourcing schools, human resource practices, budgeting processes, and the degree to which the management structure is designed to increase school capacity. Context includes the community’s present and historical social, cultural, economic, and political conditions and legacies. (Kozleski, et al., 2015, p. 218).

To that end, the very nature of inclusive education is dependent on the historical and contemporary realities of schools. Inclusive education will look one way in places where dis/ability primarily is constructed around medicalized impairment and where resources are generally abundant. It will look very different in contexts where entire communities have been historically disenfranchised and oppressed, wherein disablement operates on racial and linguistic lines as well.

Inclusion is a direction that we can move towards, even with the knowledge that as we move closer it moves away. Like the horizon, it continually shifts based on one’s position. Thus, inclusive education is never fully realized but is instead a direction to move towards. Drawing upon the work of Nancy Fraser, Waitoller and Kozleski (2013) may serve as some sort of compass in this endeavor:

Inclusive education is a continuous struggle toward (a) the redistribution of quality opportunities to learn and participate in educational programs, (b) the recognition and value of differences as reflected in content, pedagogy, and assessment tools, and (c) the opportunities for marginalized groups to represent themselves in decision-making processes that advance and define claims of exclusion and the respective solutions that affect their children’s educational futures (p. 35).
The authors’ vision of inclusion sounds so dramatically different from our current realities that it may seem impossible to ever reach, given how unequally distributed opportunities are within our global society, how human differences remain the source of stigma and oppression, and how those who are most acutely marginalized by those oppressive and stigmatizing forces have so routinely been silenced. Nevertheless, we certainly can move in that direction, and we can do so with haste.

Inclusion can be understood as the opposite of exclusion, just as the horizon can be understood clearly in relation to being not here. As such, there are likely many viable paths toward inclusion, given that our current state of affairs is so profoundly marked by exclusion:

Exclusion is a part of the grammar of our past. It is the wallpaper of our daily lives.

Exclusion is everywhere, and it has been there for a long time. This helps to explain both its invisibility and its resilience over time (Slee, 2011, p.48).

Indeed, the problems of American education in general and of urban education in particular can be and should be framed as the problems of exclusionary practices related to the distribution of resources and opportunities, in contrast to the pervasive framing of pathology or deficiency residing in the bodies of individuals, family structure, or culture of the excluded.

More Than the Strawman Of “Full Inclusion”

Opponents of inclusive education, perhaps most notably Fuchs and Fuchs (1995) juxtapose the field of “special education’s historic and noble intent to differentiate and enhance instruction for students with disabilities” (p. 214) with inclusive education’s “reformist impulse [that] has been radicalized, [which] we believe to be undesirable” (p. 216). In so doing, the authors create a strawman out of “full inclusion,” by indicating that the proponents of inclusion “adhere to the uncompromising position of no special education and all children in with
disabilities in regular classrooms” (p. 227). Moreover, Fuchs and Fuchs characterize the inclusive schools movement as destructive, as in “no meaningful transformation can occur unless and until special education and its continuum of placements are eliminated altogether. The ‘inclusive school’ denotes a place rid of special educators, where full inclusion reigns” (p. 223). Through this lens, inclusionism is merely a revival of unsuccessful radical ideas of the past, based in naive idealism and sure to go the same way. They offer what even they acknowledge to be “gratuitous advice” to inclusionists - to “permit the parents and professional advocates of children with severe behavior problems, hearing impairments, learning disabilities, and so forth to speak on behalf of the children they know best,” to “recognize, too, that you’re probably at the apex of your power. Use it to build bridges. Choose compromise over principles” (p. 233).

Yet, more than two decades later, here I am writing about inclusion, a movement that continues to build momentum, not by compromising with conservatives or incrementalist reformers in the field who wish to maintain their professional stature, but by continuing to advocate for vulnerable children. To the point that the goal of inclusion is to destroy the continuum of special education services, I have to argue that that question is beyond the horizon. There are indeed compelling arguments that “restrictive” hospital-based special education services should not be dismantled, as the educational services delivered in intensive therapeutic units could not possibly delivered elsewhere, for example. However, even though today this might be true, the pace of technological and medical development is such that we may in some short period of time find that that argument is rendered invalid. Yet this example, and less extreme ones that employ the same logic, are used to justify the ongoing exclusion of students from “regular” educational settings who are not considered “disabled” in any context outside of school.
Moreover, there is an epistemological assumption about who knows best for people with disabilities - in Fuchs and Fuchs’ case it is the professionals who work with and parents of individuals with disabilities, but never those individuals themselves. And still the parents and professionals are not often the ones who have to live with the consequences of exclusion, and generally have very limited awareness about what it means to be excluded. Indeed, to those who are excluded, the current reality is probably not just fine, even if the “experts” say it is. Assuming so involves a lack of imagination, empathy, and capacity to listen. While the opinions of education professionals and parents may be valuable, they certainly are not infallible, and the willful ignorance of the desires of people with disabilities only serves to keep us from moving forward. On the other hand, the Dis/ability Studies in Education (DSE) tradition (which I align my work with), privileges the lived experiences of those with disabilities, providing “a counter-narrative to the prevailing and intertwined hegemonic discourses of normalcy, deficiency, and efficiency operating in (special) education” (Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, & Morton, 2008, p. 455).

**Distinct from Mainstreaming or Integration**

Conversations and debates about inclusion are further muddled by a confusion of terms. Whereas mainstreaming and integration refer to the mere programmatic relocation of students with disabilities into general education classrooms, inclusive education involves the reimagining and redesigning of those spaces such that diverse student needs may be met within them. Relatedly, while inclusion sees general education as the default setting for all students, from which a number of other programs could potentially be opted into (for all students - not just students with dis/abilities), mainstreaming holds that students with disabilities in particular must prove their ability to function within general education - and therefore “act normal” - as a prerequisite for access to the full curriculum (Valle & Connor, 2010). The locus of decision for
those students thus rests with educational professionals first, families second, and then students third, if at all.

This, of course, sits within the US context of continuous denial of access to populations of non-normative populations and the glacially slow process of revising what constitutes normalcy and who exactly is considered normal. Consequently, “...most of what Americans call inclusion is more aptly termed integration” (Danforth, 2014b, p. 147). Even with integration, though, we sit at a point in US history where schools are resegregating racially, especially in New York State and City (Kucsera & Orfield, 2014; Hannah-Jones, 2016), further complicating the meaning and importance of inclusive education.

Yet paradoxically, European scholars note the interdependence of inclusion and integration:

...it is clear that strategies of integration are not in conflict with inclusion; on the contrary, success with inclusion is dependent on integration. Educational systems that have developed a segregated alternative for groups of children need to carry through the process of integration before or at the same time as they develop strategies of inclusive education. (Hausstatter & Jahnukainen, 2014, p. 122)

Indeed, programmatic change is a component of making inclusion work, but it falls well short of the ideals of inclusion. To go back to the horizon metaphor, integration/mainstreaming may be seen as a shore for a boat that is adrift - certainly better than outright segregation, and perhaps one of the most consequential concrete outcomes - but not to be mistaken for the full realization of the end goal of inclusion. However, mere integrative practices within a context of broader exclusion may not even fundamentally change the nature of exclusion as experienced by students. In order to more fully realize inclusive education, we must go get off of the beach of integration and
mainstreaming and begin to move inland towards changing more abstract but no less important features of school life. Slee (2011) reminds us that “Inclusive school cultures require fundamental changes in educational thinking about children, curriculum, pedagogy and school organization” (p. 110).

**More Than Policy Prescription**

Inclusion must be understood as more than just policy or program. Slee (2011) specifically bemoaned the interpretation of inclusion as mere policy mandate and the failure of inclusive policymakers to ground policy in ethics:

Too frequently theories of inclusive education commence with technical considerations of the means for achieving inclusion. Inclusive education is thus reduced to a list of policies, strategies and resources. These activities to pursue inclusive education represent a necessary and important discussion, but it must be the second order discussion. The first requirement is to establish our goals and aspirations. Inclusive education commences with the recognition of the unequal social relations that produce exclusion. From that point we can pursue a less capricious process of developing our strategic discussion. (Slee, 2011, p. 39)

I have in this dissertation tried to heed Slee’s guidance. Whereas the first chapter intended to frame the nature of the unequal social processes and this chapter addresses the prerequisites of establishment of a common frame, it is only from that point that I attempt to outline my hopes for action in the service of inclusion, going forward, based on existing work in the field.

Even beyond the need to ground policy in an ethical commitment to inclusion, there is reason to believe that the policy-first approach actually precludes the acceptance of critically important aspects of inclusion. Danforth (2014b) argues in his analysis of technocracy in the
US, that the principle of Least Restrictive Environment, as found in IDEIA, actually hampers efforts for inclusion: “By defining inclusion as the priority while admitting that segregation may be a suitable choice for some students in some situations, it grants practical legitimacy to segregation” (p. 148). Certainly, both the original letter of the law and the subsequent lawsuits that have sought to interpret it have privileged professional perspectives on what constitutes the extent to which a child is found to be in the subjective “least” segregated context appropriate. Moreover, policy mandates for accountability, ostensibly aimed at promoting more consistently good educational results but without ethical footing, have similarly hampered efforts to promote inclusion: “…the administrative and policy context of the schools prior to the accountability reform movement propelled by NCLB allowed teachers and administrators sufficient flexibility to consider and respond to the social justice argument,” (p. 149) a trend reversed with the law’s passing. In other words, the accountability movement and technocratic approaches to expediently making inclusion happen have subordinated the ethical argument for non-segregation.

Finally, inclusion should not be seen as a way for districts to save money, as has been the case, particularly in fiscally stressed urban schools. Connor and Ferri (2007) note the problems with seeing inclusion as a way of saving money: “Inclusion has been viewed as a cost-cutting device, not motivated by humanistic reform, but rather a means to bureaucratic fiscal prudence. Contrary to cost-cutting theories, inclusion may prove even more costly than segregated education, depending on how thoroughly and responsibly it is implemented…” (p. 72-73). Nevertheless, the cost-cutting argument has proven to be particularly troubling and pernicious, especially in New York City (Wheaton, 2011). To return once again to the horizon metaphor, inclusion is not simply the closest or cheapest or most expedient place to get to within sight. It is
difficult to set off on a voyage, not knowing exactly where it may lead or what may happen, but it does help to know why one is going.

**Inclusion is a Civil Rights Agenda**

Like other movements for equality under the law, the case for inclusion is grounded in an argument for civil rights. Inclusion scholar Scot Danforth (2014b) makes this case clearly: “The goal of inclusion is a specific version of the broader American civil rights narrative whereby African Americans, women, gays and lesbians, and other political minority groups have sought legal equality” (p. 148). Additionally, Lipsky and Gardner (1997) have traced the long arc of this struggle:

Like many groups at one time or another in U.S. history - females, non-Caucasians, those of the “wrong” ...religion, the poor, the non-English speaking - people with disabilities had long been barred from the public school system. Over the course of nearly 2 centuries, the legal exclusion of each of these groups, except for children with disabilities, had been abolished (p. 76).

Through this lens, other significant legal victories for educating children with dis/abilities should be seen as important, but insufficient. Section 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act, along with the IDEIA, have mandated accommodations for students with disabilities. These victories have yielded significant improvements in the lives of individuals with disabilities that we can identify in our language - we no longer classify students with terms like “moron,” “ineducable,” or “imbecile,” even those terms have seen an unfortunate resurgence in the era of Donald Trump.

However, to continue move forward towards the horizon, we need to abandon these places that are no longer defensible on the basic grounds that they are better than what we used to do. Currently, logistics involved with the provision of accommodations is the key argument for
educational segregation - that they cannot be delivered within general education. Yet this assumes a static, positivistic, and medicalized view of what dis/ability is — intrinsic to the individual, unyielding, and in need of specialized treatment. If we operate from the perspective that all children deserve \textit{as a fundamental human right} to not be automatically sorted out on the basis of difference, we must acknowledge and work to ameliorate the many contextual features that serve to hinder the well-being of individuals that do not conform to narrow conceptions of normalcy, instead of merely accommodating them when professionals deem it appropriate.

\textbf{Justification and Implementation Cannot Be Separated}

Artiles, Harris-Murri, and Rostenberg (2006) critically appraise the notion of inclusion for social justice. Employing theory developed by Alan Dyson, they identify divergent arguments for inclusion. Specifically, the \textit{justification} argument for inclusion involves two components - \textit{rights and ethics} and \textit{efficacy}, which focus on inequalities and the ineffectiveness of traditional special education. Additionally, the \textit{implementation} discourse focuses on \textit{political} and \textit{pragmatic} arguments for inclusion, which emphasize the struggle that is inevitable in changing special education and the logistical and functional components of making inclusion work, respectively. While the justification arguments favor individual rights, the implementation views of inclusion focus on communal benefits. Yet each fall short of promoting inclusion. Justification discourses fail because they do not account for broader contextual issues in inclusion, such as power and privilege that shape systems of exclusion at the largest levels, while implementation discourses fail because they assume that attitudes and dispositions will naturally follow logistical and political reforms. The authors ultimately advocate for a transformative view for inclusive education that goes beyond merging the two arguments, by calling models for inclusive education
that “embrace participatory strategies in which distribution of resources, access, and social cohesion constitute the foundation of democratic egalitarian alternatives” (p. 267).

While I believe that it is true that “educators who are strong-armed into participating in inclusion lack a deep understanding of the moral and political rationale that social justice advocates have articulated and expounded for decades” (Danforth, 2014b, p. 159), it is also true that emphasizing an ethical rationale for inclusion without attending to pragmatic features of making inclusion viable logistically yields little to nothing. The two things must be ideally done simultaneously.

**Inclusion Is a Vehicle for Improving General Education**

Slee (2011) identifies the issue of the problematic nature of general education, in asking rhetorically “Included into what?” (p. 42). Opponents of inclusion have long argued that general education cannot handle the needs of students with dis/abilities, and as currently constituted, there may be some merit to this argument. To place a child with an intellectual dis/ability, for example, into a classroom of thirty students may be a cruel thing to do to that child, and may have unintended consequences that yield bad situations for everyone. However, if we frame the situation differently in order to think of that same child’s *right to be included* as a reason to rethink pedagogy, programmatic issues, and school change, we are likely to see intentional and unintentional changes to the school experience of all of the other children that would certainly be positive. To illustrate this, we might imagine that smaller class sizes might be necessary, that sequential, graduated learning objectives would need to be created and assessed at different levels and in different ways, that the educators would need to consciously create a culture of belonging and acceptance of difference - what child would not benefit from those changes?
Dis/Ability Is Only One of Many Intersecting Oppressive Factors

Because dis/ability is often co-constructed alongside race, poverty, and other factors, the reimagining and redesign of general education in particularly important, especially in urban areas where these forces intersect and co-operate in service of exclusion. Annamma, Connor, and Ferri (2013) highlight the important ways in which dis/ability is co-constructed alongside race, by drawing upon the history of the conceptualizations of intelligence that have often served to reify white supremacy as well as the contemporary issue of overrepresentation of racialized children in special education. They outline an intersectional approach - DisCrit - that “explores ways in which race and ability are socially constructed and interdependent” (p.5). Even though racially-driven ableism is responsible for significant exclusion, it is worth noting that racially minoritized children are broadly excluded from opportunities and access to more prestigious and rigorous curricula, creating “schools within schools” (Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004, p. 15).

Moreover, dis/ability often intersects with poverty and other social forces in disturbing ways. Though by no means exclusively related to dis/ability, “poverty is an issue that cuts across different identities, though some people are more vulnerable” (Slee, 2011, p 27). Amongst the relationships are the complex relationship between poverty and dis/ability (Traustadottir & Rice, 2012), and the intensely complicated relationships between poverty, dis/ability and race (Skiba et al., 2005). Moreover, these factors interact with English language proficiency (Klingner, Artiles, & Barletta, 2006), ethnicity (Artiles, Aguirre-Munoz, & Abedi, 1998), and sexual identity (Christensen & Embury, 2016) among many others. Given these complexities, inclusive education must attend to intersections of oppression, and the multiple ways in which labels are imposed upon children. Moreover, inclusive education must appreciate that exclusion exists
outside of special education as well, and that the benefits of inclusion are for far more students than just those with identified dis/abilities.

Amongst these many interacting forces of oppression, it is necessary to highlight the particular importance of race and dis/ability in a broad US context. Decades of research have illustrated the ways in which racially minoritized children have been subject to disproportionate placements in restrictive special education settings. Notably, some studies have illustrated how the special education referral process itself (Harry & Anderson, 1994) along with the interactive effects of ELL labeling (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005), have led to outsizedly large proportions of Black and Hispanic students in Special Education, particularly in so-called high-incidence categories of dis/ability, wherein the classification criteria are less stringent (Harry & Klinger, 2014). As Ferri and Connor (2005) put it, “…one of the most effective and pernicious means of resisting [racial] desegregation has been to over refer students of color to segregated special education classes” (p. 96).

Nevertheless, those interactions between race and dis/ability are mediated in significant ways by racial privilege. Ong-Dean’s (2009) analysis of referral patterns for special education services found that certain dis/ability categories are sought out by privileged parents as a way of gaining extra help to their kids, thereby securing (or even hoarding) opportunities for their already well-off children. However, Ong-Dean conflates racial and economic privilege, indicating that poverty is the primary driver of disadvantage, not race. Furthermore, Morgan et al. (2015, 2017) claimed that Black and Hispanic children were, in fact, underrepresented in special education, in part due to relative distrust of special education as well as more limited access to the type of health care that would allow them to have access to supplemental services. Even though such dubious claims of underrepresentation have been convincingly addressed (Collins, Connor, Ferri,
Gallagher & Samson, 2016; Skiba, Artiles, Kozleski, Losen & Harry, 2016), it does remain that special education services are used by some privileged, especially White, parents as a way to gain supplemental services for their children. This resonates with my experience as a privileged parent who hears stories on the playground about how my children’s classmates are being evaluated for or are receiving services for reading and math “delays” that I would not consider to be disabling by any means. Nevertheless, I hope that the connections between race and dis/ability are understood by the reader to be complicated, without obscuring the ways in which dis/ability labeling, particularly for students who are multiply marginalized, is a deeply problematic process that serves to separate out children of color even within otherwise integrated schools and districts. That said, New York City is not a well-integrated school district, with nearly 90% of all Black and Hispanic students attending schools where racially minoritized groups are the minority and 20% of Hispanic and 30% of Black students attending “apartheid” schools (Kucsera & Orfield, 2014, p. 58). Undoubtedly, the dynamics of race, language, and special education are different in these schools as they are in integrated school district, just as they must function differently in different neighborhoods with different patterns of housing segregation by race.

**Attending to Dis/Ability**

Even after acknowledgement of the ways that dis/ability is constructed alongside and at the intersections of race, gender, class, etc., there is danger of #alllivesmatter’ing dis/ability, and subsuming dis/ability issues into an obfuscating discourse of oppression. To this end, inclusion also should pay attention to the particular salience of dis/ability issues in schools. For example, even though racial segregation undeniably happens in schools, there are not professional academics and educators who advocate vocally for it, as happens with the segregation of people with dis/abilities into special education places. To that end, attention needs to be maintained on
dis/ability, even while acknowledging complexity. Slee (2011) reminds us that “disabled people continue to reside at the margins of civic life because we not only allow it, but also because we create, enforce and sustain disability” (p. 36). Kiuppis and Hausstatter’s (2014) attention to this paradox is particularly helpful:

How can we think of appropriate ways for education that on the one hand take into account the universalistic character of the notion of inclusion and on the other hand the particular situation people with disabilities are both embedded in and facing when looking at their future, while experiencing barriers for access to and participation within education? (p. 4)

Indeed, improvement of general education that is both universal about oppression and simultaneously specific about dis/ability is not a simple matter by any means. However, it must involve a community effort that extends beyond individual teachers operating in isolated classrooms.

**Inclusion Must Be a Community Endeavor**

Inclusive education that sits in one classroom or one educator’s heart is not, at this juncture, enough. Systemic, structural change must be matched with cultural change, and all of this is desirable at the biggest levels, but also immediately possible at the level of the school organization. Even within schools, though, that work needs to happen on a number of simultaneous levels. Hehir and Katzman (2012), in drawing upon the work of influential organizational theorists Lee Bolman and Terry Deal, identify the need for inclusive schools to address multiple frames of organizational change simultaneously. In addressing the *structural* frame, change agents create formal organizational structures to support inclusive practice. These components often include highly mundane but incredibly important things like scheduling time
for teachers to collaborate, allocating appropriate physical space, and the like. In addressing the *symbolic* frame, change agents address the organization’s culture and values. In the context of inclusion, this means promoting an ethical understanding of why inclusion is valuable, and making those understandings central to the ways that people within the organization understand their work. In addressing the *political* frame, change agents address an organization’s micropolitics and conflicts in ways that build coalitions around issues that are areas of shared concern. This involves creating opportunities for teacher leadership in schools, as well. In addressing the *human resources* frame, change agents recognize that members of an organization have distinct needs that can either detract from meaningful change (“I don’t get paid enough for this!”) or can be leveraged to promote it (“I became a teacher to change children’s lives for the better!”).

The community features of inclusion are especially important when co-teaching models are employed in order to support inclusion.

**Organizations Within Ecological Context**

Yet what happens within schools is deeply and meaningfully shaped not only by what happens within, but also what happens outside the school walls:

...the extent to which students’ experiences and outcomes are equitable is not dependent only on the educational practices of their teachers, or even their schools. Instead, it depends on a whole range of interacting processes that reach into the school from outside (Ainscow, Dyson, Goldrick, & West, 2012, p. 198).

Therefore, inclusive changes must not terminate at the door of the school. They must at least begin to leverage resources from the communities that they exist within in order to promote belonging and reject exclusion in bigger ways. This is certainly more easily said than done,
however, if changes that begin within schools can take root in the communities outside through progressive iterations of larger and larger-scale projects for inclusion, this may be possible (Ainscow et al., 2012). In any case, there is a need to start somewhere, and the school seems as good a place as any, particularly given that it is often a primary contact place for community engagement.

**Inclusion is a Pedagogical Stance**

Traditionally, pedagogical frameworks employed in the service of meeting the needs of a diverse student body within the same setting have relied on various interpretations of *differentiation* or *individualization*. Yet these pedagogical approaches have been problematic in that they are difficult and time consuming for teachers to effectively implement, contribute to dichotomies between special and general education teacher roles in co-teaching pairs, and may contribute to intra-class tracking (Baglieri, Valle, Connor, & Gallagher, 2010). Florian (2014) identifies the essential difficulty of inclusive pedagogy: “How can students with disabilities receive the support they need without perpetuating the problem of marginalization that can occur by treating them differently from others?” (p. 221). Even though community structures are incredibly important, so too are teacher pedagogical practices that must be supported: “To move away from exclusion, a change of focus is needed. The key challenge lies in determining how teachers might respond to differences between individual students without perpetuating the marginalization that can occur when some are treated differently from others” (Florian, 2014, p. 223). To that end, the focus or target of instruction needs to be expanded from individuals, as in individualized instruction, and beyond low-middle-high function groups often found with differentiated instruction.
...the inclusive pedagogical approach begins with a shift in pedagogical thinking from an approach that works for *most* learners existing alongside something additional or different for those (*some*) who experience difficulties, towards one that involves providing rich learning opportunities that are sufficiently available for everyone” (Florian, 2014, p. 224).

Closely related to the idea of balancing awareness of the multiple permutations of intersecting oppressive forces that create exclusion with the specifics of dis/ability comes an inclusive pedagogical approach that addresses that balance.

While some argue that an inclusive pedagogical approach might lead to ‘an over-reliance on generalist teacher practices’ at the expense of attention to individual differences … the inclusive pedagogical approach does not ignore individual differences between students. Rather it encourages the teacher to *extend the range of options that are available to everyone in the community of the classroom* (Florian, 2014, p. 225).

Extending the range of options also requires acknowledgement of the interaction of individuals in context in learning, the interdependence of cognition and affect, as well as the need to foster independent, expert learners.

**Learning Is an Interaction Between Person and Environment**

In contrast to views of learning as an entirely individual or external endeavor, inclusive pedagogy involves the assumption of a dynamic relationship between individual learner and learning context. Competence therefore cannot be faithfully cultivated or measured without attending to the learning environment:
...competence is an emergent characteristic of a person-in-a-context, not of the person alone. Competence arises from the collaboration between person and context, with competence changing when context changes. People are especially important in this collaboration, molding the context to support particular kinds of actions and thoughts in those they interact with. The effects of this sort of social support are dramatic, producing sharp shifts in competence levels in individual children. Competence rises abruptly with the provision of support and drops dramatically when the support is removed (Fischer, Bullock, Rotenberg, & Raya, 2012, p. 96).

Acknowledgement of the student-context interaction has key implications for provision of instructional supports. Whereas traditional conceptions of scaffolded instruction are anxious about the creation of dependency and is therefore quick to remove supports as soon as possible, inclusive pedagogy is concerned far more with cultivating long-term autonomous capacity, which may involve maintenance of learning supports over time. For example, a student with difficulty completing arithmetic may have access to a calculator until the point at which she decides it is no longer helpful or necessary, if that day ever comes. As students develop emergent, transient skills in supportive context, those scaffolds need to be maintained until they are no longer necessary, which may take considerable time:

...after some key experiences, a child becomes capable of autonomously generating the developmentally advanced performance earlier only exhibited transiently … children do not develop autonomous control quickly in all domains. Instead, they develop it slowly and hierarchically, with vast areas of behavior
requiring social contextual support for years before children gain autonomous control over them (Fischer et al., 2012, p. 115-116).

If we accept that competence is as much a function of context as much as it is individual ability (or dis/ability, for that matter), the teacher’s place in class of educator as context-designer as opposed to content deliverer or mere learning facilitator emerges. The teacher’s role moves beyond traditional or progressive role definitions, even though it may maintain some existing features. Teachers design instructional supports integrated into the curriculum, not as an additional burdensome task, but as something that is an essential component of the process of teaching and learning. Teachers also support reflection amongst students about which supportive options are necessary for them to learn, so that they have knowledge and awareness about the conditions that support their learning best. For example, a teacher designing pedagogy may explain content and then create opportunities for students to practice skills or acquire knowledge, as in traditional and constructivist pedagogies - provided that the mode for doing so is relevant to the student needs - but they do so with graduated levels of support that are of varying durability. This allows the learning environment to have a reasonable range of options for student learning needs without stigmatizing those who need more supports.

**Interdependence of Cognition and Affect**

Inclusive pedagogy must involve the design and provision of a range of options that recognize interdependence of cognition and affect in learning. While the idea that happy kids learn more is fairly intuitive, there is a strong body of research that supports it. Inclusive pedagogy is therefore grounded in the idea that “...positive moods are associated with processing that is generative and that negative moods restrict cognition” (Rappolt-Schlichtmann, Daley, & Rose, 2012, p. 58). Moreover, teaching that appreciates that learning is facilitated by positive
emotions does not naively assume that every student will be in a good mood every day; rather, it assumes that the general emotional climate of the learning context should have to be positive and driven by a welcoming and safe culture. As such, inclusive pedagogy is not merely concerned with the transmission of measurable skills, but also the affective states that enable transmission, processing, and expression of learning.

In this sense, engagement is more than merely the capacity of students to identify the relevance of curricula, but also for them to see themselves in it in meaningful ways that are expressed in how they feel about learning. Barbara Fredrickson’s (2001) “Broaden and Build” theory of positive emotions holds that long-term affective states are critical in building psychological resources that support learning, such as creativity, enthusiasm, pride in achievement, as well as cycles of each. This stands in contrast to negative emotions, “which carry direct and immediate adaptive benefits in situations that threaten survival” (p. 220). While it may not be possible or even desirable to eliminate negative emotions entirely from school, it is certainly possible to shift the balance to a generally positive affective context with fleeting moments of negativity.

A critical aspect of inclusive pedagogy in this respect is the creation of a safe learning environment, wherein students and teachers do not feel threatened - where dis/ability and other forms of human diversity are embraced. To this end, the curricula of inclusion should include people with a range of different abilities and challenges, as well as appearances, so as to intentionally design and deliver curricula that teaches about exclusion and inclusion, normalcy and dis/ability in relation to one another (Erevelles, 2005). This is of particular importance for students who have been traditionally marginalized by co-constructions of dis/ability, race, and gender. For example, consider the classically disenfranchised and troubled “Black boy,” who sits
at the intersection of oppressive vectors that serve to marginalize him, including special education (Noguera, 2009). Such a child does not have his needs met in school just by shallow attempts to make the curriculum relevant (basketball statistics!), but rather by careful consideration and implementation of curricular supports that address the affective dimension of his dis/engagement from the process of schooling as a whole. An inclusive approach to pedagogy supports positive identity development around dis/ability, race, and other related identity markers, eliminating affective barriers to learning.

**Fostering Expert Learners**

Inclusive pedagogy must cultivate learners that are experts in knowing about how they themselves learn, in addition to being knowledgeable and engaged. Moreover, inclusive pedagogy must involve explicitly fostering students’ capacity to apply and express their knowledge. This involves a continuous commitment to learning. Extending Jean Piaget’s schema theory, Howard Gardner (2012) argues that “most of us, except in areas in which we are expert, continue to think in the way that we did when we were five years of age” (p. 42). That is, specifically, that we create generalized schemata based on the observations that we make: “The natural learner displays what I call intuitive understanding. He or she is very promiscuous with the theories already developed in the young mind” (p. 47). Indeed, the theories of the natural learner are unsurprisingly underdeveloped. Conversely, “the scholastic learner never tries to apply the theory anywhere except where he or she is told to” (p. 47). Often this learner is unable to take theories and knowledge from school and apply it to the schema that they have developed. Therefore, experiential and school learning remain separate silos.

Gardner contrasts this with an expert learner who can integrate the two types of learning - “I define understanding as the capacity to take knowledge, skills, concepts, and facts learned in
one context, usually the school context, and use that knowledge in a new context” (Gardner, 2012, p. 43). Thus, inclusive pedagogy involves transference of knowledge and skills from inside the classroom to the outside world. Additionally, “An expert person is one who comes to understand the world differently...who can use the skills that are valued in his or her culture” (p. 45). Thus, inclusive teaching also involves recognizing and valuing the culturally specific expertise that diverse students bring into the class and appreciating them, as well. Movement towards expert learning therefore merges Gardner’s natural and scholastic learning so that what happens inside a classroom is applicable outside of it, and that what is learned outside the class is valued within it.

**Universal Design for Learning**

UDL, as currently expressed, reflects the key components of inclusive pedagogy: non-stigmatizing provision of options and contextual supports, respect for the connection between affect and learning, and creation of expert learners who are knowledgeable, strategic in their learning, and able to apply their learning in multiple contexts. UDL thus provides a good existing pedagogical framework to start building upon. UDL is an application of the principles of Universal Design, originally in architecture, to learning contexts and environments. Borne out of the work of the Center for Applied Special Technologies (CAST), in applying emerging technologies of the 1980’s and 1990’s to education in service of addressing the needs of student dis/abilities. Initially, this work operated from a medicalized perspective, very much in line with traditional special education. However, in their work, researchers at CAST found that many students were excluded by curricula that addresses the needs of an “average” learner who did not actually exist. Consequently, individualized accommodations were broadly insufficient and often stigmatizing for students with different learning needs or profiles (Gordon, Meyer, & Rose, 2016).
UDL researchers began to realize that dis/ability was just one of many barriers that students faced in learning, and that there were common threads in what supports were useful for students, regardless of how they were labelled or identified. They started seeing diverse student learning needs as inevitable variability instead of individual differences. Moreover, they learned that many of the barriers that diverse students faced were entirely unnecessary, and often affective in nature. To that end, CAST began to develop a framework of environmental adaptations that could be made universally available to students in order to expand available options for learning in three domains: representation of learning, engagement with learning, and acting on or expressing learning. These three principles are broken into nine guidelines, which are in turn broken into thirty-one checkpoints that describe different features of accessible instructional design features (Gordon et al., 2016).

To illustrate, UDL might be employed in a mixed-ability classroom by modifying instruction from a teacher-centric traditional model of pedagogy in some or all of the ways that follow, provided that they are of actual benefit to students. Instead of a single presentation of content in a social studies classroom, traditionally a teacher lecture, new information to be received by students should be presented in a variety of ways. In the first place, it should be made perceivable by all children, including those who may have auditory processing delays, through supplemental visual aids. Vocabulary instruction can be provided to all students, including those whose strongest linguistic abilities are not in English. Comprehension supports, such as the emphasis of large historical patterns, will not only help students with identified dis/abilities, but a range of other students as well. UDL also involves providing multiple ways to express knowledge. Instead of summative tests, teachers can provide a range of options for students to display their proficiencies that employ a range of technologies and scaffolded supports for
students. Additionally, a universally designed classroom may employ supports for students who struggle with executive functioning – an area of need for most adolescents, I would argue, not just those identified as having dis/abilities – such as opportunities for students to set goals and develop strategies in order to meet them. Finally, a universally designed classroom would take student engagement seriously and provide multiple means for students to engage with learning experiences. This may involve maximizing the real-life relevance of learning or minimizing distractions in the classroom, but it also may mean providing meaningful feedback on student work and opportunities for students to build community through collaborative learning.

Importantly, engaging students also involves supporting what students believe about their own capacities, and inviting them to reflect on what and how they have learned. Similarly UDL should be used to make progressive and constructivist pedagogies accessible as well – as such it is not a philosophical orientation towards or against, say, lecturing or group work, but rather a way of making each one of those philosophical inclinations towards pedagogy accessible to a diverse body of students who vary widely in how they receive, express, and engage with learning.

**Caveats about UDL**

UDL is not a panacea, but it is an evolving and growing way of understanding and meeting student needs. As such, it has shortcomings. Waitoller and King-Thorius (2016) note that UDL’s “noncritical construction of dis/ability as a form of diversity simultaneously and tacitly accepts ability hierarchies and norming curriculum at the intersection of racism and ableism (and other -isms)” (p. 375). Moreover, “UDL falls short of moving educators ‘beyond the acceptance of disability as diversity’ [and] toward a critique of constructions and outcomes of dis/ability in schools and in curriculum itself…” (p. 376). Finally, UDL’s attempts to account for culture within its taxonomy has been “informed by a static and oppression-free conceptualization of culture” (p.
Waitoller and King-Thorius recommend the cross-pollination of UDL with Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies in order to create a syncretic pedagogy that is both accessible, but also self-aware and critical of the ways in which dis/ability is often a co-construction of race, gender and other vectors of oppression. These critiques of UDL are essential in helping develop inclusive pedagogy, and represent a major movement towards the horizon of inclusive education.

As for my own critiques of UDL, I think that it needs to go further with respect to understanding the ways that dis/ability is constructed around language proficiency in formal academic English, which is distant from the language spoken in the real lives of many students. Specifically, literature on UDL checkpoint 2.4 (e.g. Gordon et al, 2016; Nelson, 2014), which involves promoting understanding across languages, is underdeveloped in terms of how it elevates formal academic English without respect to the racialized political discourses of “appropriateness” (Flores & Rosa, 2015). In doing so, UDL broadly takes for granted that academic English is the only appropriate (or at least the most appropriate) mode of communication. Moreover, it is my assertion that UDL has been often cast as a means to achieving standards-based reform based on narrow and normative conceptions of achievement and accountability (e.g. Nelson 2014; Gordon, Gravel, & Schifter, 2009). In this respect, UDL has served to provide a “how” discourse in service of standards based reforms that operates as if those reforms are inherently good, willfully ignorant of the negative consequences. I believe that these two facets of UDL broadly undervalue the capabilities that students come into school with, and serve to support a political vision of the purpose of schooling as homogenizing force. However, they are not inevitable components of UDL in classroom practice, and therefore may be avoided by being mindful about their tendencies in those directions.
Conclusion

This chapter has established a five-part framework for inclusive education, in order to establish a clear frame in a contested space. Inclusive education is (a) an abstract principle of practice; (b) a civil rights agenda; (c) a vehicle for improving general education; (d) a community endeavor; and (e) a pedagogical approach that provides supports for diverse students without stigmatizing difference. The next chapter will review previous studies that have sought to conduct professional development and action research in service of inclusion.
CHAPTER 3 – REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

This chapter features empirical articles related to conducting school-level action research as professional development to promote inclusive education in the US over the last decade. I searched for peer-reviewed articles in two databases: ERIC(ProQuest) and EBSCOHost Education Source using the following key terms: inclusion or inclusive and either professional development or staff development and action research or collaborative inquiry. Figure 2 shows how the terms relate to one another, with a summary of the themes that emerged from the literature.

Inclusive Education

![Venn Diagram]

Figure 3.1 - Review of Literature
Over 800 studies met the search criteria, and two rounds of analysis were conducted in order to ensure that the studies were relevant to this dissertation. In the first round, many studies were excluded, as they used the term *inclusion* in a general sense, (e.g. “inclusion criteria were…”), were not conducted in the US, were conducted in non-K-12 settings, or were related to professional development for non-teachers.

Only studies that were in the US were included in this review. This is because the policy context with respect to test-based accountability and technocratic interpretations of inclusion driven by IDEIA stand in broad contrast to international movements for inclusive education that are more likely to be aligned to conceptualizations of inclusive education driven by international agreements, such as the Salamanca statement (Kiuppis & Hausstatter, 2014). However, as the broader movement in Europe and the rest of the world to enhance inclusivity through professional development could be instructive to this study, some of international articles were ultimately included in the final analysis, especially those that synthesized larger bodies of literature. After excluding on those basic criteria, 150 articles remained.

In the second round of analysis, a deeper combing through was executed with more detailed criteria for exclusion. Articles focused on inclusion of other marginalized groups, such as English Language Learners (ELL’s) or Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Queer (LGBTQ) youth were not excluded, so long as the broader understanding of inclusivity was consonant with this paper’s conceptual framework, in order to embrace a broader vision of inclusivity that attends to dis/ability and its intersections with other vectors of oppression. However, broadly dissonant conceptions of inclusion were excluded, such as those that conflated inclusion with mainstreaming or Response to Intervention (RTI) frameworks that lack any ethical considerations and are purely prescriptive of practice (e.g. Isbell & Szabo, 2014). Content-specific articles, such
as those related to science classrooms, were similarly included, unless the implications could not reasonably be generalized into other curricular areas (e.g. Mulvey, Chiu, Ghosh, & Bell, 2016).

What remained were a total of 33 articles: 25 pertaining to professional development for inclusion (one of which - Nishimura, 2014 - was a literature review itself); 4 pertaining to featuring action research for inclusion, and: 5 focusing on the overlap. Five major themes emerged from this body of literature on PD and inclusion: (1) teachers feel unprepared to implement inclusion; (2) job-embedded PD is superior to traditional modes; (3) effective PD can shift both attitudes and practices of inclusion; (4) co-teaching pairs need to be jointly engaged in PD, and; (5) PD is a form of identity work that should embrace the challenge of reforming teachers’ professional identities. In addition, the four articles on action research for inclusion showed that action research can challenge exclusion and reframe the teacher-researcher relationship. Finally, the five articles that talked about action research PD for inclusion in the US showed that this work is underdeveloped. Two reviews of the international literature and one recent empirical study from Europe were included in order to juxtapose the findings in the US and other countries. Each one of these areas is discussed in detail in the following sections.

**Professional Development for Inclusion**

Generally speaking, the 25 studies that focused on PD for inclusive education in the United States highlighted the importance of professional development in fulfilling the promise of inclusion. Petersen (2016) called attention to the “...need for extensive and ongoing professional development to assist teachers in defining general education curriculum access and the relationship among access, assessment, and instruction” (p. 29). In order to do this, the literature noted the importance of acknowledging and building upon existing practices. Petersen (2016) continued, noting that “professional development that provides teachers with additional learning
opportunities to understand how to integrate their current knowledge, while expanding their knowledge of academic content is paramount” (p. 31). Simon and Black (2011) similarly noted the need to identify inclusive practice and provide sustained and intensive PD in those practices, keeping an eye on student outcomes, and allowing for constant adjustment.

Nishimura (2014) conducted a literature review on professional development for inclusion. Culling from 17 studies on professional development for inclusion, she identified three themes across the literature: the need for PD to directly engage teachers in immediately relevant ways by creating a culture of collaboration; the effectiveness of peer-coaching as a way to have ongoing support through change; and empowerment to create communities of practice. Moreover, Nishimura identifies general “best practices” for professional development, including embedding PD in teachers’ daily practice, providing sustained feedback, and fostering collaboration amongst teacher peers, especially co-teachers. However, Nishimura’s study also focuses on individualized coaching as a vehicle to promote pro-inclusion attitudes amongst teachers, and employs a theoretical frame that is more focused on coaching, and as such includes studies that do “not specifically address inclusive practices” (p. 25).

**Teachers Feel Unprepared to Include**

General and special education teachers alike consistently report feeling unprepared to implement inclusive practices. Petersen (2016) noted that special education teachers often have training in providing instructional accommodations, but rarely do they have such training specific to general education settings. Jenkins and Yoshimura (2010) and Royster, Reglin, and Loiske-Sedimo (2014) noted that general education teachers feel ill prepared to meet the needs of students with disabilities in inclusive settings. Such feelings of being unprepared to meet diverse student needs were further found to be linked to general educator support for segregated special
education settings. Such support for segregated settings due to insufficient training is not limited to students with dis/abilities. Doran (2017) found that teachers lacked familiarity with basic concepts related to teaching students with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, as well as instructional practices that could support their learning, even when they had received PD on those topics.

Antagonism towards integration of diverse learners is nested within a context wherein the culture of schooling is often antagonistic to the values of inclusion. Jenkins and Ornelles (2009) found the pressure that teachers face with respect to increasing standardized test scores leads them to resist students with dis/abilities, who they perceive will have lower test scores. Moreover, Leko and Brownell (2009) noted that high turnover rates of teachers in high poverty and urban areas leads to a revolving door of alternatively certified educators, who are often inexperienced and minimally prepared, particularly in special education.

**Job-Embedded PD is Superior to Traditional PD**

Broadly speaking traditional PD modes are generally portrayed in the literature as ineffective. Shaffer and Thomas-Brown (2015), Carter-Andrews (2012), and Jenkins and Yoshimura (2010) all noted how “one-shot” professional development practices fail to meaningfully benefit teachers or result in changes in teaching practices, much less improve student outcomes. Topics for inclusive PD were described as disconnected from teacher needs, with general education teachers noting a greater need for knowledge about dis/abilities and instructional strategies that support student needs (Able, Sreckovic, Garwood, & Sherman, 2015). Similarly, special education teachers noted that PD is often irrelevant to their jobs, in turn serving as a burden, instead of a support (Petersen, 2016). Not surprisingly, Skilton-Sylvester and Slesaransky-Poe (2009) connected traditional forms of PD to “...an exclusive emphasis on legal
promulgates and the learning needs of particular students [that has] obscured the need to think holistically and systematically about the ways that schools may need to fundamentally change” (p. 32). Indeed, compliance-thinking was consistently described as a major impediment to providing useful PD to teachers. Doran (2017) noted the insufficiency of merely requiring and delivering a set number of PD days or hours; rather, that PD needs to be an ongoing, collaborative process with opportunities for implementation of learning at all points.

Job-embedded PD is described in the literature as a far more promising avenue for teacher growth as “[PD activities] were not perceived helpful unless they were participatory or included hands-on experiences” (Ko & Boswell, 2013, p. 235). Shaffer and Thomas-Brown (2015) defined job-embedded PD:

Job embedded professional development has been defined as teacher learning that is grounded in day-to-day teaching practice and is designed to enhance teachers’ content-specific instructional practices with the intent of improving student learning … [including] action research, case discussions, coaching [etc.]. Each of these formats requires teachers to be open to critical feedback and willing to share lesson plans, and tests, etc. in order to improve their teaching and ultimately improve the educational environment for all students. Regardless of which format is used, in order for learning to take place, PD must be grounded in theoretical knowledge based in actual events, self-directed and significant to the teacher, and build upon pre-existing knowledge … research in the use of embedded professional development is on the forefront of how professional development will look in schools (p. 118).
Job-embedded PD demands a much higher degree of authenticity and relevance in its design and implementation especially when compared to traditional PD, allowing the voices of teachers to be centered in determining what skills and knowledge need to be developed in order to meet real student needs (Jenkins & Ornelles, 2009). Nevertheless, job-embedded PD must still be intensive and sustained, as well as strategic and collaborative (Strieker, Logan, & Kuhel, 2012). In response to issues created by high rates of staff turnover and inexperienced teachers, job-embedded PD both requires and allows a blend of basic topics such as classroom management and lesson planning with more advanced topics in content-specific pedagogy and providing access (Leko & Brownell, 2009).

**PD Can Shift Practices and Beliefs**

At its best, professional development can shift teaching practices towards inclusion. Strieker and colleagues (2012) found that job-embedded PD was able to shift the entire continuum of special education service delivery away from segregated settings and towards co-taught general education classrooms in six schools over a three-year period. However, while this study was successful in identifying PD practices that supported inclusion, especially with respect to ongoing coaching, providing forums for reflection, and focusing professional learning on student outcomes, it was expensive, costing “minimally $17,000 per school [per year],” (p. 1062) and relied on expensive ($1000/day) external university-based expert consultants who were only minimally engaged in the day-to-day practices of the school.

Smith Canter, King, Williams, Metcalf, and Potts (2017) conducted a professional development program that connected university-based trainings with job-embedded coaching in order to promote instructional changes based on UDL. Though the research was able to yield “instructional practices that are more inclusive of all diverse learners,” (p. 15) the study did not
any way describe contextual factors. Therefore, the authors assume a universally applicable framework for providing access without respect to culture, language, or racial intersections or co-constructions with dis/ability across all contexts. Indeed, Smith Canter et al.’s framing of the biggest changes and challenges in American education are highly contestable:

The changes and challenges before U.S. public schools may look slightly different in detail, but contextually they are the same. The most pressing challenges and changes facing U.S. public schools are (a) an increase in diversity in the classroom, (b) a rise in mandated movements to recognize and respect diversity and promote global awareness, (c) a push for inclusionary policies and practices, (d) a move to standards based curricula and increased accountability of total student achievement, and (e) an increase in access to and emphasis on technological advances (p. 2).

Nevertheless, the authors did find that their job-embedded PD program did yield shifts in both implementation of inclusive pedagogy and some beliefs that supported inclusion, even if it was uncritical of the structures that create and sustain exclusion. However, programs of PD that do not allow for reflection and critique of exclusionary institutions would likely be less successful in communities that are historically marginalized and excluded.

A number of studies found that successful professional development, whatever its form, can shift teachers’ beliefs about their own effectiveness with respect to making inclusion happen. Kosko and Wilkins (2009) found that “teachers who had more professional development for adapting instruction felt more skillful” (p. 8). Royster et al.’s (2014) study found that their fairly conventional PD program warmed the attitudes towards inclusion of general education teachers who had students with dis/abilities assigned to their classes. Again, this is not isolated to issues of
dis/ability. Garrett and Spano (2017) found that PD focusing on including LGBTQ youth changed teacher attitudes toward the importance of inclusion.

**PD For Co-Teachers Is More Effective When Both Participate**

Given that general and special education teachers have different but complementary needs with respect to inclusion, many studies have identified the need for co-teaching pairs to participate in inclusion together. In fact, teamwork between co-teachers and a shared commitment to inclusion has been cited as one of the most critical of PD for inclusion (Shaffer & Thomas-Brown, 2015). General educators often need PD in knowing how to provide instructional supports for students with dis/abilities, which they otherwise considered the sole purview of special educators (Petersen, 2016; Jenkins & Yoshimura, 2010). For their part, special educators may need PD in providing accommodations in general education settings and in content-specific pedagogies (Petersen, 2016). As co-teaching models like New York City’s ICT become more common, the PD that teachers receive must provide specific supports for the needs of both groups of educators (Shaffer & Thomas-Brown, 2015). Again, this also holds true not just when seeking to include students with dis/abilities, but ELL’s as well (Russell, 2016). Engaging co-teaching pairs in shared PD leads to a greater ease in implementing new inclusive teaching practices, such as UDL (Lowrey, Hollingshead, & Howery, 2017; Smith Canter et al., 2017).

Professional development targeting co-teaching pairs needs to explicitly consider the barriers to and opportunities for PD in inclusion. In particular, PD design needs to consider the isolation of teachers and provide networks of collegial support, especially for special educators who are faced with limited co-planning time, teaching assignments that often are in multiple different classrooms, and heavy paperwork loads (Leko & Brownell, 2009). An example of this is Swanson and Bianchini’s (2015) provision specific unit and lesson planning templates to co-
teaching pairs that supported the practice of proactively planning instructional supports, which in turn led to shared goals and priorities for collaboration between general and special education teachers.

**PD As Identity (Collective and Individual) Work**

PD for inclusion must embrace what Kreiner, Hollensbe and Sheep (2006) term *identity work*, in order to negotiate a balance between personal and professional identities. Furthermore, this work must both embrace reformation of individual and collective identities. Hoppey and McLesky (2013) argued that effective PD for inclusion must support both individual professional growth and establish community norms around inclusion in order to build capacity and local knowledge of what works in context. Naraian and Oyler (2014) argue that PD for inclusion must account for the ways in which teachers’ “web of relationships, ideals, and commitments that mark their attempts to afford equitable schooling opportunities to students with disabilities” (p. 517).

Accounting for teacher identity construction is crucial, as teachers’ needs and preferences for PD are deeply connected to the ways that they understand themselves as professional learners. To that end, teachers must be included in the process of identifying those needs and finding ways to meet them (Jenkins & Yoshimura, 2010). Again, this is not isolated to dis/ability, as Carter-Andrews notes:

> Educators need to engage in meaningful professional development that is designed at the school and district levels to help building leaders and classroom teachers think through the implications of interacting with students as Black students and as Black students (Carter-Andrews, 2012, p. 40).

To this end, PD for inclusion needs to support teachers in understanding both who they are and what their needs are as professional learners, as well as the complex webs of relationships that
they maintain with respect to each other and to learners, particularly when those learners are excluded in multiple intersecting ways.

Action Research for Inclusion

Only four articles used action research methodology for promoting or investigating inclusive education. Three of these studies focused on developing social inclusion for elementary aged children, whereas one sought to reframe the teacher-university partnership for the sake of implementing inclusive educational practices.

Action Research in Schools Can Be Good for Challenging Exclusion

Zindler (2009) also employed an action research methodology in order to improve the inclusion of her second-grade students with dis/abilities. By integrating opportunities for social skills instruction into the daily curriculum, and setting aside time for weekly community meetings which involved classmates giving each other compliments, she sought to strengthen the social bonds between her young students. These activities increased peer acceptance and social connections among students overall, even though the students who remained most socially isolated were the students with IEP’s and students from lower socioeconomic levels who were bussed into the school. However, without any intersectional framework for understanding how dis/ability, race, and class are co-constructed or interactive with one another, this study misses falls short of challenging exclusion in complex ways. Moreover, while this study challenges exclusionary attitudes that young students have of each other, it does not address the more pernicious attitudes that adolescents consumed with social comparison have. Moreover, Zindler falls short of challenging exclusionary policies and practices at the institutional level, including in the teachers own practice outside of the community meetings. Nevertheless, it does show that action research can be leveraged as a vehicle to challenge exclusion.
Novak and Bartleheim (2012) investigated ways in which students with dis/abilities could be more accepted and welcomed in a second-grade integrated classroom. This action research program involved teaching social skills and acceptance to general education students so as to facilitate the inclusion of children with dis/abilities through games and team-building exercises. However, this research program did not incorporate the views of students, educators, or parents in any way, favoring the frame of a pre-made quantitative survey that focused on acceptance. In this way, it falls short of addressing either more entrenched exclusionary attitudes or the policies and practices that support exclusion. Nevertheless, the researchers concluded that the project had increased the social acceptance and inclusion of children with disabilities and suggested that similar projects could support inclusion on a broader scale.

Puckett, Mathur, and Zamora’s (2017) action research project focused on better supporting the emotional needs of three male students with identified emotional disturbances in elementary classrooms that were integrated into general education. As such, the move to make further adaptations to the classroom context to reduce those students’ exclusion can be seen as going beyond integration into inclusion. Various strategies were tested by the special education teacher to see if they supported positive behavior in the classroom. Students were positioned as co-researchers to evaluate the effectiveness of each strategy in supporting their needs. Troublingly, the researchers in this study located inappropriate behavior solely within the child, not as an interaction of the child in context, and therefore framed the results as the students’ dis/ability being “fixed” or “overcoming” their disabilities. Moreover, the study targeted such behaviors as hand-raising and sitting in “correct listening position,” which would certainly benefit from critical analysis, particularly for fourth-grade boys (e.g., at no point did the teacher-researcher ask if it was appropriate to demand compliance in those ways). Despite that, students reported an
increased sense of belonging in class, as the teacher reported emergent friendships among the boys who participated in the project, as well as the other students in the class.

**Action Research Can Reframe the Researcher-Teacher Relationship**

Fisher and Rogan (2012) used PAR methodology to investigate how inclusive practices could be supported through a university-teacher group working collaboratively. The special education teacher participants in the study acknowledged and began to bridge the gap between academic research and their lived realities in the classroom. The teachers chose topics of inquiry related to inclusion such as parental engagement, supporting the development of literacy, transition from middle to high school, and supporting new teachers. Interestingly, the study found a shift in identity amongst participants towards becoming change agents, even though not all teacher participants took a stance that was critical of systems. In so doing, the teacher participants called for university researchers to “come to us and ‘live’ in the schools, providing mentoring and coaching on-site, and create new mediums for sharing and disseminating research findings” (p. 137). Unfortunately, much of the identity outcomes reinforced a dichotomy between special and general education teachers. Teachers of students with “significant” dis/abilities, for example, came to increasingly see their work as distinct and separate from the work of general education teachers or special education teachers who work with students identified as having high-incidence disabilities. Nevertheless, it shows how action research projects can renovate the identities of teachers as change agents for inclusion, and can support the development of research in the academy that is more relevant to teachers’ daily practice.

**Action Research PD for Inclusion**

Organized chronologically, the five articles that address the overlapping area of professional development and action research for inclusion show that the practice is
underdeveloped in the US. Generally, these studies either are grounded in epistemologies that ignore the lived experienced of those most affected by exclusionary structures, lack a critical lens towards systems of exclusion, employ medicalized understandings of dis/ability, or are concerned primarily with content-specific pedagogies and not the ethics that underlie them.

Mutch-Jones, Puttick, and Minner (2012) use Jugyokenkyu (Lesson Study), a Japanese program for teacher professional development that involves peer classroom visits and feedback, in order to conduct professional development in service of inclusion in middle school science classrooms. Using an experimental design, they found that teachers who used Jugyokenkyu (n=32) for one year were able to generate more accommodations for students with disabilities than those who were not involved in the project (n=41). However, conspicuously absent from the study’s analysis is whether or not those accommodations supported student learning, social integration, or emotional wellbeing. Moreover, the study maintains a medicalized stance towards dis/ability, seeing it as something to be fixed through interventions and accommodations, and is not even minimally critical of contexts that produce exclusion.

Naraian, Ferguson, and Thomas (2012) conducted an action research project wherein administrators and university-based researchers coached and conferred with individual teachers in order to promote inclusive practices and beliefs. Central to the study is the premise that including students with dis/abilities is related to emotional functioning and contingent on positive, supportive student-teacher relationships. While the teachers did not experience the changes in practice that the researchers had intended, they did find that focusing on teachers’ existing strengths with respect to supporting student emotional needs proved valuable, as did acknowledging the oppressive nature of their work environment. However, this study did not explicitly account for either the voices and perspectives of teachers or students in its design,
instead seeking to change oppressive conditions through exertion of bureaucratic authority, including coaches appointed by administrators.

Shady, Luther, and Richman, (2013) found that few teachers in one elementary school initially felt prepared to implement inclusive practices, but that many were willing to try. After a period of fairly conventional professional development on inclusive pedagogy over a year, teachers felt better prepared to employ inclusive teaching methods, but were less enthusiastic about inclusion and less confident that the benefits of inclusion were worth the effort. However, the frame of what constitutes action research in this case could be fairly described as an intervention with pre- and post- assessments in a very linear fashion. As such, it does not take into account the perspectives of the participants as experts in the research design. Moreover, the “intervention” were workshops led by an expert from a university. Finally, this study broadly conflates co-teaching with inclusion as if they were entirely synonymous and continues to understand student needs in medicalized ways.

Brusca-Vega, Alexander, and Kamin (2014) conducted action research projects with urban school teachers in Chicago to improve inclusive science pedagogy. They found that their program resulted in changes in teachers’ abilities to “teach in ways reflective of research-based and contemporary ideas about science instruction” (p. 49), as well as teacher abilities to implement interventions for a diverse range of students. Unfortunately, the principals involved tended to see the action research aspects of the project as “personal development … rather than as a way to affect school-wide change” (p. 50). Moreover, this study was focused specifically on science pedagogy, and therefore conflated progressive inquiry-based pedagogy with inclusive pedagogy. While the two may share characteristics, they also diverge in a number of ways, most specifically that inquiry-based pedagogy makes no account for marginalization by the curriculum itself.
Nevertheless, the authors conclude that action research PD for inclusion must afford teacher participants the opportunity act on and apply what they learn about new pedagogical approaches.

Dana, Pepe, Griffin and Prosser (2017) describe an online action-research PD program in the southern US that sought to improve research-based practices in integrated classrooms that had a mix of students with and without identified dis/abilities. They found that teachers were ill prepared to teach new math curricula to diverse classrooms, that teacher inquiry supported student conceptual and procedural learning, and that high stakes testing was a significant barrier to implementing teacher inquiry. However, it should be noted that the study was not primarily focused on doing action research PD for inclusive education, but rather to improve math pedagogy. As such, inclusiveness was very much an ancillary concern to the researchers, and there was minimal consideration of ethical aspects of inclusive practice.

**International Perspectives**

Waitoller and Artiles’s (2013) review of literature on PD for inclusion traces the international movement for inclusion while attending to structural factors related to divergent policies about inclusion. They found that the concept of inclusive education in general is primarily understood in terms of specifically including students with dis/abilities, but is increasingly coming to be seen in terms of new, intersecting dimensions of exclusion, such as race, language minoritization, sexual identity, and so on. Most studies reviewed focused on instructional accommodations and strategies, while a few focused on changing school cultures to facilitate access. They also found that action research PD was the most common form of PD internationally, varying in length from 5 weeks to 3 years. These action research studies “evaluated the impact of this type of PD on teacher learning by looking at changes in teachers’ practices and beliefs and attitudes towards inclusive education and students with disabilities” (p.
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331). Roughly half of studies reviewed outcomes, whereas the other half investigated ongoing processes of PD, with the former being closely tied to narrower conceptions of inclusion strictly pertaining to dis/ability. The vast majority of studies did not examine the impact of PD on students in any way, and were instead focused on teacher beliefs and practices. In their recommendations for further research, the authors indicate a need to apply intersectional understandings of dis/ability to studies of PD in inclusion that help teachers confront multiple, interdependent forms of exclusion. Moreover, they call for future studies to continue to use powerful action research methodologies, but to also investigate how PD can change student outcomes. Moreover, they emphasize the need for outcome-based PD studies to expand the scope of their analyses beyond individual changes and into the “complex processes that take place as individuals interact with other colleagues and with schools’ institutional arrangements in daily school practices” (p. 343). In summary, Waitoller and Artiles suggest boundary practices in action research for PD wherein an ongoing forum for mutual engagement is established, with particular attention paid to the role of boundary brokers that negotiate engagement between institutions (i.e. Schools and academia). They note that analysis of boundary objects, (i.e. PD materials) can yield understandings of how PD mediates teacher learning. Such studies “can contribute to developing empirical and theoretical work that advances inclusive educational reform” (p. 348).

DeVroey, Struyf, and Petry (2016) reviewed 800 studies related to a much more expansive topic, namely the international literature on implementing inclusion in secondary schools. While they did not specifically investigate action research PD, they do address its potential, indicating its importance as a tool of inclusive policy. In particular, the authors point to the importance of
involving teachers as partners in such endeavors, allowing for reflective practices and that affect the “contextual character and long-term processes of inclusive school development” (p. 120).

Most recently, Messiou et al. (2016) is situated within the big-picture effects of work begun by Mel Ainscow and Tony Booth in the UK in the 1990’s that became highly influential in many European countries. This work has used collaborative inquiry-based professional development to promote inclusive education with both ethical and practical considerations. They have recently begun to incorporate elements of Jugyokenkyu and collaborative lesson planning into teacher inquiry projects. This study goes beyond previous work in this area, asking about how teachers might be able to develop more inclusive practices by intentionally inviting the views of students. Working with teams of secondary teachers across 8 schools in the UK, Portugal, and Spain, the researchers engaged teachers in collaborative action research that focused teachers on student perspectives on “classroom practices and activities that make them feel included” (p. 49). In some cases, teachers extended this into including students in the curriculum development process. The work led to the development of a framework for teacher development for inclusion, as seen in figure 3.
Figure 3.2 - Messiou et. al's Action Research PD Framework

In this diagram, it is clear that key elements (talking about diversity, learning from experiences, and developing inclusive practices) of an action research PD project should be informed at all points by student perspectives. Messiou et al. further concluded that (1) the views of students can help us to be more sensitive to issues of inclusion; (2) engaging with the views of others can stimulate professional discussion and experimentation; (3) collaboration is needed amongst teachers in order to create new ways of working, and; (4) learning from diversity will challenge the status quo within schools. While the policy and demographic context for the studies described by Messiou and colleagues are considerably different from those this study engages with, there is good reason to believe that similar programs implemented in the US in urban contexts may similarly challenge the status quo and find new ways for working in service of inclusion.
Conclusion

It is clear that promising practices related to doing action research PD are underdeveloped in the US. Though PD is widely agreed to be a crucial aspect of inclusive education, and action research has successfully been able to challenge exclusion, common practices from outside the US have yet to take root here. Given the existing body of literature on PD and action research and the few studies in which they overlap, there is good reason to believe that job-embedded professional development that both appreciates existing teacher practices that support inclusion and is critical of structures that sustain exclusion would likely yield concrete and meaningful outcomes. Moreover, conducting action research that is context sensitive to the United States may also help push the international inclusion movement forward. As DeVroey and colleagues note, there is a need for more work in this vein: “…recommendations for further research include qualitative studies on leadership, collaborative practice and professional development towards inclusive cultures and supportive relationships, in search for a deeper inclusive pedagogy and its implementation in secondary schools. (p. 127).

It is worth also noting the history of collaborative inquiry in New York City, to provide context. Teacher collaborative inquiry projects were once mandatory in New York City schools but were abandoned. In Herr and Anderson’s (2014) appraisal of the program, issues of trust, logistics, and authenticity prevented mandated inquiry from becoming successful. Notably, mandated collaborative inquiry was viewed by many as “merely a vehicle for implementing the large ARIS database the district purchased” (p. 47), an expensive pet project of then chancellor Joel Klein.
Collaborative inquiry professional development was therefore unsurprisingly tied to the same type of technocratic reforms and narrowly operationalized ideas of achievement that drove the hollow inclusion reforms at the same time.

This dissertation does not therefore necessarily address a “gap” in the existing literature as much as it does seek to take a body of research that is successful in other international policy contexts and apply it sensitively to an urban US context. Specifically, I will seek to thoughtfully apply existing frameworks for positive organizational change and critical participatory action research in order to promote inclusion. In the next chapter, I will outline the research methods for this study.
CHAPTER 4 – METHODS

...I had learned that all of the greatest and most important problems of life are fundamentally insoluble. They must be so, because they express the necessary polarity inherent in every self-regulating system. They can never be solved, but only outgrown.

Carl Jung (1947, p. 89)

Introduction

This chapter describes the research methods for this study. On the first level, it was a teacher action research project done by special and general educator pairs working in MS 222. This project aimed to create sustainable change on the terms of the teacher-participants by both honoring their situated knowledge of their students and building on existing promising practices. However, the data collected on this first teacher-inquiry level was not included in this dissertation. Instead, it served as the basis for professional development that seeks to promote inclusion, which was evaluated on the second level. On this second level, the methods were a more conventional qualitative case study of whether the first-level action research professional development level-inquiry was able to shift the school towards greater fulfilling the promise of inclusive education.

First Level – Teacher Action Research as Professional Development

The rationale for action research is generally driven by a desire to change the conditions wherein research is conducted. Creswell (2013) refers to this as a transformative worldview for educational research:

A transformative worldview holds that research inquiry needs to be intertwined with politics and a political change agenda to confront social oppression at
whatever level it occurs … transformative research provides a voice for these participants, raising their consciousness or advancing an agenda for change to improve their lives. It becomes a united voice for reform and change (Creswell, 2013, p. 9).

In order to consciously embrace change as a research methodology, the research methods that I employed on this first level broadly questioned the epistemological assumptions about who owns and who can “do” research. Traditionally, research is an endeavor of experts from academic institutions who are well-versed in relevant theories and (often quantitative) research methods. This perspective on educational research, I argue, has done little to upend dynamics of exclusion and marginalization. If anything, it has served to reify expertise as the domain of privileged people who are overwhelmingly white men, which has in turn endowed their epistemologies of with a veneer of authority, marginalizing the knowledge and ways of knowing of “other” people as inferior or invalid. Doing so has ensured that the findings of traditional educational research have broadly been at odds with the lived experiences of teachers, students, and families marginalized by systems of exclusion.

On this level, the study tangled with a paradox: teachers are probably the most important institutional players in determining educational outcomes, yet they also serve the whim of and are often complicit with a system that has devalued student learning as narrowly operationalized achievement, and that often sees the teachers themselves as expendable and interchangeable cogs. The research methods on this level sought to embrace that paradox and shift its balance. Ultimately, my hope was that the frame developed here could help teachers outgrow the problems that they currently face in their work with students. This involved enabling them to inquire into the nature of the systems of exclusion that they exist within, but also to discover and magnify the
ways in which they already successfully navigate those systems to promote well-being and inclusion of vulnerable children. To that end, I combined two complementary action research methodologies on this level, Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR).

**Appreciative Inquiry**

Appreciative Inquiry is a mode of action research that seeks to advance organization-level change by magnifying existing strengths. It stands in contrast to other models of organization development in that it is explicitly asset-focused instead of relying on “problem-solving” models of organizational development that suggest that organizational problems can be fixed merely by doing less of what the organization does poorly. This involves a shift in focus towards long-held, unconscious assumptions about the organization and how members of the organization understand their roles (Hammond, 2013). Srivasta and Cooperrider draw a clear distinction between AI and other theories of organizational change:

In contrast to a type of research that is lived without a sense of mystery, the appreciative mode awakens the desire to create and discover new social possibilities that can enrich our existence and give it meaning … (AI) is an inquiry process that takes nothing for granted, searching to apprehend the basis of organizational life and working to articulate those possibilities, giving witness to a better existence (Cooperrider & Srivastva 1987, p. 157).

Perhaps because of the affirmative focus, AI is an increasingly popular approach in the business, non-profit, and governmental sectors. Cooperrider and Whitney (2001) attribute the power of Appreciative Inquiry to its unique philosophical bent towards the affirmative:
[the increasing popularity of AI as a model for change] suggests, we believe, a growing sense of disenchantment with exhausted theories of change, especially those wedded to vocabularies of human deficit, and a corresponding urge to work with people, groups, and organizations in more constructive, positive, life-affirming, even spiritual ways (p. 612).

For the purposes of this dissertation, the organization that was the focus of inquiry was the special education system within MS 222. As such, the participants in this inquiry are teachers who embody the aforementioned paradox: they have often been complicit in maintaining the struggles of the school and its somewhat integrated special education system; however, they also have been those who make up the “positive core” of the organization with respect to the tremendous assets that they bring to the school. They were the researchers on this level, generating the data about what has been working well, analyzing why it works, and then generating new knowledge about how to do it more often. (Stetson, 2010).

**Critical Participatory Action Research**

Critical Participatory Action Research is a mode of action research that seeks to empower participants to take action to dismantle systems of exclusion. It stands in contrast to other methods for action research in that it explicitly seeks to uncover and document systematic forms of injustice.

...critical PAR is an epistemology that engages research design, methods, analyses, and products through a lens of democratic participation. Joining social movements and public science, PAR projects document the grossly uneven structural distributions of opportunities, resources, and dignity; trouble ideological categories
projected onto communities (delinquent, at risk, damaged, innocent, victim\(^5\)); and
contest how “science” has been recruited to legitimate dominant policies and
practices (Torre, Fine, Stoudt, & Fox, 2012, p. 171).

This requires a shift in focus away from locating pathology within the bodies of individuals and
towards the systems that create and sustain dysfunction, which in turn requires deep reflection on
the personal experiences of the research participants:

Deeply committed to what Antonio Gramsci … called “organic intellectuals,”
Freire, Fals-Borda, and their colleagues believed a research of the people by the
people that encouraged people to critically reflect on their own experiences to
generate theory, design research, and engage action could have the power to
interrupt the oppressive conditions of the status quo (Torre, 2014, p. 4).

In the context of this study, teachers participating in the action research project were empowered
to reflect on their own experiences within the educational system in order to identify the very real
barriers to meaningful inclusion, such that successive cycles of inquiry may eliminate those
barriers. More immediately though, identification of those barriers might help participants cope
with the aversive conditions of their work lives through the development of “secondary control”
mechanisms. These mechanisms enable adults to shift the focus of what can be changed to the
self in order to create a sense of empowerment, even when there may be few actionable levers to
pull (Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck, 2011). Again, as the hope was to outgrow the fundamental
problems within the context of this school, the participants needed to be able to recognize and
question the broader sociopolitical forces at work in order to leverage their particular skills and
assets to upend them.

\(^5\) To which I would add “dis/abled”
Steps & Flowchart

Figure 4.1 - Flowchart
The primary framework for this appreciative and critical action research project is the 5 D’s of AI (Hammond, 2013), as they provide a semi-rigid structure upon which criticality can be added. Though I present them here as distinct phases, I also had anticipated that they will bleed into each other in practice, either for practical reasons (e.g. the need to review for teachers who may miss PD sessions) or because in many places the previous phase informed the successive and vice versa, which created a need to have recursive loops. These phases are illustrated in Figure 4.1 and outlined below.

**Define.**

*This is the most critical step in the AI process because what we focus on becomes our reality ... and the act of asking questions of an organization or group influences the group in some way (Hammond, p. 27).*

The first phase was to define the focus of the inquiry. In other times and for other purposes, this is often done by someone in a supervisory or managerial capacity, or it may be left up to a democratic process to define the focus of inquiry. While it might be desirable in other contexts (and even for future aspirational iterative cycles of this project) to enable participants to define the focus of inquiry, for reasons outlined in the introduction (the “why this, why now”), as well as practical reasons, I defined the focus of inquiry around inclusive education.

Which is not to say that I did the majority of the work for this phase of the project. In this phase, participants were invited to question their relationships to the focus of inquiry, as abbreviated theories of inclusion and action research are presented to them to reflect upon. We began to discuss our relationships to inclusive education, including any reservations or resistance that we may have towards it, and draw a distinction between ICT and inclusion. I had anticipated that this phase would take 1 or 2 professional development periods of 45 minutes to complete, as I
had anticipated that many of the teachers will have a general familiarity with the concept of inclusive education.

Discover.

_The core task of the discovery phase is to discover and disclose positive capacity, at least until an organization’s understanding of this “surplus” is exhausted (which has never happened once in our experience) (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001, p. 7)._ 

In the second phase, teachers asked their students about times in which they felt most meaningfully included in school. The teachers made choices about how to listen to their students, in so doing identifying the features of inclusive education that were most salient to them. Teachers were able to choose to conduct quantitative and/or qualitative research; broadly an interview or a survey or both a survey. This choice was framed by suggesting that the development and administration of an interview protocol would yield deeper insights into a few individual student experiences. In this case, I also encouraged interviews to be done with the students who are the most marginalized in their classes. Because forces of marginalization and exclusion work in tandem with each other, it is hard to say who exactly that student is, but in my estimation, it would have been typically someone with multiple labels (i.e. IEP, ELL) and externalizing behavior that the teachers find difficult to support or contain.

I had anticipated that in this phase teachers would focus on feelings of belonging and positive emotions, which will align most closely with the “community endeavor” and “inclusive pedagogy” features of this dissertation’s conceptual framework. I had anticipated that it would take 1 professional development session to design the survey/interview protocol and another 1-2 weeks for the teachers to gather data, which they would then share in the next phase.
**Dream.**

*During the dream phase ... people are brought together to listen carefully to the innovations and moments of organizational “life”, sometimes in storytelling modes, sometimes in interpretive and analytic modes, a convergence zone is created where the future begins to be discerned in the form of visible patterns interwoven into the texture of the actual.* (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001, p. 9)

In this third phase, teachers were prompted to imagine what their school context would look like if students were included all of the time, drawing upon the provided definition of inclusion as well as findings from the “discover” phase. In particular, attention was paid to the affective dimensions of what change would feel like for both the students and for them as teachers. They were invited to creatively express a realistic, yet hopeful vision for a future version of inclusive education in the school, in which exclusion is minimized that was grounded in awareness of real-life constraints.

I had anticipated that this would be very difficult for the teachers, as I had suspected that a major barrier to meaningful inclusion is a problem of imagination—that they had become so accustomed to exclusion that it would be difficult to even imagine what else could be. I also anticipated that this would the point at which racist and/or ableist assertions about student capacity would arise. I had planned to respond to those assertions by inviting the members of the team to challenge such statements, though I knew that I may be forced to directly engage the group on these issues. I had planned to reframe such problematic statements in optimistic terms (Seligman, 1990). For example, if a teacher suggests that “SPED students aren’t able to pass tests,” I planned reframe that in such a way that implicates the tests as invalid measures of learning, shifting from an *internal* to an *external* attribution. Moreover, I planned to reframe the
statement in order to shift from a *global* to a *specific* attribution, such that some students with IEP’s may not do well on tests, but that many could. In this I may need to draw credibility from my own experience as a teacher who successfully was able to help kids pass tests. Finally, in response to such a statement, I planned reframe that sentiment such that the inevitability of failure is in doubt, shifting from a *permanent* to a *temporary* attribution, by highlighting the unreliability of standardized test results. While I knew that this approach may yet leave something to be desired, particularly if the attitudes of the teachers are more problematic than I was able to anticipate. I also had recognized that it might have been necessary to call out discrimination as such in more forceful terms, though I do hope to avoid teacher disengagement from the study.

I had anticipated that this phase might have taken up a considerable amount of time, but was willing to spend it, as I believed it would be crucial in making sure that the groundwork for the rest of the inquiry is laid. I thought that this phase could take as little as one PD period, or as many as four. Nevertheless, at the end of it, the participating teachers should have a clearly articulated and hopeful vision that is also realistic for what inclusive education could look in their immediate context.

**Design.**

*When inspired by a great dream, we have yet to find an organization that did not feel compelled to design something very new and very necessary. (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001, p.10)*

In the design phase, teachers designed a pedagogical shift based on the practices they are currently employing to meet student needs and put it into more widespread practice. This involved identifying an existing pedagogical strategy that aligned with inclusive pedagogy and UDL and finding ways to implement it across curricular contexts such that it could meaningfully
promote greater inclusion. Pedagogical strategies needed to be explicitly be connected to the last phase in which teachers imagined a better future for themselves and their students, which we realized might necessitate expanding the teachers’ scope of how we understand what pedagogy is.

The team decided on how they would demonstrate that a strategy was useful or successful in meeting the needs of their kids. This involved deciding what data will be used to show others outside the group that it is a useful strategy, and therefore meant challenging the types of data that were acceptable as evidence. The new data could have taken a variety of forms, and might come from a variety of sources, but was required to be explicitly tied to the pedagogical strategy as well as the “dream.” I had anticipated that this will take 1-2 PD sessions.

**Destiny.**

The last phase is to deliver by creating the future you have collectively envisioned.

Some call this phase destiny to denote the spirit of a continuous future versus a one-time project that is completed when “delivered”. (Hammond, p. 38)

In the first half of the destiny phase, teachers implemented the plan that they designed, shifting their pedagogical practices and collecting data along the way. Every week, the teachers will be called in to reflect on the success of the strategy, by asking (a) “does it help kids?” and if so, (b) “can we show that it did?” Negative responses to those questions will cycle us back to the design phase, finely tuning both the pedagogical practice and the teachers’ capacity to justify them in terms of their students’ needs. I had anticipated that this demi-phase could take as little as one week but was more likely to take up to 4 weeks. Once we had at least one strategy that we can say confidently helps include students, we will move on to the second part of the destiny phase.
The second part of the destiny phase involved critical analysis and evaluation of broader systemic issues that impact the usefulness of the pedagogical strategy. Primarily, teachers were invited to consider the limitations of the strategy and the locus of those limitations. I had anticipated that this also might be a juncture at which teachers express discriminatory views of their students or their families. If so, I had planned to make an effort to implicate structural factors that create exclusion, with an explicit statement about addressing those factors in successive iterations. Teachers also considered how their findings may benefit both other teachers in their school, as well as individuals outside the school, such as their union, community members, etc.

The teacher team then were to develop a traditional professional development module for the teachers of their school. This module was to note that the strategy is context-specific to their population, while also noting any limitations that the strategy may have. The professional development presentation they deliver to their colleagues was also to note the ethical rationale for inclusion. For the purposes of second level data collection (the case study in professional development), this is where my data collection on the process will end.

I had hoped that this would not be the end of the work in promoting inclusion in this school, though. I knew I would have to continue to encourage and enable the teachers to continue to disseminate their findings through teacher-facing publications, blogs, community presentations, and other modes of communication that they find to be relevant to their intended audiences. These presentations would also culminate with the idea of “what next?” in hopes of recruiting a new research team with a new, more expansive focus that addresses the broader issues of marginalization that emerged from their critical analysis of the limitations. I had hoped that this also could lead to ongoing cycles of inclusive action research PD amongst teachers. I had anticipated that though teachers may be exhausted, many other parties will want to engage in this
work. This, to me, was the least clear part of the project, and could go in many other directions that I was unable to foresee.

**Emergent Data Collection and Analysis.**

Teacher data collection was informed by pragmatism, and not a rigid commitment to either quantitative or qualitative data. Teachers may have chosen to use student work products, their own reflections and similar qualitative data to support their evaluation of the usefulness of pedagogical strategies, or they may have chosen to use quantitative behavioral data, classroom test scores, or even standardized scores. What mattered is that each source of data is chosen for its pragmatic utility in evaluating student outcomes. Creswell (2013) describes a pragmatist approach to educational research:

> Truth is what works at the time. It is not based in a duality between reality independent of the mind or within the mind. Thus, in mixed methods research, investigators use both quantitative and qualitative data because they work to provide the best understanding of a research problem ... Pragmatists agree that research always occurs in social, historical, political, and other contexts. In this way, mixed methods studies may include a postmodern turn, a theoretical lens that is reflective of social justice and political aims. (p. 11)

Nevertheless, the philosophical disposition of appreciative inquiry is social-constructivist. As such, AI requires attending to the linguistic and metaphorical frames around which meaning is constructed within organizations:

> AI [is] a living research process engaging with human systems and based upon a set of philosophical understandings about the way the social world in which we live is being continually co-constructed between us … [AI] is built around a keen
appreciation of the power of language and discourse of all types (from words to
metaphors to narrative forms, and so on) to create our sense of reality—our sense
of the true, the good, and the possible. (Cantore & Cooperrider, 2013, p. 271)
In turn, first-level data analysis is driven by a critical lens on exclusion, one that seeks to
implicate systemic factors:

Critical inquiry deliberately shifts the gaze from ‘what’s wrong with that person’
to ‘what are the policies, institutions, and social arrangements that help to form and
deform, enrich and limit, human development?’ and ‘how do people resist the
weight of injustice in their lives.’ (Torre et al, 2012, p. 179)
It was therefore impossible and undesirable to identify the precise data collection or analysis
techniques that would have been used on this level. Instead, I have sought to enumerate
philosophical commitments that could guide the design and execution of the inquiry done by
teachers. Such an approach ensured that there was a gentle touch on the rudder of this project - I
could prevent it from going wildly off-course or getting stuck in doldrums, yet flexible enough to
allow for new possibilities created by the participants themselves that might not be available
under rigid data collection and analysis protocols.

It is important to note that data collected on this level was not to be published in any form
for this dissertation. It was to be collected and used solely to drive the PD project, and therefore
was not the subject of the IRB. Nevertheless, this process of collecting and analyzing student
data would still mitigate risk to students by communicating that any identifiable student data used
to drive the inquiry process is not in any way to be discussed outside of the PD contexts. The
benefits of such data collection in informing teacher practice were significant, in that the data
empowered the teachers to think and teach in new, more accessible ways, and with an eye to their
students’ considerable assets. Moreover, the students benefited by improved instruction, and changed teacher dispositions.

**Addressing Threats to Authenticity**

In addressing threats to the action research-level inquiry, I make reference to Lincoln and Guba’s *authenticity* paradigm (1986), which were established to address shortcomings of traditional positivist research. These criteria mirror the “reliability” paradigm found in traditional research but are further concerned with accounting for the multiple constructions of meaning that positivist research ignores.

For Lincoln and Guba (1986) *catalytic authenticity* is the degree to which research “facilitates and stimulates action” (p. 82). Before conducting the project, I had anticipated that persistent deficit thinking about students was probably the most troubling and likely threat to the success of this project. Acknowledging that racism, ableism, and the like did not begin within this school, it would be foolish to think that this project could have erased them in one cycle of several months. However, the extent to which this project could foster the kind of ethical dispositions and challenge exclusion was unknown. Throughout the project, I tried to mitigate the effects of this by keeping a keen ear out for derogatory statements and having a plan for the outlines of my responses to such statements, should they arise. Indeed, those deficit perspectives were a challenge in executing this project, as anticipated, but I assert that this project was successful in challenging those perspectives, even if not at all eliminating them.

Similarly, *tactical authenticity* is the criterion that describes whether the project is “empowering or impoverishing, and to whom” (Lincoln & Guba, 1986, p 82-83). In planning, I was concerned that teacher exhaustion would likely to threaten this project. Acknowledging that the teachers in this school were under a great deal of pressure to improve test scores, in addition
to having multiple outside-of-school commitments, I had tried to mitigate the effects of this by making the inquiry space as pleasant of an experience as possible, not least of which by providing healthy and delicious snacks. I also communicated to the best of my ability with the administration the importance of allowing this space to function without interruption, with respect to the agenda that I thought would matter to the school, particularly connecting the project to the rubrics used by NYC quality review auditors. I was pleased to find that this project was empowering to teachers, in no small part because they were actively involved in the design and execution of the study, making crucial decisions throughout. While teachers were sometimes noticeably physically tired, I assert that this project was not threatened by being yet another thing for them to do, but rather something that was enriching and empowering to them.

*Fairness* and *educative authenticity* relate to how findings are represented such that they reflect the various points of view within a project as well as my own responsibility as a researcher to ensure that “gatekeepers … have the opportunity to be ‘educated’ in the variety of perspectives and value systems that exist in a given context” (Lincoln & Guba, 1986, p. 82). From the outset, I was concerned that administrative noncooperation may have impeded the success of this project. I knew that if administrators were to decide that they want to keep a close eye on me, that may have inhibited the freedom of the participants to engage in critical evaluation of data, especially if it meant ever implicating administrative practices. To mitigate the effects of that, I sought to proactively build trust with the administration, such that they would not see a profound need to oversee the project. Of course, they were welcomed, but I tried to define the terms of their participation with them in advance, such that the project would not be adversely affected. Moreover, I had anticipated that the desired outcome of this project may have come to be seen by the administration as discordant with the desired outcomes that mattered to them, and this did
come to pass eventually. In order to address this, I had planned to take great care to frame this project such that they could see our shared objectives related to student well-being and learning. To that end, the recommendation report (Appendix B) issued by the team were written is such a way that they were careful to ensure that the multiple perspectives within the group on various issues were well represented, and that they could inform the administration about the priorities of teachers in implementing inclusion.

*Ontological authenticity* pertains to “the individual’s (and group’s) conscious experiencing of the world” (Lincoln & Guba, 1986, p. 81). I had anticipated that the composition of the research team might have also been a problem, since I was entirely at the mercy of the administration to determine who would be on my research team. I had tried to mitigate the difficulty I by encouraging the administration to assign teachers to the group that had made a long-term commitment to teaching and were not just transient alternative certification teachers, on the grounds that folks who had made deeper commitments to teaching would gain more from the project. In addressing this, I believed that the draw of having meaningful professional development would make participation in the project appealing to the teachers that were assigned to the project. I had also anticipated that running out of time might also have undermined the extent to which teachers might come to understand the value of this project. As there were several phases that could take varying lengths of time, there was the potential to finish early or not finish this work at all. To mitigate the possibility of these, I drew upon my experience managing similar projects in the past and was always mindful of time. I had planned to mitigate the negative effects by helping teachers to find a better balance between test preparation and meeting student needs. The two things should not be at odds with one another, but since I knew that they most likely would be, then supporting teachers in this way will almost certainly be useful in itself. Indeed, I
believe that the teachers did experience a marked improvement in their conscious experiencing of their lives in this school.

**Second Level – A Case Study in Shifting Towards Inclusive Education**

It was on this level that I sought to gain insights to the central research question of the study:

*To what extent can action research-based professional development that is based on magnifying existing strengths shift the practices and beliefs of co-teaching pairs working towards inclusion in a school facing pressure to improve test scores?*

In line with the conceptual framework that I developed for inclusive education, there were five key components of inclusive education: (a) inclusion as a principle of practice, (b) as a civil rights agenda, (c) as a vehicle for improvement of general education, (d) as a community endeavor, and (e) inclusive pedagogy. This is illustrated in Figure 4.2 as the application of a lens to the first level action research flowchart.
Qualitative Design and Role of Researcher

On this level, the study was a fairly conventional case study evaluating a professional development’s effects within a school. Case study methodology is indicated in this case because of the desire to get deeper insights into the many phenomena and features of the first-level action research project. Yin (2009) defines and provides rationale for case study research:

A case study is an empirical inquiry that (a) investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when (b) the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident … (c) copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as a result (d) relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as
another result (e) benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to
guide data collection and analysis. (Yin, 2009, p. 18)

This research question warranted a case study because it meets those conditions—the context for
the case study is deep and complex, therefore requiring multiple points of data collection and
analysis that carefully attend to that specific context.

As I did not have prior relationships with the teachers in MS2222, I knew I needed to
remain mindful of their concerns (and perhaps suspicions) with respect to my motives (Maxwell,
2012). To that end, I needed to be explicit about my research agenda on this level and be careful
to clearly explain the purposes of the research in supporting them, in addition to furthering my
career. All identifiable teacher information has to be de-identified as quickly as possible through
the use pseudonyms in all written data. Consent forms ensured that teachers knew that they could
leave the project at any time without having to provide an explanation. Similarly, teachers were
notified of their responsibility to maintain both mutual confidentiality and the confidentiality of
their students outside of the PD sessions.

**Data Collection Plan**

This case study incorporated multiple triangulated sources of data, so as to gain as much
insight as possible into what might have changed as a result of the professional development
project, how and to what extent it might have changed, and why it might have changed. To that
end, several sources of data will be used, and they are all explicitly linked to the conceptual
framework for inclusion.

**Field notes and video recordings of PD sessions.** In order to document the progress of
the professional development project, as well as participant reactions, I video recorded each of the
professional development sessions. The video recorder was placed unobtrusively so as to capture both the voices and faces of participants. The videos will be transcribed by me.

At the same time, I took notes on the conversations that we had. In order to ensure that my documentation was focused, I documented key phrases and statements that teachers used to describe their thinking about the project, with particular attention to the attitudes they expressed, metaphors that they encoded meaning in, and problematic or optimistic statements that they made. As a follow-up step, I typed my own subjective reflections as soon as I reasonably can after leaving the site. These provided me the opportunity to make personal observations and record my reactions to what happened in each of the PD sessions (Berg & Lune, 2011).

**Document analysis.** The first level project yielded three sets of documents or *boundary objects* for analysis — the teacher-created survey/interview protocol (discover), the dream statement (dream), and the professional development materials they develop for the rest of the school (destiny). Each of these documents yielded deep insight into the process and its relative successes and shortcomings. Additionally, there were written communications in a variety of forms between me and the teachers (emails, text messages, etc.) that were used for analysis.

**Individual summative interviews.** After the project ended, I came back to the school to do individual interviews about the process. These interviews will be structured around the questions in Appendix A, with opportunities for further probing as necessary.

**Summative online focus group.** Additionally, after the interviews, I created an asynchronous online focus group for the participating teachers. Such online focus groups are useful for this project as they may (a) be convenient for participants (b) afford participants time to carefully consider and respond, and (c) allow participants to express their thoughts without interruption (Nicholas et al., 2010). In the online focus group, teachers responded as they would...
in a social media-type arrangement, which allowed them the flexibility to think through and process their responses to the prompts (in Appendix B). It will gave me an opportunity to add additional discussion threads that are unobtrusive based on emergent findings from other data sources.

**Data Analysis Plan**

The primary strategy to analyze data was to rely on theoretical propositions in the conceptual framework about what I had anticipated might change. However, before this, I took time to “play” with the data by re-reading through collected data and beginning to identify broad patterns (Yin, 2008, p. 129). Once I have a clear picture of the data set as a whole, I returned to my theoretical framework for inclusion. With that, the primary analytic technique was pattern matching. In this case, I will seek to draw connections between the data and the analytical frames. Table 1 below shows some ways in which data sources may align with the established analytic frames. I also seek alternative explanations for outcomes beyond the first level action research project, as undoubtedly some of the outcomes of the study will be influenced by factors external to the project.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analytic Frames</th>
<th>Data Sources</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principle of Practice</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Civil Rights</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improvement of Gen. Ed.</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community Endeavor</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pedagogy</td>
<td>X</td>
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</tbody>
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*Table 4.1 - Data sources v. Analytic frames*
Addressing Threats to Validity

Though I certainly prefer the paradigm that accompanies qualitative research, implying a discussion of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, I have opted to use Yin’s (2008) framework for addressing the specific validity (or trustworthiness) threats, as it directly pertains to case-study research. Nevertheless, this should not be understood as an embrace of a positivist, objectivist approach to the evaluation of this professional development project, but instead a desire to conform to relatively standard practices in case study research, as they are not in-and-of themselves problematic. However, I wish to put these criteria in conversation with Fine’s (2007) reframing of objectivity, validity, and generalizability.

Construct validity. Yin (2008) indicates that those who are critical of case studies believe that subjective judgements are used to collect data. Indeed, my own subjectivities will play a great role in the design and execution of this research. Nevertheless, I have sought to mitigate whatever effects that has by (a) clearly operationalizing inclusive education so as to make my subjectivities clear and justifiable, and (b) explicitly linking data collection to those facets of inclusive education. However, “strong objectivity” requires that in research, we not make the assumption of absolute objectivity, but rather convey that our research is necessarily skewed by our own perspectives, while also being explicit about what those perspectives are (Harding, 1993; Fine, 2007). To that end, this dissertation represents an investigation into how the participants perceived of changes. This shift in the construct of case-study evaluation from an objective dispassionate one, to one of committed engagement. Similarly, while I provided a broad theoretical perspective on inclusive education, it was the teachers negotiation of meaning around that framework that was important to this study.
**Internal validity.** Yin (2008) notes that especially when causal linkages are explored, threats to internal validity arise when unanticipated or confounding variables may account for changes in dependent variables. In order to mitigate the effects of this, I will explicitly seek rival explanations for whatever changes are identified, in particular from the teacher-participants, who are likely to have the greatest insights as to how identified changes may be most fairly attributed. Moreover, I will find ways, during and after analysis of the data, to check and confirm my findings with my participants, in part to mitigate threats to internal validity, but more importantly to ensure that I am not speaking incorrectly for the participants.

**External validity.** Yin (2008) also notes that a problem with case study research is the extent to which its findings are portrayed as generalizable beyond the immediate context. I mitigated any effects related to over-generalizability by explicitly framing this as a PD project in one school. Of course, my hopes were that there would be findings that other practitioners and researchers will find to be useful, but those will explicitly be framed as heuristics that may guide other work in principle. A large part of what I believe the strength of the research design of this project is that it is explicitly sensitive to context. If anything will likely be generalizable, it will be the necessity of accounting for local context in designing similar projects.

As such, I hope that the findings of this study may have what Fine (2007) terms *theoretical generalizability*, resonating and echoing across contexts in hopes that some broader truth about inclusive change or urban schools can be understood. Further, I hope that this will have *provocative generalizability*. That is, I hope that the readers of this (and future) work will imagine what is not now imaginable, finding ways to apply these methods and philosophical commitments in their own contexts, especially in service of reimagining special education.
Repliability. Yin (2008) notes that the findings of the study should be replicable based on the established protocols. My explicit descriptions of each step of the first level PD project should be replicable, but only to an extent. Researchers seeking to replicate the findings must be sensitive to contextual factors, be they similar or different.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined research methods on two levels. On the first level, this study will be a collaborative teacher action research project that is both appreciative of their strengths as teachers as well as critical of systems of exclusion. As such, the specific processes of data collection and analysis are emergent. On the second level, this dissertation employs much more conventional case study methodology in order to evaluate the extent to which teacher beliefs and practices have shifted towards inclusion through the action research-driven professional development.
CHAPTER 5 – STAGING THE DATA

In this chapter, I will provide an overview of what happened over the course of the action research project. This will provide context for the following chapter in which the data derived from the study will be analyzed and discussed. Broadly speaking, this project created a teacher action research “third space” (Fox & Fine, 2012), providing a forum for teachers to critically analyze structures that sustained exclusion within their own immediate contexts - atheoretical, hasty teacher preparation programs; logistical issues at the school level; the conceptualization of “achievement” that is based on test score performance; and segregated classrooms as sites of profound social isolation. The process of conducting teacher collaborative inquiry also located and reinforced teaching practices that make students feel belonging, community, and learning. Our sessions were lighthearted and full of laughter breaks, as we shared food and stories of teaching. The remainder of this chapter develops a broad-strokes narrative of what happened, drawing upon the 5 D’s framework of Appreciative Inquiry (Define, Discover, Dream, Design, Destiny; Hammond, 2013), as outlined in chapter 4. Given this appreciative focus, this narrative perhaps reads optimistically—this is intentional, as the focus of the program was to identify and build on positive features of school life as it pertains to inclusion. In subsequent chapters the shortcomings and limitations of this project will be addressed.

Gaining Access

The first task was to find a site to conduct the research, which unfortunately had to be done twice. Originally, I had planned on conducting my project in MS 1111 (pseudonym) in which I had coached teacher pairs for two years prior, and the four teachers that I had worked with were eager to continue our work together. On one level, MS 1111 was an ideal school for me to work with—poverty, institutional racism, linguistic minoritization, malfeasant school funding
schemes, and residential segregation were all at work. So too was the dynamic of using dis/ability labeling and the IEP process to exclude the most profoundly marginalized students, placing them in restrictive settings, even though for many of them the only contexts in which they were likely considered to have a dis/ability was school. Moreover, MS 1111 had fully embraced a technocratic approach to special education that conceived of students as numbers (i.e. “He’s a one\(^6\). He belongs in a self-contained class”). This approach often precluded the possibility for seeing the students as complex young people with learning needs, many of which were unmet in their school experiences. Moreover, MS 1111 was colocated with a politically controversial, no excuses charter school, and had come to adopt their problematic reactive disciplinary practices without supporting them with proactive means to support desired behaviors. Consequently, the affective climate of MS 1111 was not unlike a stockyard, with assistant principals and disciplinary deans literally herding children through hallways with a bullhorn and corralling them into their classrooms.

According to the teachers that I had worked with, the school’s discretionary budget was largely spent on outside behavior consultants. These consultants delivered PD on topics like getting a classroom quiet using the *Teach Like a Champion* techniques (which originated in no-excuses charter schools; Lemov, 2010). These same teachers, now finished with their induction training, thought that I could get the principal to let me continue to support them by framing myself and my work with them as pro-bono consulting. As long as I did not charge the principal any money, they told me, she would be happy to work with me. It should be noted that the teachers did not think highly of their principal, that they thought she was inconsistent with the students and that she used the mandated teacher evaluation system against teachers that she

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\(^6\) [denoting the child’s score from 1-4 on standardized examinations]
Personally disliked. That said, the perspectives of those teachers could be problematized, as three of the four teachers that I worked with were White, and the principal was a Black woman. In light of the dynamic that often attributes less competency to Black women school leaders (Brooks & Watson, 2018), these critiques of her should not be taken at face value. Instead, they should speak merely to the rift between the teachers and administration over the handling of students.

Nevertheless, the principal verbally agreed to host my research, under the premise that I would be delivering PD to teachers on co-teaching. We had a pleasant meeting in the summer of 2017, in which she told me about the improvement that she had noticed in the two teaching pairs that I had supported. She suggested that she had a budget for my consulting but was pleased to know that I would be offering my services free of charge. I told her that I was conducting my dissertation research, which she was somewhat surprised about and perhaps suspicious of, in retrospect. As I finished my dissertation proposal and moved towards completing my IRB application, I stayed in contact with her and her office. However, when I had a letter of support for her to sign for the school district’s IRB application in the winter, she stopped returning calls and emails. I tried to get the teachers that I had worked with to speak to her, but she never got back in touch with me. Perhaps it was fear of the scrutiny that hosting research or maybe she just got really busy, but after some time it was clear that I would need to find a new site.

Through my personal network, I put myself in contact with a senior official in the central office. After I refused her offer to compel that principal to sign my paperwork (though I did not disclose which principal it was), she referred me to a few superintendents, who in turn referred me to a few principals. This had some advantages. In the first case, I was guaranteed a much greater degree of administrative and logistical support for my work, given that the entry point to the school was by way of the chain-of-command, so to speak. My conversations with superintendents
and principals had a markedly different tone, knowing that the supervisor of everyone I had talked to supported my work. However, this approach also had some disadvantages. I was particularly concerned that that administrative backing would have the downside of making teachers think that what I was doing was a function of the institutional bureaucracy. Nevertheless, I believed that I could win the teachers over in our sessions, and that they might come to understand this work as subversive on some level. In an exchange with an assistant superintendent during this process, they remarked that coming in to do this work as research would be difficult and that I would need to consult with the attorney for the school district in order to gain access to the school. They further suggested that if I were to charge the schools money but not document the process it would be much easier to gain access to the schools.

The superintendents suggested schools that would benefit from my work, and I had conversations with six different schools, all of whom thought that my program would benefit them. Two of the schools were reluctant to relinquish control of the six to eight teachers I wanted in order to conduct the professional development, but they were willing to give me one pair each and suggested that I gather other pairs from nearby schools. I felt that doing so would not allow the project the opportunity to develop deep enough roots in order to grow. Two other principals were eager to work with me but dropped off communications, including one that invited me in to visit the school, but then was absent on the day I visited. I probably could have hounded these principals in order to cooperate, but given my experience at MS 1111, I felt like it was prudent to hold out for a principal who was better able to maintain contact. The final two principals that I met with and visited were eager to gain my support and were very responsive to my emails. One of the final two schools was in a relatively affluent and somewhat racially integrated neighborhood without a large special education population, and the other was geographically
close to MS 1111 and was struggling with many of the same issues that I had originally planned for. While I had no doubt that I would be able to help the more affluent school, I was concerned that my work be done in a more profoundly disadvantaged school, even though the principal of the more affluent school offered to pay for my services. I decided that MS 2222 would be the best one to host my research.

My initial visit with Principal David Karpov was very encouraging. Our first meeting was candid and both David and I were able to find points of agreement about the problematic nature of special education in a school under pressure to improve test scores. With or without me, Principal Karpov told me, the school was moving towards closing those exclusionary classes, and they were eager to have something new to try. It also became clear to me that while MS 2222 was under pressures to improve their test scores, Principal Karpov largely shielded his teachers and students from this burden. Spreadsheets of printed student test score data were widely visible were inside his office, but only there. He told me that they were to appease the many external auditors that came to see “the data” and what the school was doing about it. This is not to say that he did not fail to see the value of the metrics; rather, he saw them in context as narrow measures of student proficiency that did not capture who the students were or what was happening in their lives. A third of his students, he told me, lived in temporary housing, a third did not speak English at home, and another third had IEP’s, with much overlap. I was encouraged to learn that the school was working with community-based organizations to provide supports for students and their families outside of the curriculum.

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7 All names in this chapter are pseudonyms. The principal chose his pseudonym in honor of chess grandmaster Anatoly Karpov. I chose the pseudonym for Assistant Principal Tortelli.

8 Based upon data from school web page, the actual numbers were more like 25% in each category.
Setting up

Once I had secured a site that was suitable to host this work and IRB’s were cleared, there were a number of logistical and ethical issues that arose. Sadly, in the case of closing self-contained classes, external priorities took precedence over the principal’s priorities in meeting the needs of his students. Despite Principal Karpov’s commitment to closing up the exclusionary classrooms and the sentiment expressed by Assistant Principal Tortelli, who largely handled logistical affairs, that the school was doing a disservice to the students just by having a segregated class, the district compelled the school to keep the segregated classes open. It seems that this was so the school could maintain “seats” in self-contained settings and was enforced by budgeting mechanisms. In ICT classrooms (at least in this district), I learned, one of the teachers’ salaries is paid by the school, whereas the other is paid by the district. Since the district did not support David’s plan to phase out self-contained classrooms, it was able to withhold the funding needed to realign special education towards inclusion. Instead of providing for student needs, David expressed dismay in how too much of the district’s budget went to six-figure consultants that he did not ask for or even want, people who claimed to be on the side of kids but were benefitting and uphold the system as it is.

Scheduling and personnel issues presented a major logistical element that had to be resolved before work towards inclusion could begin. Until the third week of school, teacher and class schedules were still changing. On some level this was because of the inherent complexity of developing schedules that conform to all of the various pressures that perhaps all schools deal with: class size regulations, union rules, special education ratios and programmatic requirements, and the like. However, these challenges were compounded by the unique challenges of having brand new alternatively certified teachers who need extra support and other teachers departing for
the last minute to the suburbs. Specifically, one teacher announced his resignation the week before school began, leaving David and Elaine scrambling for a replacement. Filing a last-minute staffing vacancy would be difficult in the best of circumstances, but that was further compounded by a hiring freeze instituted by the district soon after.

Shifting institutional priorities at the city and district level also threatened the project at one point. With a new chancellor of schools came the removal of the district superintendent that had referred me to MS 2222. With that new superintendent came new pressures for David and Elaine, and a concern that their plans for professional development would have to be redone from the ground up. I tried to reassure them that, if necessary, it would be possible to reframe my work to align to district priorities. In order to include the school’s priority topics, namely appropriate instructional challenge and small-group instruction, I had already been willing to tailor my program to the institutional pressures of the school and thought this would likely be no different. We began the professional development program in the last week of September, and I was given ten 80-minute sessions, though they noted that those could often be cut short or reappropriated.

Define

In this first phase of the PD session, the task was to define the focus of the teacher inquiry group. While it might be argued that in general it is better to have an opportunity for participatory decision-making during this phase about the focus of the group, given that this is my dissertation, I provided the focus on inclusive education and co-teaching, and the school administration assigned participants to the group based on their identified strengths in partnership with each other. This segment took place over two weeks, roughly an hour in total PD time. In this phase, we focused on introducing ourselves and our position relative to the work we were to engage in, identifying preconceptions about inclusion, and introduce the epistemological assumptions of
action research. As anticipated, this phase looked like many other PD sessions, with frontal teaching the primary mode of communication.

**Who are we?**

In approaching teachers to gain consent, as well as during our initial PD session, I foregrounded that I was a former special education teacher in a similarly “struggling” school, and that this work was an outgrowth of what I had learned in that process. In my initial introductions, I made a point of my skepticism of the nature of special education in urban contexts as a way of excluding kids. I identified myself as a veteran with a dis/ability and indicated that informs how I understand dis/ability as an interaction of person and context. I also told them about my skepticism of the ways that educational researchers and school consultants usually prescribe magic solutions without listening to teachers or their students’ needs, drawing a distinction between what they would understand as typical and my own approach.

I then invited the team, composed of four pairs of teachers, to introduce themselves. I told them that they were assigned to the project by the administration because they thought that these teachers would be the best to carry this work forward. They were grouped in pairs of co-teachers, but one teacher (Cliff) worked with two others (Norm and Joey). The descriptions of the participants below were based on how they introduced themselves in the first PD session, but they were given the opportunity to revise and correct, as well as the opportunity to foreground what they wanted about their own race, gender, and class. They were also given the opportunity to choose their pseudonyms, though I did suggest that they use characters from *Cheers.*
Sam identifies as a middle-class White male. He is new to the school, a former high school teacher who primarily focused on teaching advanced algebra and physics. As such, in his previous teaching roles, he did not frequently interact with students with disabilities. Before becoming a teacher 8 years ago, he worked in accounting. As a teacher, he said that he enjoys building student confidence, but has found that teaching oversized classes and managing student behavior and difficulties focusing were challenges for him. Nevertheless, he sees addressing those challenges as “part of the job,” in building student readiness for the world outside of school. He was partnered with Carla to teach 8th grade ICT math, but he also was teaching another section of 8th grade math to class of English Language Learners (ELL’s) and a mainstream 7th grade science class.

Carla identifies herself as a Hispanic woman. She entered teaching through an alternative certification program after working in banking for seven years. Disillusioned with the corporate world and drawing inspiration from early experiences in helping family members learn how to read, she became a teacher, and was excited about starting her second year. In introducing herself, she noted a deep affection and sympathy for her students which she struggles to balance with a need to challenge them and prepare them for the “real world.” In addition to working with Sam,
she was also teaching a section of 8th grade science to a segregated self-contained special education class, and two periods of gym/physical education.

Rebecca identifies as a lower-middle class African-American woman. She is a career changer, having worked as an accountant, business manager, and entrepreneur. She enjoys the challenges of teaching and hopes to inspire children in changing their lives. In introducing herself, she noted the difficult nature of teaching, and the struggle of maintaining patience with other people’s kids. Nevertheless, teaching has always been her passion, and she is happy to make personal sacrifices for the sake of the students. In addition to teaching a section of social studies to the self-contained 7th grade class with Diane—which has a group of three Black boys with troubling behaviors that I was specifically asked to support—she also teaches 7th grade ICT English and Science with another teacher who is not assigned to the group.

Diane identifies as a middle-class White woman. She is beginning her first year of teaching in this school. Though she wanted to go to law school right after college, and as such did not have any specific interest in teaching before joining her alternative certification program, Diane ultimately decided that she wanted to have an impact on students’ lives. She acknowledged the difficult situations that many adolescents in the school face in their lives, she wants to support them in making good choices. In addition to teaching with Rebecca, she also teaches social studies to the 6th and 8th grade self-contained classes and the 8th grade ICT classes, for which she pairs with another teacher who is not assigned to the PD.

Lilith identifies as a middle-class White woman. She has worked in this school since graduating college 12 years ago. In introducing herself, she talked about a deep love for her students, especially the group of ICT students that she has stayed with for three years. From our earliest introduction, she indicated an awareness of the structural issues at play, noting that the
adults were the ones causing her difficulties. She noted that all of her students had different abilities and skill levels, especially in reading, but that the obsessive culture around test scoring and achievement was getting in the way of her meeting their needs. In addition to co-teaching with Norm for a 6th grade ICT English class, Lilith also teaches one section of 8th graders that she has worked with since they entered the school in sixth grade, she serves on the school’s instructional cabinet, and is ironically the testing coordinator.

Norm identifies as a White, upper-middle class man. He came into teaching special education 4 years ago because his mother works with students with emotional disturbances in a nearby suburb. After working alongside her and in summer camp settings, he pursued a traditional-certification special education certification to work with students with emotional disturbances and believes that special education services really help students. He loves building relationships with the students in the school—many of whom he believes to have unidentified emotional/behavioral disabilities—and has found a great deal of satisfaction in working with his students. In particular, he talked about two students who have chosen to commute across the city to stay in his class even when their families moved out of the immediate vicinity of the school. He finds working with adults to be the biggest challenge associated with working in this school, because while he believes that children might misbehave, adults should know better. In addition to teaching ELA to the 6th grade ICT class with Lilith, he teaches Math to the same group of 6th graders with Cliff.

Cliff identifies as a white, upper-middle class man. He lives in an exclusive school district in a nearby suburb but says he’s at the “bottom end” of it. He came into teaching through a traditional math teacher training program after a career on Wall Street that ended with the 2008 market crash. He had a specific interest in teaching middle school math because he thought he
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could bridge the abstract concepts emerging in the middle school curriculum with concrete and relevant examples and had always wanted to teach. He has worked in this school for four years, and feels lucky to be there, as at 70 years old, he said that he had a hard time finding work in the schools. In addition to teaching 6th grade ICT math with Norm, he also works with Joey to teach 7th grade ICT math.

Joey also identifies as a White, middle-class man, and similarly locates himself as living at the bottom end of an exclusive suburban school district. He is also a career changer, having worked in technology before becoming a math teacher through an alternative certification program for math and science teachers. He has always enjoyed teaching, having experienced success in school himself, often assigned to the role of peer tutor. He likes building relationships with students academically and emotionally and has been proud of his work when graduates of the middle school come back to visit once they are in high school. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that working in this school presents unique challenges because of the difficult economic and family situations that students face outside of school. In addition to teaching 7th grade math with Cliff, he also works as part of the school’s “transition team” which manages discipline, and that work takes up a great deal of his time and emotional energy.

What is Inclusion?

I opened the conversation on inclusion by asking the teachers what they thought inclusion was. It was clear during this phase that conversations about inclusion only happened for these teachers during pre-service training. Not surprisingly, many of the teachers thought that inclusion and ICT were the same thing and were unclear about the relationship between the two. Cliff noted that ICT classes are frequently called “inclusive classrooms,” so he was surprised to learn that the letter “I” did not stand for inclusive, but rather “integrated.” Norm said that he was struggling to
recall—that it had been a long time since college, and Carla, Rebecca, and Diane (all of whom were still doing their induction training through an alternative certification program now) said with exasperation that they were now or had just taken the inclusion class.

When Norm hesitantly brought up the idea of inclusion as understanding students and their lives, I tried to build upon that, emphasizing that inclusion was less about programming and more about ethics. When I asked further about the specifics of inclusion in an urban context, Carla hesitantly drew a comparison to culturally responsive teaching, which the group struggled to define beyond understanding that “some of them live in shelters.” Norm pointed to inclusion being two teachers together, with one special education teacher providing supports for “the special ed kids.” When I followed up by asking who each teacher was responsible for in the room, the teachers all agreed that they shared the responsibility for all students, but also acknowledged that in practice it depended on the teachers themselves. Rebecca noted that there are general education students who have more profound needs than the students with IEP’s, so she felt responsible for instructional supports for all students. The team agreed with this sentiment, indicating that whether the student had an IEP or not, they should get support as they all likely had some learning needs. The team questioned the need for an IEP at all at that point, noting that there was not a clear cutoff point for academic functioning, with Rebecca noting that “there are no criteria [for an IEP]” and Cliff saying, “It’s a fuzzy line...different days, this kid needs an IEP, and other days they don’t.”

The team also acknowledged the interplay of culture on the IEP label, noting that many families in the neighborhood may not want to draw the stigma of special education upon their children, though Rebecca (who is a Black mother herself) questioned that narrative, saying, “I don’t know if it’s a parent thing as much as it is a teacher thing,” pointing to the ways in which
parents are talked into IEP’s. Financial resources were also discussed, with Cliff (who lives in a boutique suburban school district) noting that “Ideally, all kids would have a plan that was catered to them [but] that’s budgetary constraints and everything else.” This led to the team agreeing that who gets an IEP in the context of this school is very different from who gets an IEP in the suburban contexts in which these teachers live, noting that supplemental services like speech are available outside of special education for suburban children, but not in this school.

The team also lamented the extent to which their ICT classes were treated as a dumping ground. Both Lilith and Norm shared that they had been in conflict with the administration over the removal of the “3’s and 4’s” from their classes. Lilith pointed out that a “true ICT” should have a wide range of student abilities that could support students in learning from each other. Instead, the ICT classes are full of “1’s,” “kids who were just behaviors,” and “16-year old’s who shouldn’t be in the building anymore.” Nevertheless, Cliff defended the social benefits of ICT, noting that it was better than “having those kids segregated in a special room where they’re given special ed…because then they’re the special ed kids and you have your general ed kids…[ICT] is a more viable atmosphere for the kids with IEP’s.”

After that, I introduced my understanding of inclusion, based on chapter 2, the conceptual framework for this dissertation. Right up front, I explained that ICT is New York City’s attempt at inclusive education, but like much of what happens in the district, it has mixed successes. I talked about inclusion as a principle of practice, especially noting the multiple ways that exclusion works, emphasizing inclusive education as an orientation instead of a program. I talked about the history of the dis/ability rights movement leading to IDEA, but also made a point of the many ways in which students were excluded from opportunities based on race, family income or wealth, home language, poverty, and the like. I framed inclusion as a way to improve general
education, acknowledging their remarks about the fuzzy lines between general and special education, and saying that inclusion provided the impetus to improve things for all students. I emphasized the need for the teachers to work together, for the team to work together, and the need to work with broader parties to eliminate things like using ICT as a dumping ground. Finally, I talked about pedagogy, and briefly introduced Universal Design for Learning as an alternative to differentiation, which is often difficult to implement. I finished by noting that many of the problematic student behaviors that teachers encounter in self-contained settings might be seen as students resisting a placement that excludes them from everybody else. I pointed to one possible outcome of this project being that, as a group, we might be able to suggest to administration better ways of composing the ICT classes, such that it is not just a 1-1 fight against them. I noted that the administration cares about including students, even if it is tougher to actually work out the logistics.

What is Action Research?

Having given the teachers the broad strokes of action research during the recruitment/consent forms distribution and collection, I went briefly over my epistemological commitments. I positioned my dissertation as a sharing of the tools of research with them in order to concretely change life in their school. I emphasized that while I had knowledge of big theories and methods, they knew their kids better than anyone, and were already doing things to meet their needs in deep ways. I contrasted this with the research of folks like Charlotte Danielson who, I offered, purport to have all the answers about effective teaching, but do not know anything about the contexts in which their theories are being applied. I further acknowledged that too much research is done in places where poverty and racism and the like do not confound the research, but that this school and this team provided an opportunity to embrace the complexity of the ways that
those things are tied up with dis/ability. I finished by stating that they, as teachers had profound insights about student needs, and that the students have profound knowledge of what they need to.

I noted that this PD program was a different model of PD. I drew a contrast between PD as usual, which the group agreed (while laughing) was not worthwhile, and this project in which would ask them to grow their practice. I compared it to the inquiry groups that the City used to mandate, but we would use very different types of data—instead of standardized test scores, we could design and administer our own measures/ways of knowing what was going well. I introduced an abbreviated version of the whole process, making a transition into the research question that became the core of the next phase of the project.

**Discover**

In the “discover” phase, the team inquired into the instances in which students were included and began to identify contextual barriers to inclusion. In order to do that, the teachers designed and executed a mixed-methods study of their students’ opinions. From exploratory qualitative interview findings, the teachers developed a survey to administer to a broader group of students to confirm what they found. After that, I invited them to juxtapose the trustworthiness of the data that they had collected to the state test score data that the school is mandated to use in making its decisions. Their interpretation of the findings informed a vision of the future of what inclusion in the school could be in the next, “dream” phase. This phase took the better part of three sessions, approximately 3 hours total.

**Mixed-Methods Design**

In the initial design of the inquiry, I provided the research question: *When has inclusion really happened?* I further provided that it should be from inquiring into student positive experiences with inclusion that we should find our answers. Initially, Sam expressed some
skepticism of asking students as a research approach: “I guess I would like to see how much
tought each of the students has put into that—like how much metacognitive thought has been put
into ‘under what conditions do I learn well?’” In response, I replied that an important outcome of
the inquiry would be to stimulate that type of metacognition among students even if it was only
latent in their minds, and that even if they did not have profound answers yet they could certainly
come to develop them through this project, if sustained over time.

We discussed a range of methods that could be used to conduct the inquiry, including
quantitative and qualitative approaches, data collection methods, and question types (Likert,
open-ended, etc.). Norm indicated that the value of qualitative data was that it could give us deep
meaning and draw causal linkages, which I agreed with. Rebecca suggested that the quantitative
test score data that the school uses to make decisions could be used to evaluate whether the
students who have been moved to less restrictive settings have been successful. On that, I
challenged her, asking whether that data was a useful measure of inclusion, to which the group
widely agreed that the test scores said nothing about inclusion as we now understood it, and she
too, was convinced. Cliff agreed that using a mix of qualitative data to hear stories was valuable,
but he wanted to gain some sense of whether those stories were indicative of broader patterns.
Joey shared that differences in how school staff value quantitative vs. qualitative data has been a
source of “professional arguments,” including between him and Norm; however, he noted that the
quantitative and qualitative data support each other and should both be used, especially in
communicating our findings to the administration. The teachers ultimately decided that something
like an exploratory sequential mixed methods study (Creswell, 2014), in which a qualitative,
theory generating phase would be followed up by a quantitative phase to determine the scope of
agreement with the emerging theories.
In developing the interview protocol, the team agreed that it was important to interview both students with IEP’s and students without IEP’s, as exclusion was not solely a special education phenomenon. Figure 5.2 shows the notes that I had written on the whiteboard in the room in planning the interview protocol. From this set of notes, a set of interview questions was extracted and refined:

1. Tell me about a teacher who made you feel comfortable in class?
2. Tell me about a lesson where you felt like you felt like you really got it, and maybe were even able to help others learn?
3. Tell me about a time when you felt like you were really listened to in class?
4. Do you feel like you’re part of a community in your classes?
5. Do you feel different from other students in the school?
6. What is your definition of inclusion?
What is your definition of inclusion?

Tell me about a teacher who has made you feel comfortable?

...a lesson where you felt like you got it? Able to help others?

...when you felt like you were listened to?

Do you feel like you’re part of a community?

Do you feel different from other students in the school?

Figure 5.2 - Whiteboard Planning Map for Interview Guide

Norm expressed worry that interviewing his own students might “tamper” the data, to which I responded that students’ responses to him will be valuable when we understand them in context—as answers given to him. I suggested that student responses to him would be far more valuable than if they were given by someone like me, who might have a claim at “objectivity” in conducting an interview. Therefore, I encouraged them all to leverage their relationships with students in doing the interviews, to draw out insights from students beyond the questions, and to use the questions as guides. Norm also questioned the sampling methods that were used to determine which students would be interviewed. I offered that it would be useful to try to target the most excluded students, as they would likely have the most to say about exclusion. However, I suggested that convenience was the main selection criteria, which was okay, since we would be further confirming our findings.
In the following session, we reviewed and analyzed the qualitative student responses to the interview in order to extract dichotomous agree/disagree statements that we turned into a survey. It was clear from our discussions that the process of the interviews was valuable to both the students and the teachers. Cliff talked about how one student that he had interviewed was happy that his voice was being listened to in school improvement efforts. Additionally, teachers overwhelmingly (though not exclusively) found affirmations of their practice in the interviews—that many students feel safe and included in their classrooms, and that their classroom communities are closely-knit, like families. From conducting the surveys, the teachers also found a great deal about the personal attributes of teachers that made them feel included, including ones that had been omitted from their teacher education. Cliff was somewhat surprised to find how often fairness came up in the interviews, that to students “fairness is a big deal.” The teachers also found that students cared about who they were and their personal lives, which they found surprising, as again, many of their teacher education programs had not necessarily emphasized relationship building and personal sharing.

They also broadly found that students did not have well-developed understandings of “inclusion” as a concept, but they did have strong insights into what made them feel welcome, comfortable, and supported their learning. Consequently, the team decided to not use that term, but instead discuss belonging and comfort, learning and understanding, and choices as a proxy for inclusion in the survey. Figure 5.3 shows the mapping out of student interview data, as done by me on the whiteboard, written while teachers described their findings. The interview findings were limited in that some teachers were unable to find the time to conduct interviews, as well, and in some cases felt that they were rushed.
Figure 5.3 Whiteboard Summary of Interview Findings

From this concept map, the team developed a survey. In addition to asking general information about name and grade, students were asked the following agree/disagree questions:

1. I feel like I belong when I work in a group.
2. I understand better when there are step-by-step instructions.
3. I do better when I know what is expected of me.
4. This class feels like a family.
5. Earning rewards motivates me.
6. I feel more comfortable in class when I know about my teacher’s life.
7. I learn better when I have resources available to me (multiplication tables, word walls, charts).
8. I prefer to have choices about when I can use resources, rather than having them assigned.
9. It helps me when I'm asked to think about my actions when I make bad choices.
10. I feel like what I learn is relevant and interesting.
11. I have choices about how I learn.

Additionally, the following open-ended questions were asked:

1. What is it about group work that makes you feel like you belong?
2. What about this class feels like a family?

Finally, a multiple response question was asked, in which students could select multiple boxes:

1. I learn best from teachers that are…
   a. Funny
   b. Kind
   c. Respectful
   d. Strict
   e. Positive - thinks the best of me
   f. Fair

Additionally, the teachers thought it was important to frame the survey as a whole-school improvement effort, especially given that a student that Cliff was interviewing made that he was happy to have his voice listened to. The team also thought that it was important to make clear that this isn’t a “special ed thing.” Therefore, we titled the survey “Improving learning at MS 2222” and agreed to include the following text in the directions for the survey: “We are collecting information from students about what matters to them in school, and ways that we can make learning easier and more fun. We care what you think.” The teachers administered the quantitative survey to their students in self-contained and ICT classes online, with some teachers choosing to
read the survey item by item to the whole class and others sitting with individual students and discussing the questions one-by-one. We also added a dichotomous variable for whether or not the student had an IEP, as well as a nominal variable for the class that the student was in.

In subsequent sessions, we looked at the quantitative responses from the survey, as well as the open-ended qualitative question. In our first look at the survey data, we only had findings from one ICT class, with a few sparse responses from students in the self-contained classes that had been done individually with the teacher sitting with them, explaining the questions (n=36). Nevertheless, we found a great deal of agreement with the dichotomous statements, including some surprisingly positive responses to whether or not the students felt that the curriculum was relevant and interesting. The team also had some questions about how agreement was related to placement in an ICT/self-contained setting or whether or not the student had an IEP. Broadly speaking, the teachers found that the first round of data was interesting and trustworthy of the group of students who took it, but was not representative of the school in general, as the sample of students was not reflective of their students in terms of grade, placement, or IEP designation. We agreed that we needed more data.

The second round of data analysis, now with more than twice as many respondents (n=75), led to much more clear understandings amongst the teachers about their students’ perspectives on inclusive pedagogy. Cliff noted that the continued high rate of agreement with the statements and positive tone of the qualitative responses to the survey “reflects a fairly positive attitude on behalf of the kids.” When it came to a discussion of step-by-step instructions, Joey thought it was great that the kids find explicit directions helpful, but also lamented that there was immense pressure on time in each lesson. He said that it was difficult to think of how to implement some of the findings when there are already so many competing instructional
initiatives in the school. In response, I tried to highlight the ways in which step-by-step instructions could be integrated into an existing lesson or class routine, that there were relatively easy things to be done that did not compete with school initiatives, and were not massively teacher effort-intensive, but make a great deal of difference to the students. This led to Norm and Cliff talking about a specific technique that they use in their class for teaching math with sequential steps that they said helps students a great deal. There was also an important acknowledgement that students did not all need or want the same types of learning experiences, especially group work. We discussed the value of allowing students to have choices of independently on tasks or working with groups that they selected and agreed that there were places for all of those things, but that none of them were always appropriate for all children. We finished our analysis with a consideration of supporting behavioral self-regulation and developing structures for students to manage their own academic and emotional needs, so that we could see some real growth across the years.

**Trusting the Data**

The teachers had important critical perspectives on the trustworthiness of our qualitative and quantitative data. In the first case, the teachers did not trust the responses to the statement “I learn better when I have resources available to me (multiplication tables, word walls, charts),” and its follow up “I prefer to have choices about when I can use resources, rather than having them assigned,” because they did not think that students were aware of the broad category of instructional supports that we were talking about. In fact, teachers who had done more personalized administrations of the survey (like Diane and Rebecca) said that many questions asked for clarification when that question came up. Further, the teachers noted that the reliability of the data was a function of who was doing the interviews or administering the surveys, and that
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we had not made any efforts to address this. The team also expressed concern that students might have rushed through survey items, but we agreed that that was somewhat mitigated by the agree/disagree format of the responses. However, given the multiple sources of data, the teachers felt overwhelmingly that the data they had collected was trustworthy and could be used to inform a realistic picture of what inclusion could be at their school.

Their critical perspectives on data trustworthiness was valuable when one of our PD sessions was reappropriated to administrative tasks following the abrupt announcement of an audit of the school and Principal Karpov. In that session, we were asked to identify which of the students were “pushables or slippables”; that is, which students were on the precipice of moving between the quadrilles for test-score achievement. In communicating the administration’s directions to the teachers, I said the following, which elicited laughter from the group:

First, pick out the classes that you teach together...then look at the ones who are plus or minus, so if they’re like a 2.9, they’re an easy push to a 3. If they’re a 3.1, they’re an easy slip to a 2. That’s what they’re saying. So, they want you to identify those kids for whom—and I have feelings about this that I’m not going to share.

The principal and a department head then came in to direct the teachers to create “intervention groups” comprised of 8 of those “pushables and slippables.” This took roughly an hour of our PD time.

Fortuitously, that triage operation happened at the same time that our quantitative survey data from students was starting to take shape. This led to an interesting juxtaposition about data trustworthiness, in which teachers explained why they trusted our data, but not that which came from state test scores. Cliff importantly noted that, unlike test score data, ours “reflected human
contact.” In hopes of eliciting some criticisms of the state test data, I expressed my revolt in referring to students as 1’s, 2’s, 3’s and 4’s, which I think they had not previously considered.

Extending that critique, Lilith shared her belief that the state test scores provide an unreliable, decontextualized slice of student performance, with outsized consequences. Specifically, she said that even though the data the school uses to make decisions claims to be objective, they are laden with problematic assumptions. According to her, this was especially on the open-ended constructed response questions that teachers are assigned to grade with minimal training on the state exams. She told us that during grading sessions, she has heard teachers express low expectations for students with IEP’s and award points for effort even when the answers are wrong. She highlighted the ways that the test scores reflect the way the school (and to some extent the way the teachers) are judged, but that they are virtually meaningless. She was frustrated with the process of building these intervention groups of kids on the bubble, saying that “so now we’re basing our whole year on 8 kids...it's going to be these kids all year...[and the other students] are kinda out of luck.” When challenged by Cliff who indicated that she could work with whatever students she wanted to unless she was being observed, Lilith shared her frustration with the unreliable teacher evaluation system. She told the group the story about how she was observed twice in one week while doing, as she put it “the exact same thing.” She griped that for one observation, the feedback was that she was teaching “a fake lesson” and in the other, it was “amazing.” She found this frustrating, laughing out loud, “What twilight zone are we living in? They didn’t see me do anything different.”

**Interpreting the Findings**

The teachers came to a series of important conclusions from the process of data collection and analysis. One such major understanding was that self-contained classes were places of
profound isolation for students with disabilities, and that conversely, ICT classes (despite their problems) were much more supportive social settings. Through this lens, teachers came to understand increased student misbehavior not only as the reason for placement within segregated settings, but also described how those behaviors were made worse by isolated placements—students with troubling behaviors would be less likely to learn alternative coping behaviors, and more likely to display resistant behaviors. Thus, the teachers understood the relationship between disruptive classroom behavior and social isolation as mutually reinforcing as opposed to causal in one direction only. Additionally, Norm identified how we want to move them to less restrictive settings, but when they prove themselves to be academically able, we deny them those moves because their behavior is too bad, thus creating a trap for the students. Norm and Joey also talked about how the self-contained classes were physically located in remote corners of the school—that the students were profoundly physically separated from their peers.

Furthermore, the teachers described a situation in which one student—one of the three troublemaking Black boys from the self-contained class—was placed into Cliff and Joey’s ICT class on a trial basis. The teachers made meaning of the situation by noting that even though he was acutely aware of how isolated he was—or as Diane put it, how “cornered” he was—he was both terrified of the new setting and had gained a comfort and familiarity with the expectations of the self-contained classroom. One day, after he had been escorted up to the class by Rebecca and two of his friends, Joey described how he was given room to blend in and another student had welcomed him into the room. Joey noted that even though he was initially neither disruptive nor compliant, he eventually came around to doing math with his new friend, so John was surprised when he never came back. Rebecca noted that for him, his segregated self-contained class was a familiar environment, but also one where the boundaries were clear and where there were
established relationships. Rebecca noted that his fear of change seemed to be outweighing his desire to escape isolation. Since the student’s foray into the ICT class, though, Diane described a strong behavior shift, “…it’s almost like [moving him to ICT] is a threat to him.” This led to a conversation about creating explicit school-wide expectations for students that they would be intentionally moved to less-restrictive settings as students transitioned between the grades so that students would be able to prepare for such transitions between settings. Rebecca talked about communicating clear expectations to students that they would move as the default, not contingent on their behavior or anything, but as the default mode for the school.

The data interpretation also launched a conversation about the paradoxical benefit of a small class size. Norm insisted that self-contained classes are really beneficial for students with academic struggles, but the way the school uses them to isolate bad behaviors is problematic. I responded by acknowledging the benefit of smaller class sizes for all children. This led to the revelation on the part of Norm that the school psychologist was trying to move students into the 6th self-contained class from the ICT class to alleviate a compliance issue—that one of the self-contained class was under capacity, whereas the ICT class was overcapacity. I noted that Principal Karpov had tried to fix this situation before the school year started by opening another section of ICT classes, but was interrupted by district funding priorities. Cliff said that there were students who were not thriving in his class and were disruptive and who “need something else,” hoping that they would have their learning needs better met in self-contained, where there were fewer students and theoretically fewer distractions.

Another important interpretation was that there needed to be a shift in how special education services were used at all levels so that there was continuity between the various special education services. Cliff remarked that because there are fixed ratios for how many students with
IEP’s can be in each class, it is not possible to simply move students into ICT settings without creating new legal compliance issues. I suggested to the group that, big picture, it is also necessary to make “downstream” improvements in the ways in which SETSS services are conceptualized, programmed, and delivered to students. According to Norm, up until this year, SETSS services were not functional at all, and that IEP teams almost never recommended SETSS anymore. Carla and Rebecca noted that when they did SETSS delivery last year, there was rarely any continuity in who was in the pull-out sessions, and that there never were planned activities. Rebecca summarized the conversation: “we need to change SETSS, the way we do it, we need to change the ICT program, and the [self-contained] program where we have the 12 to 1. We have to change these programs because they don’t have a goal. They’re one standing alone, each one.”

More importantly for the project, though, the teachers were able to find moments in which students experienced inclusion, on their terms. These were in class structures, like in the articulation of clear expectations and group work, in the relationships that the students had with each other and with their teachers. In listening to their students, the teachers had also come to understand ways in which their classes functioned like families. It was these moments that informed the development of the “dream” phase.

**Dream**

In the “dream” phase teachers were asked to create a realistic vision for what inclusion could be at MS 2222 based on their analysis of when students were already meaningfully included. This short phase took less than an hour of PD time but was incredibly valuable in solidifying the connections between how teachers understood their student needs and creating a

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9 Special Education Teacher Support Services, or SETSS, is a special education service delivery model in which students with IEP’s are placed in general education classrooms, and either have a “push-in” special education teacher who helps make instructional adaptations, or a “pull-out” resource room structure with the opportunity for specific remedial instruction.
vision for inclusion that was authentic to the context. Figure 5.4 shows the whiteboard notes from the sessions in which we dreamed, but perhaps Cliff’s haiku summarizes the shared vision best, eliciting cheers and snaps when he read it aloud.

They all enter in a rush
Leaving outside out
“How are you Mr. Malone?”

Central to the team’s vision of inclusion was student enthusiasm for learning. The teachers imagined that this would lead to deep student engagement that would manifest as curious questions from the students. Such intense student engagement was seen as parallel to teachers having freedom to explore the curriculum and make it interesting. While Joey noted that that freedom used to exist, it had been stifled since 2010, saying “…you had the freedom to teach, because it came from you. Now, it’s very robotic.” I understood this timeline to align with New York State’s Race to the Top (RTT) application, which put an emphasis on an increasingly standardized curriculum, a more stringent teacher tenure process, and intense teacher evaluation protocols. saying Interestingly, only Joey and I remembered that shift, as all of the teachers (except Lilith, who was out sick) had come into teaching more recently. Diane even joked that 2010 was the year she had graduated middle school herself. Even at that time as a student, she had never seen teaching like this, and that learning this mechanistic approach to teaching in her alternative teacher certification program was so unlike what she had experienced as a student, saying “It’s so unrealistic, it's bizarre. It’s like, so not focused on the kids.” John also noted that at the same time, it still was possible to return to refocus his efforts on building curricula on student interests, but that it was just much harder now. I replied by indicating that it is also much easier if the teachers collaborate and coordinate their efforts to that end, that the community of this inquiry
The group could look at that more going forward, even after the defined period of time associated with my project was finished.

**Students**
- Desire learning
- Ask questions
- Prepared for life
- Social aspect
- Love being in class
- Feel needed & wanted

**Teachers (We)**
- Freedom to explore
- Excited.
- Leave work happy
- Made a difference
- Want to be here

*Figure 5.4 - Whiteboard Summary of Dream Statements*

Importantly, that enthusiasm for learning was also linked to a sense of community. The teachers recalled from their student interviews and surveys the importance of group work and collaboration for students. Student enthusiasm and excitement was tied to the social element of learning. Norm noted that it was not always possible to make the content super interesting, but that even in those cases, it was possible to create ways in which students might love the process of learning. Rebecca extended this further, drawing attention to the ways teacher attitudes about students are communicated to students supports positive social environments. She asked rhetorically, “Do we ever tell our students that we really need them? Do they feel needed?...How much do we transfer, even not in words but in our—say I need you, I really want you, I really like having you here. I’m wondering how much do we transfer that or, you know, communicate that.” Rebecca further noted that teacher frustration was frequently a feature of other PD experiences which had turned into spaces in which teachers grumbled that they not want to come to school.
She talked about how her colleagues’ frustration had washed onto her, making her dread coming to work. Norm noted how during his first year of teaching, he ate lunch in his car by himself every day because the school was so toxic, that unless he was working with children, he could not stand being around the unhappy adults in the building. Sam and Carla both talked about teachers should be enjoying their work, which Carla tied to really feeling like she was making a difference in students’ lives and preparing them for the real world. Rebecca echoed this, noting that the reason that she changed careers was to make a difference in students’ lives, even if that often felt stifled by the day-to-day. I tied this conversation to all of their motivations—that they all had likely come into teaching for some variation on Rebecca and Flora’s wanting to make a difference. In that way, I told them, inclusion might also mean shifting their orientation away from student test scores and towards finding fulfillment in making a difference in students’ lives.

**Design**

At the end of the dream phase, teachers were asked to think about what they were already doing that supported inclusion as we now understood it. They were encouraged to think about existing practices that aligned with their conception of inclusion, and why those practices support students by aligning those practices to the UDL framework for inclusive pedagogy. They were also required to think about evidence that their practices demonstrably support student learning, and how those practices could be expanded within their classes and within the school so that they could support more students. Summaries of these discussions were turned into research posters that were shared with their colleagues in the next “destiny” phase.

Before I could ask the teachers to identify their practices that supported inclusion and align them to the UDL framework, I had to first demonstrate what that looked like. To that end, we began by returning to the student study findings and our dreams for inclusion in this context.
before brainstorming a long list of teaching practices that supported our “dream” as a group. The techniques discussed at this level were sometimes elements of established school protocol (i.e. “the flow of the day” or agenda presented at the beginning of each lesson) or very basic things (i.e. graphic organizers). However, those things took a much more meaningful shape when we picked them apart *vis-a-vis* the student survey findings, our dream statements, and the UDL framework. This led to deeper, richer discussions about how presenting an agenda supported students in coping with academic frustration, and under what contexts graphic organizers might not only be used as basic assessments, but as ways of supporting student expression, strategy development, and transfer of learning across contexts. Then we launched into deeper development of single strategies that were robust, grounded in the existing strong practices, and could be further developed both in their classes and across the school.

**Carla & Sam**

Sam and Carla initially wanted to implement a new strategy related to flexible grouping based on assessment data but ended up describing a choice-based strategy in which students learned through an artistic Math project. Spurred by Norm’s initial conversations about adjusting his classroom groupings based on short-term assessment data (as opposed to inflexible and problematic standardized test data), both Carla and Sam articulated an interest in trying to use formative assessments to adjust their teaching, especially in composing groups. However, they had struggled to implement this new strategy, citing lack of time. Instead, I urged them to come to a place where they had recently experienced success with their ICT class and dig into it further. With that insistence, they chose to talk about a project in math that they had done recently that had positively changed the classroom dynamics. In this project, their 8th grade math students were asked to plot a shape of their choosing on a coordinate plane and then perform one of the
geometrical transformations that they had been studying in the prior weeks with the support of a group of their choosing.

Sam and Carla had noted that there was a profound difference in student engagement with this strategy. I encouraged them to think about these changes in terms of qualitative data—as evidence that doing projects in which students could make choices about how they can authentically express their knowledge supports their learning. They noted that all students in the class were able to remain focused and interested in the task. In particular, one student with an IEP who they thought to often struggle with mathematics content was able to thrive when given this opportunity to creatively express his learning. Moreover, they noted a dramatic decline in misbehavior during this project, particularly among two Black boys with IEP’s. They also included student work as evidence that this strategy supported student learning, with the student-made projects themselves demonstrating a much higher level of learning than other class work.

Both Sam and Carla had struggled to align their strategy to principles of inclusive pedagogy initially but ended up with deep understandings about student choice and authentic expression. While neither Sam nor Carla initially demonstrated any awareness of the UDL framework, they gained an emerging awareness by noting elements of their work that aligned to UDL. They articulated how the ability to physically move around the classroom supported student learning, particularly for their students who were highly impulsive (who had been previously seen as hyperactive). Giving students opportunities to make choices, they remarked, gave students a greater sense of ownership of their projects, yielding fewer resistance behaviors and much more enjoyment of the process. Students having the ability to express their learning in a different mode also led to their increased excitement for learning and success with the assignment.
Carla and Sam talked about taking this work forward in making project-based learning and student choice. They described how projects could be used as summative assessments in their classes, giving students to express their learning in ways that were authentic to them. Moreover, they noted how the projects could be used to bridge student expression of learning so that test-aligned activities and assessments could be seen as more valuable and relevant to students. They urged that the school could benefit from a wider application of project-based assessment, as it allows student proficiencies that are undervalued by tests to shine through. They also urged that, school wide, giving students the freedom to make choices in their learning would allow a much higher degree of engagement and much less misbehavior to manage.

**Diane & Rebecca**

As two new teachers, Diane and Rebecca initially had a hard time identifying existing teaching practices that supported inclusion but came to develop a strategy for self-paced small group work. Their difficulties as new teachers were compounded by the fact that they co-taught in a segregated self-contained special education classroom wherein inclusion was not anyone’s objective before this project. In our initial conversations about what they were doing that was successful, both teachers talked about things that they were doing separately with other partners that had worked, but they had not found anything that worked for the class that they taught together. Angela lamented that so much of her attention went to the “pushables” and “slippables” that there was no opportunity to focus her energies on the profoundly struggling students in their class. Additionally, they struggled because Rebecca had three other courses that she needed to prepare with another co-teacher for, so there was a shortage of time in planning with Diane. Furthermore, many of the related service providers had decided to pull students from their first
period class, which meant that, except for Fridays, they never had all of their students in the room at the same time.

Given their struggles in finding something that worked for their class, I stepped in to suggest a series of strategies for their co-taught 7th grade self-contained class. One of which was to do packets that the students could work on at their own pace. Given that there were fewer than twelve students in their class and four adults, each group could further have differentiated support—the bilingual paraprofessional could support language needs for the students who struggled with English, the crisis paraprofessional could work with her one student independently, and the teachers could split the remaining students amongst themselves. Rebecca, who had strong rapport with two of the boys who were thought to be most disruptive could work with them alone, and Diane could pull her own group. I came in to observe what they learned from our discussions and found that their class had a much higher degree of student engagement than I had seen for the same group at other times and with other teachers.

Rebecca and Diane noted a profound difference in how this strategy supported a range of different learning needs, which I encouraged them to think of as qualitative data. For the students who were academically strong, the strategy of using self-paced packets allowed the students to work at a faster clip, which minimized their frustration and challenged them more appropriately, therefore minimizing their disruptive behaviors. Importantly, this shift helped Rebecca and Diane to see the students in a new light. Their class, thought by just about everybody to be the most difficult group in the school, was seen in new, positive ways. At one point, Rebecca stated, “You know, I’m finding that they’re really really sweet kids.” For students who struggled more with English language, decoding, and information processing, Rebecca and Diane noted that they were able to comprehend and engage with the work differently with small group support and the ability
to pause and ask questions. All students, they said, were calmer, more focused, and proud of their work.

Rebecca and Diane, both seeking certification in special education, did not have a profoundly difficult time aligning these practices to principles of inclusive pedagogy, though they were generally unfamiliar with the UDL framework itself. Angela had expressed misconceptions about UDL as a special education-only thing, which she had learned from a UDL consultant who had come to the school and was paid to do PD with the special education department. Nevertheless, they linked their strategy to student engagement insofar as the students benefited from clear expectations for their academic and behavioral performance with feedback throughout. Moreover, the students benefited from the varying degrees of peer and adult support and collaborative community that was forged in each of the groups. They also identified ways in which the students benefited from the different types of support available to them: students who struggled to decode had decoding support; those who needed support in comprehending content had support for information processing and transfer.

Rebecca and Diane talked about more fully developing this strategy so that it could support student reflection and self-regulation. Specifically, they talked about how packets could be more closely linked to student interests and come to include space for student goal-setting and executive function development. Additionally, the teachers spoke to saying in which the packets might be made available on computers, therefore enabling the range of linguistic and perceptual supports that are commonly available in most software, such as text-to-speech and speech-to-text, translation software, and high-visibility and font size features. Finally, they spoke to how putting them in an online format could open new avenues for student inquiry through internet research.
Cliff & Joey

Cliff and Joey initially struggled to identify any of their own pedagogical practices that supported inclusion. Interestingly, they were the only pair in the group in which neither teacher had a special education certification, though the administration had managed to justify this by periodically also adding a third special education teacher to the mix. While that person was certified, they also were a first-year alternative certification teacher who did not collaborate with Cliff or Joey in the planning or execution of lessons. Their pairing was justified by the administration in terms of classroom management—that since Joey was a dean and therefore “strong” and Cliff was skilled in teaching math, but older, he was “weak.” Not surprisingly then, they had tough time identifying an existing teaching practice that supported inclusion, as what they both considered to be their strengths were the coordination of their efforts to gain student behavioral compliance. Their difficulty in finding their own successful practices were compounded by the fact that Joey was frequently pulled away from the classroom in order to support school-wide discipline efforts and was frequently late to or absent from our PD sessions.

Because of their difficulty identifying their own practices which support inclusion, so I came to observe their co-taught math class. I found that they had done a great deal to support students by minimizing threats and distractions in the classroom, but control over those systems was entirely in the hands of the teachers. I encouraged them to think about ways in which they might transfer ownership of student behavioral management to the students themselves, therein developing the students’ abilities to self-regulate. They agreed that this would be valuable to students across school contexts, and they welcomed the opportunity to teach instead of manage behavior. Therefore, we framed their work with students as “setting the table” for student self-regulation, which recognized that they had developed a strong set of practices that could
increasingly be used to support students in regulating their own actions. These conversations spurred a deeper level of thinking about classroom management, especially with respect to student self-regulation. Critically, this involved thinking about causes for student disruptive behavior, including student resistance to unfair authority, healthy adolescent impulsiveness, replication of problematic elements of youth culture (i.e. violent video games, music), and immediate gratification (some of which may be exacerbated, as we discussed, by poverty). We also discussed the paradox of reward and punishments systems, which provided short term supports in developing pro-learning behaviors, but do not support long-term self-regulation abilities.

These conversations, in turn, yielded some metacognition of their strong teaching practices that could be further developed. Joey and Cliff talked about how their assessment strategies inform the physical layout of their classroom, especially in determining seating arrangements. They also talked about establishing clear behavioral expectations. Most importantly, Joey and Cliff came to see classroom management as a basic skill that could support learning, but also came to realize that the control that they had sought inhibited self-regulation. Importantly, they came to understand the reciprocal nature of misbehavior and academic struggles, with the need to support academic success directly related to behavioral success. They talked about incorporating student choice, self-assessment, and feedback into developing their strategy further, so that students can build confidence in their abilities. They saw the importance of students being involved in their own assessment processes, so that their abilities were not only “judged” by the teachers, but also so that they developed some capacity to monitor their own progress.
Joey and Cliff wanted to use quantitative data to show that there had been an improvement in student results but realized that the data that they were collecting did not document such growth. We talked about how they knew that their students were learning and the ways in which they expressed that, noting a strong dissonance between what they value and the test scores that the school and district value. Unfortunately, though, Joey and Cliff were not able to justify the value of their teaching strategies with student outcomes.

However, what is promising is that they both discussed ways in which students could be given opportunities to develop self-regulation capacity, both immediately and over the long-term. This included giving students space for reflection on how their choices were directly linked to their grades. Additionally, they agreed that more frequent and lower stakes assessments with more feedback would support student ownership of the learning process. They also talked about linking these processes to mathematics content by giving students space to monitor and track their own progress through graphing assignments.

Norm & Lilith

Norm and Lilith devoted their attention to describing how a class could resemble a family. From our initial conversations onward, Norm had the most to say about pedagogy, and Lilith was the most experienced teacher in the group. However, Norm and Lilith struggled with articulating how practices that felt like they had become part of their personality were actually things that could be done in other classrooms for the benefit of the students. It took some work for me to draw out of them individual, concrete, transferable teaching practices, but once they came to see what they were doing as teaching, it was hard to hold back their ideas. They spoke about making their classroom a place in which their students felt welcome to bring in their whole selves and personal lives. In return, they noted how important it was that teachers also share their own lives
with students in order to build relationships and bonds with students. They also spoke to the importance of setting clear expectations, but with an emphasis on promoting kindness and the ability for students and teachers alike to recognize and apologize for their mistakes. They also spoke about developing a culture of celebration and openness, welcoming students in their classroom during lunch periods. They also spoke about returning student work with thoughtful feedback quickly and checking in with struggling students to maintain clear expectations for work.

They spoke to the many ways in which they knew that their techniques supported their students’ inclusion, which I insisted they think of as qualitative data. They cited student enthusiasm and initiative, in asking for feedback from each other and teachers as well as extra credit work. They told stories of how their students were driven to succeed in and out of class, turning in high quality homework assignments and avoiding disruptive peers. They spoke of their mutual affection for students, and the ways in which students sought to bond with them by creating silly groups (the fanny pack club) and inviting them to join, as well as by jokingly calling them “mom” and “dad.” However, they thought the best evidence that their students benefited from the classroom community were their conversations during parent-teacher conferences in which parents talked about their students being happy to come to school and the major attitude shifts that their students showed.

Like many others, they too struggled with aligning those practices to UDL. Norm said that even though he had his masters’ degree in inclusive special education, he had not heard of UDL, though he did remember a UDL consultant coming to the school. Like Rebecca, he remembered UDL being introduced as a special education specific idea and had not made any connections to inclusive teaching. Nevertheless, with some discussion, Norm and Lilith recognized the very clear
and explicit connections to UDL principles of creating classroom communities and minimizing threats and distractions.

For Norm and Lilith, carrying this work forward meant supporting their colleagues in developing similar practices. While they recognized that some elements of what they do that is successful because of their personalities and relationships with their kids, they saw the potential for other types of familial relationships in classes. Additionally, they noted that all teachers can display kindness, respectfulness, positivity, and fairness towards students. In their posters, they encouraged their peers to develop bonds with their students by opening up to them.

**Destiny**

In the destiny phase, teachers spread what they had learned, and shared it with their colleagues and administration. Their findings took the shape of two finished products, a set of research posters, as well as a recommendation report to the administration on structuring inclusive programs. I also invited them to consider presenting their posters at a conference over the summer, as well as on my website for UDL.

**Practice for the Main Poster Session**

Before the teachers shared their posters with the whole school, they shared amongst their four groups. This led to a deeper synthesis of inclusion and an opportunity to make explicit the connections between their beliefs about inclusion and their pedagogical strategies. In their discussions across groups, they talked about how student belonging was linked to developing the ability to self-regulate and enjoy academic success. In turn, that belonging was linked to being appropriately academically challenged and having some degree of choice and control over what and how they would be able to learn. They recognized that learning is necessarily social in middle
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school, with the quality of student relationships with teachers and peers being an important factor in student learning.

A rich conversation emerged about creating a classroom culture that was both emotionally nurturing and allowed for socialization, but that also was not so disruptive or unruly that students were unable to focus. This involved allowing students to choose their partners for work, but also supporting good choices by providing opportunities to reflect on how well they learned collaboratively. It also meant for some students who struggled to focus, having the option of working in more secluded parts of a classroom independently. Most importantly, the key element was that it was the students making those choices about how they worked best, as opposed to being told what was best for them. This phenomenon was tied to all of the teachers’ projects, as the broad consensus was that students needed to be given the freedom to learn to identify and self-regulate their learning context within structures that enabled students to concentrate and maintain their attention. This centering of student choice further meant not focusing teacher attention so intensely on misbehavior, but rather supporting students in avoiding distractions. In this way, teachers can minimize disruptive behavior that is attention-seeking.

**Poster Session**

During the final session of this project, the teachers presented their posters very briefly to the rest of the staff. Because of the way in which Principal Karpov had structured that final session, teachers were given three minutes to spend at each of the four sessions before going to the cafeteria for a potluck holiday party. One teacher was deeply upset by this arrangement, yelling angrily “We have PD now? Are you kidding me? I have to pick up my kids!”

That teacher’s attitude changed very quickly. After hearing from her colleagues on their posters and their work, she had questions for them about their strategies and was deeply engaged
in learning more about what they had done to include their students. Like her, the other teachers listened intently and asked questions as the four pairs of teachers presented (minus Joey who had been pulled away to manage a student altercation and Lilith who had left early, feeling woozy in her late stages of pregnancy). After the fifteen minutes was up, Principal Karpov struggled to regain the attention of the staff to invite them downstairs for the party. The school faculty clapped enthusiastically for the inquiry team’s work and remarked aloud how “usable” the strategies were, to which Rebecca called back “that’s the point!” Teachers lingered in the room instead of rushing downstairs, with a few coming to me to ask if they could be in the next round. I had tried to keep a low profile and let my team shine, but this was the point at which I expressed the hope to the remaining teachers that we could continue to pursue projects like this. The special education coordinator, Rachel, talked to me at length about how good the posters were and how they might be used to support students with and without IEP’s in inclusive settings. She also praised the PD program itself, contrasting it with the usual Monday meetings “which suck the life out of teaching.”

**Recommendation Report**

Our discussions of school-level barriers to inclusion began early and continued throughout all of our sessions. Those discussions culminated in a recommendation report, written from the perspective of the team, and addressed to the administration. A major challenge for me in actually drafting the report was balancing the sometimes incendiary sentiments and language of the team with being tactful with respect to the administration’s response to the recommendation. After the project was done, I also sat with Assistant Principal Tortelli and Principal Karpov to hear their responses and see how it would be possible to carry this work forward. However, they had not read the report itself, and I was left to summarize it.
One of the key elements of our report was not treating ICT classes as “dumping grounds” for poorly behaved general education students. This emerged from conversations in which teachers noted that ICT classes, were in fact, low-level tracked classes. Indeed, this is a common and long-standing problem across the city, and I tried to frame as such in the report. In response, Principal Karpov indicated that it was impossible to put academically strong students into the ICT classes, as they were designated to be in the “magnet” classes that the school was receiving grant money to support. It seemed as if the school leadership was committed to dismantling the worst elements of tracking without addressing the “gifted” end of the spectrum.

Relatedly, we recommended that the school schedule ICT classes as a priority, given the unique logistical challenges that arise from scheduling for two teachers who need common planning time, in addition to prescribed student ratios. Principal Karpov acknowledged the difficulties that the school faced in developing schedules this year, but also noted that the challenges of sharing space with another school upstairs. Nevertheless, he also acknowledged the importance of providing co-teachers with common planning time and consistency in their schedules.

Somewhat at my insistence, the report recommended that the administration find and develop stronger ways of implementing SETSS. Both administrators were unaware that it was possible to do push-in SETSS services, and were excited to know that such logistical arrangements could be made so that students who do not need the intensive degree of support and attention that a co-taught ICT class provides could be moved into general education settings, and still receive academic supports for their learning needs through the general education teacher.

Driven by new understandings of the ways in which segregated special education settings are socially isolated and not academically supportive, the team recommended developing and
articulating expectations for students to leave self-contained classrooms. As a group, the teachers thought it was absolutely critical to communicate to incoming students that they were expected to move out of restrictive settings as quickly as possible. In order to enable that transition, however, students would need to develop executive functioning and self-regulation skills in self-contained classes. While we realized that the decision to move students to less restrictive settings was not solely the decision of the school, the report argued that it should be the expectation that students leave self-contained classes as a default but perhaps with a few exceptions, not the other way around.

Finally, the report recommended that the administration be more proactive in buffering the teachers from the institutional pressures associated with the accountability regimes that the school was struggling with. Teachers had noted that the observation and teacher evaluation system made them feel like they did not have the freedom to engage themselves in teaching anymore—that they were given scripted curricula and held to an inauthentic rubric for effective teachers. While they acknowledged that part of their jobs as teachers was to buffer the students from the effects of top-down surveillance, we also included in the report something of a plea for the administration to extend a similar courtesy by explicitly bringing an asset-oriented lens to classroom observations and feedback. Especially since all of the full-time special education teachers in the school had fewer than 5 years of experience, this was particularly important to them in developing as professionals. Both Assistant Principal Tortelli and Principal Karpov noted that the school was already facing some degree of scrutiny for giving their teachers such high ratings, and that there was not much more that could be done with respect to that area.
Aspirations for the Future

A few weeks after the end of the project, which culminated with the delivery of the recommendation report and poster session, I met with Principal Karpov to discuss how the school might carry the work forward. He told me that the school would be moving to a new, less intense accountability category, given the progress the school had made in improving test scores. Additionally, the city had decided to scrap and revamp the model used to spur developments in underperforming school. While it was not entirely clear what this meant for the school as a whole, it certainly meant that they would have fewer financial and material resources to work with going forward.

One of our shared key concerns was that this work be sustained. To that end, we agreed to explore ways in which these poster sessions could form the core of new inquiry-focused professional development groups that were teacher-led. I offered to come on to support implementation of the recommendation report’s findings, especially those pertaining to SETSS implementation and schedule development. Principal Karpov had expressed a great deal of concern about sustaining these developments, given the roughly 40% year-to-year special education teacher turnover, which results in alternatively certified special education teachers delivering most of the special education services at the school. We talked about developing an apprenticeship model wherein first year teachers could work in ICT settings in supportive settings in order to support their learning and minimize turnover. Additionally, he noted that he has a hard time recruiting certified special education teachers from non-alternatively certified avenues, given the reputation of the school. I offered to try to reach out to my contacts within teacher education programs to see if student teaching opportunities could be expanded.
However, there remain a few concerns for me about this work going forward in this school. The school wants to maintain a high-tracked class for the highest performing students. Above the school level, district level funding formulas make expanding ICT models more difficult, and there seems to be a renewed embrace of segregated self-contained models, perhaps as a backlash to the inclusive changes of a decade ago. Finally, I remain concerned about the administration’s willingness and commitment to sustaining these changes, especially in the face of shifting priorities. Not two months after the completion of this project, the new district superintendent had apparently decided to move to an out-of-building PD model in which teachers from different schools are pulled to a central location to receive professional development, as opposed to the current school-based model, precluding the possibility of extending the work of this team across the school’s whole faculty. Nevertheless, I am hopeful that the work that started here will continue to grow and become self-sustaining, especially by bringing this work into newer spheres across districts, which is discussed further in the conclusion chapter. In the next chapter, I provide an analysis of this data, attending to the ways in which this professional development program did and, importantly, did not shift teacher attitudes and practices towards inclusion.
CHAPTER 6 - ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I report findings from the hundreds of pages of transcripts and documents gathered during and after the professional development action research project. Broadly speaking, there were many interesting threads that emerged from within this data, many of which were not entirely germane to the scope of this dissertation’s conceptual framework; however, those threads will be briefly described in the following conclusion chapter. Aligned with the five-part conceptualization of inclusion in chapter two (see Figure 2.1), the data was deductively coded in the first cycle of analysis. Subsequently, pattern codes within each category emerged from a closer, inductive analysis. This process was recursive, reshaping the boundaries of the initial five categories. Those five conceptual categories form the primary framework of this chapter, with subheadings corresponding to pattern codes, as well as my own reflections on the limitations of this project relative to the conceptual framework and intended outcomes. This chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the findings and implications for further work, as well as a consideration of alternative explanations for the observed changes in teacher beliefs and practices.

Coding Methods

In the first cycle of coding, I extracted important quotes directly from the transcripts and documents themselves from the words of participants and my field notes, but not my own utterances during PD sessions or interviews. These 475 extracted quotations were treated as In Vivo codes (Saldana, 2015) that were then aligned to the five conceptual codes for inclusive education from chapter 2 (principle of practice, civil rights agenda, improving general education, community endeavor, pedagogy). This deductive hypothesis coding based on In Vivo codes that capture the participants verbatim phrasing is a combination of Saldana’s (2015) hypothesis coding, concept coding, and in vivo coding techniques. Hypothesis coding is described as “a
strategic choice for an efficient study that acknowledges its focused or sometimes narrowly defined parameters of investigation” (p. 309). While this method of coding skirts the detail and nuance of more inductive coding methods, it does tie the data to the specific research question and conceptual framework of this study. Maintaining the direct participants’ quotes as In Vivo codes was important because it afforded me the ability to prioritize and honor participants’ voice as well as adhere to the *verbatim principle*, “using terms and concepts drawn from the words of the participants themselves” (p. 207) and provide a check on whether I have grasped (especially as a novice researcher) what is significant to the participants.

In the second cycle, inductive *pattern coding* was the primary method of analysis (Saldana, 2015). For the sake of concise organization, these patterns were established within the hypothesized conceptual categories, as a way of maintaining and sorting the In Vivo Codes. Given the inflexibility of the first cycle’s deductive analysis, this allowed new themes to emerge within the conceptual categories. Saldana suggests that second cycle pattern coding “is a way of grouping [findings] into a smaller number of themes...they pull together a lot of material from first cycle coding into more meaningful and parsimonious units of analysis” (p. 414).

These analytical cycles were recursive, consolidating 36 initial pattern codes into 14 more clear pattern codes that sometimes spanned multiple concept codes. The 14 final pattern codes that emerged from analysis are each linked to the single domain in which they primarily lie. Therefore, while the categorization of data may seem tidy here for the sake of presentation, the data is actually far messier, with direct participant quotes and my own field notes often addressing multiple thematic categories simultaneously. My election to fit participants’ words and my own field notes into categories is therefore by its very nature reductive. In the same vein, in drafting this chapter, I have had to make choices about directly presenting participant quotes while also
trying to maintain some degree of brevity. My selections of representative quotes further sought to balance including statements that best encapsulate participant ideas and sentiments while simultaneously being mindful of how publication of those comments could adversely affect the speakers. To that end, I have attributed some statements to “one of the teachers” intentionally without specifying. Finally, I have represented the voices of all 8 speakers here as a single unit of analysis, which leaves out how participants individually negotiated these changes.

This analytical process changed how I conceive of inclusive education. Whereas my initial conceptualization (Figure 2.1) held that the five themes were linked but separate, data from this study did not support that model. Therefore, I have amended my diagram (Figure 6.1) in order to reflect my newfound position that these concepts overlap with one another to a large degree. As such, I present a reworked framework as a Venn diagram, with inclusive education sitting at the central convergence point. This diagram also presents numerical values for the number of codes within each category. This illustrates the degree to which data fell within these conceptual categories, with some well represented (principle of practice, n=135; pedagogy, n=134; civil rights, n=107), and others less so (improving general education, n=49, community endeavor n=48). Again, this should not be understood to say that those areas are necessarily underdeveloped, as some data clearly addresses findings within those categories, but is more closely linked to another.
Figure 6.1 - Code Map
Inclusion Is A Principle of Practice

Under this first conceptual category, data that spoke to teachers’ understandings of inclusive education as an abstract principle of practice were analyzed. Under this category, the ways in which teachers understood and appreciated how context shapes inclusion are discussed, as are understandings of inclusion as an ethical commitment, as opposed to a programmatic or policy protocol. Perhaps most succinctly, principle of practice understandings involved understanding how inclusion is the antithesis of exclusionary practices that are common in urban schooling, and especially in special education. Pattern codes under this concept were teacher understandings of “inclusion is more than ICT” and understandings of inclusion as “teacher nirvana.” This section also addresses the ways in which these understandings are limited, in that it is unclear whether or not what teachers acquired in the process of this project can be sustained over time.

“Inclusion is more than ICT”

In the earliest phases of the project, teachers reflected on their current understandings of inclusive education. Norm discussed on how his undergraduate teacher preparation in “inclusive special ed” emphasized techniques over ethical understandings:

When I knew inclusion, that was my undergrad was inclusive special ed. A lot of what they were focused on what actually in the urban centers more than they even were the suburban schools...A lot of that was focused on teaching you techniques to work with inclusive. It wasn't actually ... There was no real clear definition of inclusion given. It was just more "Here's strategies you can use to help the special ed kids with gen-ed kids at the same time."
In contrast, at the end of the project, Cliff described how his preconception that ICT was synonymous with inclusion had shifted into a deeper, conceptual understanding of inclusion, about which he was still learning:

Well, inclusion to me has always been kind of wrapped together with the ICT classroom. And that is that just ... ICT somehow I thought it was inclusion before I figured out it was integrated co-teaching. And integrated co-teaching is a great thing. Inclusion is like a concept ... We're still kind of in an inquiry into it. And I think that's what's valuable about this project was actually to do some inquiry and to see what it means to be included.

This conceptual understanding of inclusive education was articulated in the final posters. While the words themselves are my own registry of what teachers said to me, they are both based on teacher statements and further approved by teachers before they claimed them as their own. They reflect an understanding of inclusion in their own specific context, emphasizing belonging, enthusiasm for learning, and valuing of students and their voices. In each of the posters, there was text that said:

We believe that [MS 2222] it is realistic for all students, struggling and striving alike to speak to their work, have their opinions heard, and feel like they are part of a classroom family. We believe that inclusion in our school has to be social, with students loving school and showing enthusiasm for learning. In order to move to inclusion in our school, we believe that teachers must value their students and make them feel wanted.
Promoting Inclusion in a “Struggling” School 154

Engagement and enthusiasm for learning was an essential part of their vision for inclusion. In his summative interviews, Joey spoke to how understood student enthusiasm as integral to inclusion.

Some of the things is, kids basically desiring to want to learn, so they come to class and there is a desire of learning. Like understanding the big picture, and so if they have gaps in questions, they can ask.

Teachers recognized the need for students to learn from each other in creating that enthusiasm for learning. Discussing the student interviews that he had conducted to learn when students felt included, Cliff summarized his conversations:

One of [the students] said “sometimes in class, people want to include me, they have to explain step-by-step so that I can understand.” I felt that was good, that the other kids explained things step-by-step...here are step by step instructions, and it was more about that there was a feeling that it was from the other kids. It wasn’t just like a lesson. And then the other one, they said the whole class is like a family.

Following up on the notion that classes feel like a family, teachers came to understandings of inclusion as social belonging. In her summative interview, Lilith put it succinctly, saying “So inclusion is everybody feels included, and part of a class, and ... they feel like they belong.”

However, teachers like Cliff also recognized the limitations of belonging—that “in the society of thirteen-year-olds” students naturally are inclined to form cliques that are exclusionary; however, they also acknowledged how within classrooms teachers had a great deal of power to support feelings of belonging.

Teachers also conceived of inclusive classrooms as having a range of academic abilities and preferences, which Lilith referred to as “true inclusion.” They identified how this mixed-
ability structure was not currently the practice for ICT classrooms, which they described as having been used as low-tracked classes, placing academically and behaviorally struggling general education students\(^\text{10}\) alongside students with IEPs. Some teachers lamented how ICT classrooms had been used as “dumping ground” for struggling students, recalling arguments with administrators. According to them, it was common practice in the school to place “16-year old’s who shouldn’t have been in the building anymore” alongside 12-year old’s with IEP’s. Another teacher pointed to how because ICT settings have two teachers, students without IEP’s who display frustrating behaviors are placed in them as well. Speaking of students that teachers often find difficult, one teacher laughingly described how they “exclude them by putting them in an inclusion class.” Similarly, another teacher described how general education students who make significant progress are removed from ICT classes, instead placing them in high-tracked classes. However, teachers described how they mitigate these effects, as well.

Teachers also thought about inclusion as listening to their students, and literally including their perspectives in their planning. Cliff described the positive reaction that one student had to being interviewed about inclusion during the *discover* phase, saying:

> One of the kids that I talked to today at the end, he said, “I have a question.” I said, “Okay.” He said, “why are we doing [these interviews], what is this all about?” So I told him, I said, “we’re trying to do some things to improve the school, and we want to get the students’ input.” And he so appreciated that he was contributing to something in the school...You could tell, he was like moved.

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\(^{10}\) In writing this, I have tried to take caution to dislocate the “bad” behavior from the students themselves, primarily by describing it as behavior that is frustrating or challenging to the teachers. The causes and nature of these behaviors is important, but not necessarily germane to these discussions.
Teachers also recognized that student voice could improve instruction. Rebecca talked about how she often went to students about insights for the best way to teach, recalling:

We were talking about consistency, one of the kids said, it was [student name] who told me “[student name] does better when [teacher name] is with him.” That’s [teacher name]’s class all of the time. She has a relationship with them.

They contrasted this with current practices for listening students, with one teacher reflecting “when you think about it, there's not much freedom and I think that students, especially in this type of environment…they're not allowed to say as much as they would hope for and I don't even know if they know that they could hope to…that their voice matters.” Another teacher lamented that students do not even have an awareness of their IEP, much less a say in it. They reflected on how inclusion should also support students in gaining an awareness of their own learning needs, not just telling them “oh, you’re in special education.”

“Teacher Nirvana”

Teachers came to understandings about how inclusion could improve their own professional lives. They contrasted inclusion with the current emphasis on test-score achievement that centers test scores which made their lives difficult, pointing to administrative practices as well as larger-scale policies. In my field notes, I wrote about this, referring to a “sandwiching” of teachers and students between challenging student behaviors and out-of-touch policy. Teachers were highly critical of policies that they were subject to, questioning in particular why special education policies were the way they were, and expressing aggravation with the politics of those who issued orders to them. Some of the more senior teachers remembered what teaching was like before intense accountability systems, and how they were able to diverge from the curriculum and really spend time with their students. In one such case, the teacher recalled how it used to be:
We could have conversations. I would teach, I would have a prep, a PA and a lunch. I had those three periods. If I didn’t spend them with the kids, I mean, if I spent them with the kids, I’d be fine! I didn’t have pressure. I was allowed to teach. There was no pressure from admin at the time. All this pressure, we are booked solid. You cannot go off and explore in the middle of class. I could, because you know what I would do? “Guys, I need 15 more minutes during your lunch,” the kids would stay with me, we’d finish up, or even at the end of 8th period, I need 10 15 more minutes. And they’d go “yes!” You were free to do things, but not that you ever needed that, I would go to the gym, play basketball, or interact with the kids, and by the end of September, I would know all of the kids and have a great relationship. Can’t do that now. Sometimes you have to literally - it's harder to do, it's not that you can’t do it, it’s that its harder to do.

Other teachers noted how the tools of neoliberal policies, especially those that enforced teacher effectiveness propped up ineffective and inexperienced administrators. They discussed feeling surveilled by their administration, fearful that they be subject to an unannounced observation at any time that could land them in trouble: “But if they come and observe you during that time, you'll be hit, which is something we talk about, is the fact that we have to call it getting hit in an observation is crazy.” Teachers also talked about how those policies and administrative practices resulted in teacher turnover, expressing fear that questioning those policies and practices would lead to them quitting or being fired. They cited examples of teachers who quit teaching because policies did not support students. One teacher even expressed fear about how this project and its critical elements made her fear for her job security11.

11 Although I consistently shielded teacher identities in all critical work, such as the recommendation report.
However, teachers also balanced these statements with reflections on how poor feedback was before, and that there has always been a need to balance standard curriculum with student needs. Sam reflected:

Having been a physics teacher, there’s always that kinda balancing act, because you have the curriculum and you have the physics concepts and there are alot of cool ideas, and then there’s alot of tangents that the kids wanna go on - everything’s about space, or right, the combustion engine, this or that, hypotheticals, and you want to indulge those and feed their curiosity and explore some of those ideas, but at the same [time], you also need to rein it in and be like, there is this objective that we’ve got to meet, so, I’m familiar with those situations, where you want to talk about internal combustion, but how much time do you spend on those - go on this direction, sacrificing the learning objective, and how much do you say, let's shelve this for another day, do this during lab, whatever, so.

Joey continued to discuss how it is possible to balance administrative and policy pressures with student needs, but it requires creativity. He commented:

I think what we need to do next is, focus on ... Well, there's two things. One, now that the class is flowing a certain way, and the way we want it, focus on what we would like do as teachers, right, but intertwined with what admin wants us to do, right? It can't just be one way. I know, because I'm a 13-year teacher, I know that it could be done ... certain things can be done by thinking outside the box. But if our hands are tied, because admin or the upper echelons wants it to be a certain way, it's a mix...So I want to work on that mix...I don't want to say, "Hey, I'm not doing anything you're doing." Or if the say, "I want to work on a mix of things", that
again, helps my kids, helps my classroom, helps us get the info, and them do the
best that they can do.

Nevertheless, they lamented how prescribed their current curriculum is and how difficult the
outsized role of test preparation makes finding that balance. One teacher reflected:

Kind of what I'm thinking a lot about lately is we have students with different
needs, students that move at different paces. But then at the end of the unit they all
take the same assessment. I'm not sure how I feel about that, 'cause we took an
assessment today and some students were ready, and others needed more time. But
the curriculum and the mapping and the calendar says it's time to move on and we
move on. I wonder about differentiated assessments. I don't make all that decision.
We're subject to various outside authorities. Something I'm thinking about.

However, through the process of constructing a new vision for inclusion in context during
the dream phase, teachers also saw inclusion as oppositional to their current frustrations, allowing
students and teachers alike to enjoy their time in schools. Rebecca described her inclusive
“Nirvana”:

I would imagine that a class that feels included in all aspect of learning and school
social life. I see my student loving to enter the classroom. They cannot wait to
return the next day. They enjoy learning. As a teacher I would feel as if I have
attained Nirvana.

Carla reflected on how that would mitigate the frustrating student behaviors that she
struggles with, writing:

Students would feel excited to come to school They would feel like school was an
important/beneficial part of their day. I would feel like students would be happy to
be here I would look forward to coming in each day without worrying about behaviors, because we would all be here to learn and enjoy one's company...Our students would see a value in their education.

Norm wrote further about the social changes in the school that inclusion could bring:

Students feel that they can ask a question at any time. Feel free to have conversations during down time. Laugh and get to feel happy. Working with group members, want to and feel willing to talk during whole class setting. Going to groups no matter level of the group. As a teacher I would feel happy to be here. Want to talk with my students. Have the students understand my expectations and when we can have fun and when it's time to learn. Professionally, I could talk with colleagues as I do with Cliff and Lilith now. Making sure lessons are done ahead of time so we can group easier and change lessons accordingly. Students would want to go to school, be happy to see classmates and teachers. Come in with a smile or be able to communicate why they don't have a smile. Or what's going on in their lives. Not as excuses not to work but as things we can address together.

Students wouldn't see school as a drag but at least as a place where you have fun at least one period a day. Hopefully more.

In her summative interview, Carla connected her newfound inclusive practices with students to the reason she became a teacher in the first place, commenting, “I feel like I made a difference, because that’s why I came into this, but I don’t feel like that every day, I guess.”

**Reflections on Limitations – Sustaining Change**

However, there may be an important limitation of this project insofar as the degree to which these new beliefs about inclusion can be sustained is not clear. On the one hand, I believe
that these understandings of inclusion as an abstract principle of practice that is deeply tied to professional autonomy are both important and indelible. However, the profound degree of teacher turnover certainly begs questions about sustaining these beliefs and practices in this school. The school largely relies on alternative certification programs to fill “hard-to-staff” vacancies, especially those in special education. It is certainly a stereotype of these alternatively certified teachers that they turnover at significantly higher rates than traditionally certified teachers, though recent studies have confirmed that alternate pathway teachers leave the profession at significantly higher rates, particularly those serving urban schools (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Moving to greener pastures does make sense for many teachers in this context, especially since all eight teachers in this project live in suburban areas, with some like Carla commuting over 4 hours per day.

Inclusion Is A Civil Rights Agenda

Understandings of inclusion as a civil rights agenda involve recognition of the rights of individuals with disabilities to not be denied opportunities. These civil rights arguments are not disconnected from practical implementation issues; rather, they provide the ethical impetus for implementation of inclusive changes. For these teachers, understandings about civil rights involved understanding contextual differences between urban and suburban special education, paradoxes of self-contained classrooms, and issues pertaining to compliance and implementation of inclusion. However, these understandings were limited insofar as they never fully realized an actively anti-racist or anti-ableist position.

Suburban-Urban Differences

In understanding the differences between urban and suburban special education systems, teachers came to understand inclusion as a civil rights issue. Teachers discussed how the
fundamental nature of special education classification and placement is different in the suburban schools that they and their children have attended than it is in this urban school. Cliff, who lives in an exclusive, predominantly White suburban school district that is very well funded noted the invisibility of special education in that district, remarking:

My daughter a few years ago graduated from the [nearby suburban school district] school system, which is like one of the top school systems around here. Yeah, and I don’t think there were that many kids with IEP’s. And yet they all got very good individual educations.

Teachers noted that the ways in which parents have access to the special education process is widely variant by urbanicity. In the early discover phase, Norm reflected that special education services might be scary to parents in this setting, resulting in students being underclassified in urban settings, saying, “… there are some [students in this school] that could benefit from [placement in special education] that don’t have it. And that might be a parent thing. They’re afraid of it.” He continued at another time, noting how parents in suburban areas have different perceptions of special education:

It's also probably embarrassing for alot of those parents to say “my kid has a disability” or to know that, like in this neighborhood, alot of them don’t want to be seen as “I’m the dumb one.” I’m serious, alot of them don’t. But in the suburbs alot of the parents know better. Alot of these parents have no idea what they’re really getting when their kid gets an IEP…in their head, they’re like “oh, my kid’s stupid,” they don’t really know. But where we come from, alot of the parents are alot more educated on that topic, so it's like okay to give an IEP more.
This, of course, represents a problematic line of thinking found in teachers’ lounges and professional literature alike (i.e. Morgan et al., 2015, 2017; Ong-Dean, 2009) which locates the problems of special education service provision in the families of students with suspected disabilities, not in the systems that provide insufficient resources to provide adequate evaluations and services, as well as inform parents of the process and their rights. By way of a rebuttal of sorts, Rebecca implicated the systems that keep suburban parents informed of their rights under the law, as opposed to urban systems that keep parents in the dark:

I live in the suburbs. My daughter and my nephew went to the same school. He was in Special ed, and I see eventually through going to the programs, and what was available to us, and the knowledge that was available to us, even though we're people of color, he was able to be declassified out of Special ed.

Rebecca’s rebuttal and the ensuing conversations that extended across the project reinforced the essential differences between urban and suburban special education. As time went on, for Norm, juxtapositions of urban and suburban special education systems and the stigmatizing, restrictive nature of the former yielded some dissonance, even though he had experienced work in both. He commented:

And where we are in the city too, it's different, because if you grow up in my area [in the suburbs], you can have your IEP through high school and it’s fine...You can have the whole way, all that stuff, but there is a big stigmatism [sic] in the city, especially if you go to high school with an IEP, you’re screwed. If you go into high school in self-contained, you’re screwed. And your life will be...but it’s weird that it's different in the city compared to the suburbs.
During Norm’s summative interview, I asked about one student in particular who had been moved into a more isolated special education setting that had no general education students in it and limited access to the general education curriculum. While she was had not been thriving in the ICT setting that she was in, he recounted that she was doing better now. In response to my question about how she would fare in a White, well-resourced suburban school, he responded:

I think that her classification might be different than what it is considered here. Or the assistance that she might need, like in an OT or a PT and things like that because that would help her, I think too and we don't have those opportunities here. Those type of things. I find like a reading specialist or a writing specialist. Specific specialists to work with kids in a very small group because we don't have the time in the class to work on those things … But that's what I think … I think if she was there, there's a chance that she could end up getting inclusive but she would get a lot of pullouts. A para probably, things like that.

Teachers also came to recognize that academic deficits are contextual and reinforced by inadequate access. In this recognition they also came to see avenues for improvement. Cliff reflected on how some contextual limitations become calcified, and how teachers can create supportive contexts that reverse this. Cliff reflected:

Students bring themselves to our classrooms, and a sheet of paper [referring to the IEP] that tells us about past behavior that indicates some disability. Case by case, of course, but I would say that a good number of defined disabilities are limiting habits that have been reinforced over time and have become a part of our student's personality. Can we provide a context to allow for students to breakthrough, as
they grow? Maybe, maybe not. But an enabling context can be an environment that serves to help all students grow.

For Rebecca, it was more personal, with her reflecting on how in the suburbs there was an expectation that students be actively moved towards less isolated settings as preparation for the real world that does not have special settings. She commented:

I’ve had, my nephew was in ICT, and he was in special ed in [segregated self-contained classroom] at one point, and he eventually moved from there to there to there until when he went to high school he didn’t have an IEP, that's the setting, and we were in a suburb, but that’s what we should tell them. You’re here to move to here—the expectation is that. Not to be here forever. So whatever we teach you, or whatever we change your setting or timing, it's for you to go out there.

She further reflected on the opportunities afforded to suburban students based on affluence and provision of supplemental tutoring. Conversely, she recounted how parent advocates pushed for restrictive self-contained settings in the context of this school:

I’m thinking about what you [Louis] said earlier about affluence and race, and the ability that we have academically and what we’re offering our kids go hand in hand. Because I’m thinking that so many of our kids, how they’re suffering because they’re in seventh grade and they’re on a third-grade level and I’m like how am I going to bridge this gap? How? You tell me? How am I going to bridge it? I mean I’ve been in an IEP meeting with this lady and she has her kid, third grade reading and he’s in seventh and she brought this advocate and the advocate was like “he needs to be in self-contained, he needs more support” and I’m like this remedial [work] should have been done before middle school. and I keep
saying to her, that’s not what this kid wants, and I know for a fact that it's not going to help him. What you should do, and affluence dictates that—with affluent parenting, gets tutoring for them to catch them up.

In our summative interview, I asked Rebecca how she now conceived of her role in moving students towards inclusion as a civil rights issue.

Louis: Do you see yourself ever playing that role [of moving kids out of segregated special education settings] for these kids?

Rebecca: Definitely, and that's why I want to pursue special ed—where there's so much more I could do in it. That was not my original plan so to speak.

Self-Contained Paradox

In their thinking about inclusion as a civil rights agenda, teachers gained understandings of the paradoxical nature of segregated self-contained special education placements within this school as a civil rights issue: on the one hand, teachers and administrators alike recognized the injurious effects of self-contained classrooms; however, they simultaneously argued for their existence as necessary evils. In one of many instances in which school personnel recognized how injurious self-contained settings are for students, Rebecca likened these settings to prisons, saying, “I hate using that word [self-contained] so it's like an aversion for me. Every time I think about self-contained, it sounds like a prison.” Going further, Norm talked about their physical isolation from the rest of the classrooms in the school, noting “8th, 7th and 6th [self-contained classes] are right there in the corner and nobody really goes into that corner there.” Rebecca told the story of one student who had been put into a self-contained classroom for seventh grade after presenting behavioral problems in sixth grade, reflecting how self-contained classes were settings for poorly behaved students:
… I think what the intention is, which we find we can’t contain the kids in our ICT setting, so we send them to self-contained, and so when we send them to self-contained, and that was my experience with [student name], who had his issues, but we wanted a para--just a para. But the system wouldn’t allow, they said “put him in self-contained.” it made him worse. And he never got over it. Every time he sees me in the hallway, he says how we’re wicked, how we tossed him out, we all had a party the minute he left. That wasn’t good for him.

Carla generously tried to suggest that the isolation of students in self-contained classes was not intentional, but nevertheless injurious. She reflected:

Yeah, and I don't think it's intentional. I don't think anybody's intentionally like, "screw the kids with disabilities," obviously. But I think that it happens, and I think that it happens amongst the students, too, because the students seem ... The students see they're the small class, the class that is upstairs by themselves, that never comes down, that never transitions in the hallway.

It was clear that self-contained classrooms were poorly equipped to meet student needs and were primarily staffed by the least experienced teachers in the school. In my field notes, I recorded my impressions of classroom observations that the special education department leader had asked me to do of the self-contained classes, as well as our follow up conversations. In them, I noted that it seemed clear to me that the students in the self-contained classroom that I had observed were not getting instruction tied to their needs. One teacher further discussed how it was often the new teachers who were given the self-contained classes, as they knew they would not argue with the administration for better schedules. Teachers also talked about how unnecessary the self-contained classes were, as many of the students currently in self-contained settings could likely do
fine in less restrictive environments right away. Throughout the project, teachers and administrators alike expressed sentiments like Rebecca’s:

It is odd in that I look at our self-contained in the morning, and there are quite a few kids that can move out to ICT, there are quite a few that can move out to ICT.

They could function, and it would expose them more to a larger group.

Clearly, teachers either already were or became aware of the stigmatizing nature of self-contained classrooms, and their inability to meet student needs.

However, teachers also paradoxically pointed to the necessity and benefits of self-contained classrooms as well. Cliff reflected on a few students in his ICT class who had recently been reevaluated to put them into self-contained settings. He recalled:

We have kids in our, we have a couple of kids who are going to possibly move out of our ICT and into self-contained— they need something else … But there are other kids who are so disruptive in an ICT setting that it’s just … I don’t want to say it's impossible, but it makes it very difficult to provide them with what they need for the other kids, because its, its kids constantly disturbing the setting.

It should be noted that Cliff had somewhat of a reputation for struggling with classroom management, and this problematic perspective on needing to segregate kids for teacher convenience is worth putting in that context. Perhaps less troublingly, Norm noted that students are placed at this school with self-contained as their mandated programs, so for that reason, there needed to be a mechanism to reassess and begin to move students into settings that better support their needs, be they more or less restrictive. He commented:

Alot of kids that come in the sixth grade into a self-contained, so you don't really have a picture on them or really an understanding. You can look at an IEP, but you
can only get so much from an IEP with a student. It gives you their levels and 
maybe some behaviors, but you don't really read the kid well. I think that there is 
room for those self-contained kids in the beginning of the year to stay in that self-
contained and get an idea of where they're at. Get your own sense of what it's 
going to be because sometimes the jump from elementary to middle school is huge 
for some of those kids so it's a lot for them. There is room for those self-contained 
students to be able to jump to an inclusive situation and the same vice-versa where 
you notice that a kid's struggling in the ICT.

Additionally, Sam remarked on the value of smaller class sizes, and how that benefits all students, 
as well as the teachers.

One of the things that I think is ... Smaller class size is always ... I think that is one 
of the first priorities, if there can be smaller class sizes, more attention. Cause I 
have so many kids saying, "Mr. Boyd." There are so many kids who want to learn. 
They want more time. They need more time. So, I have so many kids saying, "Mr. 
Boyd, Mr. Boyd." There's not enough ME’s in the room. I know people know that.

Norm expressed a similar sentiment about how some kids really do profoundly benefit from a 
smaller class size. He importantly draws a distinction between using that smaller class size as a 
supportive academic environment versus a more tightly controlled setting for students displaying 
difficult behaviors. He commented that, “… self-contained is maybe good for some kids, but 
maybe not behaviorally, they just couldn’t when we have a whole group thing, they just can’t 
function with 35 kids in there, so they might just need a smaller setting.” During Norm’s 
summative interview, I challenged him on this point by asking him to give an example of a 
situation in which a student benefitted from being in a self-contained setting. In his response, he
told the story of a student with academic difficulties who had really struggled in her ICT setting, whom he believed to be thriving in self-contained now:

One of the girls from our class, [student name], jumped from ICT to self-contained. What we found when we were working the ICT, we would have times where there's mini-lessons on the board or we're working that the focus wasn't quite there. Even if you went over, it was almost like she ... I don't know if this was more of her disability, the way she was and maybe not classified the correct way because all the stuff that we had seen wasn't necessarily on the IEP where she was ... I'd come over and she almost ... It's almost like she'd say "Hello", like she didn't realize why I was coming over to check on her work. When you give her time to do some work, it'd get done but at a much slower pace and unable to keep up with the work. So when she's with the self-contained right now, she's actually improved on being able to stay on task. With the group it's a little smaller room, not as many distractions with the other kids and then she can focus like join the conversation in there. She's actually like one of the higher performing in there now.

Importantly, in the end, teachers talked about how they could advocate and act to include students in self-contained settings. Joey discussed the importance of creating the expectation for those classes that they transition to more and more inclusive settings over their time at the school, so that they do not face the same exclusion in high school:

I think it needs to change for those kids [in self-contained classes], right. I have the example. I have a kid that's in one of those classes, coming up just for math, and he functions absolutely fine. He's fine. He needs a teacher who can guide him, like me, and talk to him nicely, and model, and do all these good things, and the child
func ... [student name] functions fine. I mean, there are several kids in there that function fine. Why are they ... Maybe ... So if they can, we need to ... This is going to answer it quicker, they might need to be mainstreamed, or put in with ICT, next level up, so that they feel like, "Wow, this is ..." and you get them accustomed. And then when they go to high school maybe from here, then they could be in a regular class, just will have an IEP with whatever criteria they have set over there. So it should be like a ladder.

Diane revealed in her summative interview that there had been shifts in the way that the teachers advocated for students to progress out of self-contained settings in special education department meetings. She commented:

Yeah! It's amazing. It's really what they needed and even talking in our SPED meeting about what to do and what to do about them, I say to them, this is what we do and this is what we’ve been doing, and with the idea of the what next, we have these kids in here and we should be saying “what’s next for you? You’re coming back next year and you’re not going to be in [self-contained], you shouldn’t be. This is — your goal should be ICT and then general ed and then out.” so this is the part that I love most is the “what next” and what we should be — and I sincerely feel strongly about that because even [student name], he’s just eager to go.

**Compliance and Implementation**

MS 2222 and its special education department perennially face a number of difficult challenges, many of which seem at odds with each other and with inclusion as the teachers had

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12 I am concerned that direct quotations from teachers and administrators in this context could adversely affect the participants as well as other parties that did not sign informed consent. For that reason, I have opted to describe what happened here as my own observations. In order to confirm that what was said in this section was accurate, I have engaged participants in conducting member checks.
envisioned. While it may be argued that compliance with federal law (IDEia, in particular) and related federal, state, and city regulations is a reasonable paradigm for ensuring the civil rights of students with disabilities, in this case I assert that compliance thinking worked against inclusive change. From the outset it seemed to me to be quite clear that compliance was the primary paradigm for undertaking work in the special education department, as I expressed in my field notes concerns that the PD project would not receive adequate support from the administration, despite their professed commitment to inclusion because it was not directly linked to a specific compliance issue. As the project went along, I made several notes that compliance with regulations, especially relatively meaningless ones to students (whether or not IEPs were written within 10 days of due date, for example), was the solitary focus of the special education department at the school. Importantly, compliance issues that I would assert do matter to students were not prioritized, such as having a certified special education teacher as one of the co-teachers in an ICT setting.

This emphasis on compliance is maintained through another form of behaviorist policy, namely external contingent funding that is withheld for non-compliance (if IEPs are completed late, for example). This narrow attention to few things ensured external control over special education systems within the school. These funding mechanisms were further brought to bear, inhibiting the school’s ability to create ICT classes because funding for special education teachers in ICT settings was provided by the district, as opposed to by the school. Therefore, there was a massive financial disincentive for the school to close self-contained classrooms and transition students into more inclusive settings. In addition to miscommunications between district administrators (that probably were inevitable), school administrators, and teachers, the fact that the self-contained classrooms remained in place frustrated the teachers who had known of the
Promoting Inclusion in a “Struggling” School

plans to eliminate them. The end result was that the school had admitted too many 6th graders with IEPs for the one ICT class to handle, and consequently students were moved into segregated self-contained classes in order to resolve the compliance issue (40:60 ratio of students without IEPs to students with IEPs) that mattered to the district.

This frustration was evident in special education teacher meetings in which compliance activities were at the forefront. Many involved reviewing IEPs, not for accuracy and fidelity, but rather for terminology preferred by the district, adhering to medicalized understandings of dis/ability. It was said that Behavior Intervention Plans needed to be done, but the contents of those important behavioral supports were seemingly immaterial. It was clear to me in these notes that the reactions that the teachers had during these activities, namely grading papers, having side conversations with one another, that compliance was perfunctory and did not engage their reasons for wanting to teach. In some meetings, teachers discussed student needs in what I can only describe as wildly inappropriate and deeply problematic ways. Teachers engagement levels in these special education department meetings stood in stark contrast to the high levels of collegiality and engagement that I saw from the same teachers when asked to think critically about inclusion.

Further, because of the compliance-funding connection, the continuum of available programs for meeting student needs was not fully available to students in this school. In particular this is true of SETSS, one of the least restrictive placement options for students with IEPs in the district, as it is the one that yields the smallest amount of per-student funding per child. The few students who are in SETSS were often given only a few periods of academic support per week, and even that was contingent on the general education teacher’s willingness to “let them go” to a classroom in an isolated corner of the school to get specialized instruction separate from their
general education counterparts. Neither teachers nor administrators were even aware that SETSS services were allowed, by regulation, to be delivered by special education teachers supporting general education teachers directly. Consequently, many students who had SETSS placements had been moved to more restrictive settings in recent years, because of the inadequacy of the SETSS programs.

Fortunately, this is where there is some positive change in the narrative. Spurred by new, critical understandings of the shortcomings of the special education structures at this school, teachers now believed it would be possible to shift all of the programs toward inclusivity. Indeed, these understandings of program implementation that were grounded in an ethical rationale for change underlie the recommendation report’s advocacy for development of SETSS services at the school (Appendix D). Perhaps Rebecca put it best:

We need to change SETSS, the way we do it, we need to change the ICT program, and [self-contained]. We have to change these programs because they don’t have a goal. They’re one standing alone, each one.

**Reflection on Limitations – Falling Short of Anti-Racism and Anti-Ableism**

While understandings of urban-suburban differences in special education conception and delivery could be understood as coded talk about race, explicit conversations about racism were absent from this work. On the one hand, it was because a lack of awareness of institutionalized racism from the White teachers – my belief is that they understand racism as simply an individual process, without necessarily having robust understandings of how policies sustain disparate outcomes. As such, I suspect that they understand racism as simply an individual process, with people either being racist or not racist. I base these assertions on my own problematic prior beliefs as an urban teacher, as a consumer of racist ideas (Kendi, 2014), though admittedly this remains
an otherwise unsubstantiated claim. Nevertheless, on several occasions, I turned to the structural, pontificating about racial segregation in schools in New York and the concentration of poverty in the neighborhood of the school, and while I did not face explicit resistance from the White teachers, I made note of their discomfort. On the other hand, the two women of color teachers in the group also privately expressed fatigue about constantly talking about racism in their graduate classes. Both Carla and Rebecca expressed frustration with having to talk about race all the time in their alternative certification program, especially in groups of colleagues with distinctly limited awareness of race and racism. In my field notes, I recollected how they resented being called “color-blind” by White colleagues and instructors because of their beliefs that all students should be treated equally. With the exception of one moment in which there was an acknowledgement that the only White people in the neighborhood were cops and teachers, conversations about race or racism did not organically arise. After that conversation, I made the following comment in my field notes:

I think there’s more to unpack there about how the teachers understand whiteness in this context, especially as a marker for Black/Brown hatred, but I also feel like those feelings are unclear. It's almost as if the White teachers think that the Black/Brown kids hate them for being White, mirroring the White man persecution complex that led to Trump’s election.

In my estimation, this is a significant shortcoming of this project that must be addressed in future iterations. Similarly, this project did not explore institutionalized ableism in sufficient ways. Without promoting strong teacher understandings of inclusive as both anti-ableist and anti-racist work, this project has room to grow.
Inclusion Is A Vehicle for Improving General Education

The concept of improving general education through inclusive change entails recognizing that many general education settings are unable to meet the educational needs of students without identified disabilities. Given the ways in which dis/ability is constructed alongside and at the intersections of race and gender (primarily perhaps, but certainly among other things), understanding inclusion as a broader educational improvement mechanism recognizes that general education settings are rarely well equipped to support the needs of diverse students, including those without disabilities. However, this must be done without obscuring the unique needs of students with disabilities, whose segregated placements are upheld by policy and research alike. As Lipsky and Gartner put it, this is not a “restructuring for some students” (1997, p. 215), but a broader “reform in general education philosophy and practice” (p. 225) as well. In this project, teachers came to understandings of inclusion as a vehicle for improving general education in discussions of the “fuzzy line” distinguishing the learning needs of students with and without IEPs as well as in their expressions that the work of this project would have a “ripple effect” across all classrooms in the school.

“Fuzzy Line”

Teachers came to understand inclusion as improvement in general education classes by noting that the needs of students with and without IEP’s were not always clearly different. Teachers rejected the false dichotomy of special and general education student in their classes, instead focusing on common learning needs. In the early discover phase, Cliff remarked that the students in his ICT classes were not that different from each other, and that, in practice, the distinctions between the needs of students with and without IEPs was not always clear. He commented:
I tend to think of it as a 40-60 split in the classroom, so if it's like there’s a hard and fast line the number of kids that have IEP’s, kids who don’t have IEPs. But actually, that line is not at all clear. It's a fuzzy line and there’s all kinds of circumstances, all kinds of different days. Different days, this kid needs an IEP and other days they don’t...Ideally, every kid would have an IEP. Ideally every kid would have a plan that was catered just to him.

He went on to comment that, even with the focus on collecting and designing instruction based on data, that there was not always a clear distinction between students with and without IEPs, remarking:

I was just going to say that it's more last year and this year were doing data-driven differentiation. So we’re taking tests, homeworks, exit tickets, things like that and using them to split kids up. So, yeah, we’re aware of who’s an IEP kid, who’s a general ed kid but that distinction gets a little mixed because we’re working off of what they’re learning now--who’s getting it, who’s not getting it. Sometimes it breaks down that way, sometimes it doesn’t, but we’re working off of current data that we have.

Given the common needs of students and “fuzzy line” distinguishing students with and without IEP’s, Rebecca questioned the value of the IEP itself:

That leads me to think really what is the need of the IEP? Because sometimes, what are the criteria to be on an IEP? Because some of the kids [shaking head] general ed kids act up just the same as the others, their grade might be low, they might not focus, so why are they not on IEPs? So I’m beginning to wonder, what is the criteria? There are no criteria.
In the summative focus group, Rebecca further reflected on how the IEP label may be a distraction, leading her to ignore the significant learning needs of students without IEPs, writing that “as a Special Education teacher, I see how much I can unintentionally neglect my general education students. I sometimes I forget that the general education students may need some form of scaffolding and they also have needs. Diane echoed this line of thinking in her summative interview as well, noting that the educational needs of many students could be met by using strategies typically thought of as specialized for all students. She said, “What helps a kid [in special education] will help a kid anywhere else. Regardless if they need it or not, it will help them.”

“Ripple Effect”

Teachers discussed how this project could improve general education by expanding the range of academic supports that they described in their posters throughout the school. Even before the group had the opportunity to share their findings in a more formal setting, some teachers had begun to share the teaching strategies that we had developed outside of the PD session. In my field notes during the design phase, I made notes of a conversation with Rebecca in which she told me about how the conversations from our PD sessions were spilling into other classrooms as she shared our work with other teachers. Importantly, she discussed how the techniques that we were then developing were consonant with the styles of those who she considered mentors. However, most of the teachers’ discussions of outward ripples took place after the final poster session. During that final session, the teachers shared their posters with the other teachers at the school. As mentioned in chapter 5, these posters were remarkably well received. As Sam put it in the summative focus group:
In regard to the school as a whole, I think we are waiting for the "ripple-effect" to take hold. I am optimistic given how receptive and enthusiastic the faculty at large were in response to our research presentations at the Holiday Party.

He continued in the summative interview, describing how many of the teachers seemed to find value in the techniques presented, writing:

[my colleagues] reacted positively to [the poster presentation]. I think they recognized the importance of choice. They understood how choice is something that increases student engagement and student empowerment, really. It's really about buy-in. It's about empowerment, buy-in. They recognize that. I'm sure many of them have had experiences in their classrooms when they've experimented with choice that that can help. Also, the fact that it was active. The students were able to move. They were able to express themselves artistically in a math class. They all appreciated that. It seemed like it was a positive reception.

This was echoed in my own interactions with teachers, in which a few approached me to tell me that they wanted to participate in future versions of the project. The special education coordinator, told me she was happy that the findings were framed as techniques that could benefit all students, and not just “SPED things.” In the days after the PD, teachers from the action research team were approached to share what they had learned, so that their techniques might benefit a larger group of students. Carla recounted how the presentations spurred interest amongst her peers in trying new things to meet student needs:

I think after our PD, where we presented our posters, Miss [teacher name], who I work with in science, she's actually like, "We need to start planning more, so that we can make things more hands on, give them more choice," and so that's what
we're gonna work on. Instead of ... starting a unit on test prep, which we start really early in the year, we're gonna do a unit where the kids can actually do fun activities as opposed to read from a book, or just listen to us talk. So, I think that it's helping me and Sam, and it's also helping other teachers in the school be more aware of what works with these kids.

Teachers also wished that they had more time to share their findings with colleagues. They were hopeful that greater sharing of the techniques and the ethical rationale that they were grounded in could result in deep changes in the school’s culture. Rebecca commented on her peers’ reception of the techniques:

I think they responded well, and I think they had—we needed some more time. We only have three minutes at a time ’cause there was so much more to explain about it. We got some really good feedback, and people were willing to know more about it, and would like to try it.

Reflection on Limitations – Potential to Obscure Less Common Needs

This project is also limited in that its emphasis on common student learning needs may obscure less common/unique student needs, whether they arise from dis/ability or something else. On the one hand, the logic of what will benefit students with IEPs will also likely benefit students without disabilities is generally good, particularly given the ambiguity of the label in the context of this particular school. However, such ideas could potentially obfuscate the less common needs of some students, especially those considered to have more “severe” disabilities. Such students may have learning needs that are not common among their peers, and it is possible that those needs could require specially designed instruction. However, in the cases of the students that these teachers described, there was only one student discussed who might fit that profile, and even
then, Norm acknowledged that in a suburban context, she would likely still be educated in a general education setting with more embedded supports.

**Inclusion Is A Community Endeavor**

Understandings of inclusion as a community endeavor necessarily involve recognition that inclusion is not a thing that can happen in a single isolated classroom. Understandings of inclusion involve recognizing how inclusivity exists within partnerships, groups, organizations, and policy structures, as well as across different frames of an organization such as structural, symbolic, political, and human resources (Bolman & Deal, 2011). In this project, teachers talked about how inclusive collaborations with their co-teaching partners developed, as well as how the action research group itself created a new community of inclusive practice.

**Co-Teaching Relationships**

Teachers came to experience shifts in their inclusive practices by strengthening relationships with co-teachers. ICT, like many models for inclusive education, relies on two teachers coordinating their efforts in order to meet student needs. In New York City it is required for one teacher to be certified in special education and the other to be certified the general education content area; however, as noted under compliance and implementation, the rules that mandate the composition of these pairings is not always followed or enforced. Moreover, these relationships are often asymmetrical, with the special education teacher playing a subservient role to that of the general education teacher (Valle & Connor, 2010). As one might anticipate from this, some teachers described great relationships with their colleagues, whereas others noted difficulties in working with another teacher. Carla described one positive relationship with a co-teacher who also served as a mentor to her in her first year of teaching. This mentor reaffirmed
Carla’s commitment to teaching, and encouraged her to stay, arguing that leaving the school would do a disservice to the students:

I do, well, I have ... My mentor is Ms. [teacher name], who I worked with ... I was an ICT teacher with her last year, and she's amazing. And she hears me out on things like this. It's not just like, “Oh, how are your lessons going?” If I am having a terrible day, I can sit there and tell her, “This is what happened,” and whatever, and she's really good. So she really helps me, and I do have a really good connection with her, and she's actually part of the reason why initially last year I was like, “Oh, I can do the five years,” because she kind of told me. She's like, “You're pretty much learning off of these kids, and to leave, just get your thing done and leave, it's a disservice to them,” or whatever.

Another example of a positive co-teaching relationship was that between Norm and Lilith, who students sometimes called Mom and Dad. Lilith described how this relationship led to a family feeling, for better and for worse:

The [8th Grade ICT] class this year was definitely like [a family], because they had Norm and I for two years. So there was a good and bad, like they tried to play us off of each other like parents.

Not all co-teaching relationships were so positive to start, though. Carla described difficulties working with some of her co-teachers because time was not allocated within the school day for teachers to collaborate, combined with her long commute, saying:

But I also feel like it's so hard to collaborate with my co-teachers sometimes, because we don't have ... It's either you stay, and you stay late, and half the time because of my commute, I want to run out of here at the end of the day, so it's like
what ... You know what I mean? Like what wins? Do you get home early or do you get home four hours later? So it's hard to collaborate so much with her, so it's like five minutes in the morning. What are we doing today? Okay. So then it's hard for me to provide accommodations for my special ed kids, because I need to actually look at the lesson. I need to see the PowerPoint and see what activities they're doing, so I think that that's why it's difficult when people say, "Oh, we'll just work together," or ICT is such an amazing thing. Ideally, it would be an amazing thing, because there's two teachers in the classroom, but it's so hard to manage.

There is reason to think that the less ideal co-teaching relationships were common among this group. In my field notes, I recollect how in Cliff’s classes with both Norm and Joey, he played a diminished role, probably by design. Early observations of Carla and Sam’s classrooms similarly led me to believe that their partnership was not symmetrical, with Carla taking a more passive role in delivering lessons. For Diane and Rebecca, the learning curve of being new teachers and having graduate classes after work, along with having at least two other co-teaching partnerships each meant that their efforts were not at all coordinated at the beginning of the project.

Nevertheless, I witnessed a shift. During our PD sessions, Diane and Rebecca engaged in deep discussions about student needs and proficiencies, as well as how their lessons, despite still being led by Diane, could be more closely tailored to student needs. Carla and Sam often stayed after school to discuss plans, especially in designing projects for their students, given the success of their technique. I do not know that Joey and Cliff experienced a significant shift in their co-teaching practices, especially given Joey’s responsibilities to the disciplinary team at the school, but whenever I saw Norm at school, Cliff was typically with him, often sharing a plan for an
upcoming math lesson. In her summative interview, Lilith expressed the importance of collaborating with co-teachers in order to realize the potential of inclusion:

I think it [meaningful inclusion] is possible, but I think it takes a lot of planning and collaboration. And I think that definitely time needs to be built in for that. I think it would work if both the teachers were on the same page, both teachers had the same role in a class. So one is not looking more like a para and one looks more like teacher. Because the kids definitely pick up on that.

Inquiry Community

This project also yielded important findings about how a collaborative community for inclusion could be created through action research. In the summative focus group, Diane wrote about how this project went beyond supporting co-teaching relationships and opened new lines of communication about teaching among the group members, “By opening up discussion with my co-teacher and other members in this group, we were able to find different teaching strategies that work for us and benefit our students.” Lilith agreed:

I have talked more with the teachers in this group about their practices, and what is working and not working for them or myself, as well as figuring out how to change our practices, and sharing what works well for us and what did not.

Joey explained in his summative interview how having conversations within the community of the action research group has made him see the need for changes in the routine practices of the school, stating:

When we have conversations like this, it opens up your mind, it opens up the box, think outside the box. If I were to become a principal five, ten years ago, I may have done and kept everything exactly the same, because that was the norm in my
Sam described how working together to discuss inclusion resulted in an authentic vision that tied in existing practices. He said:

This was a very good PD. This was very good. It was like teacher-centered. The realizations were generated out of discussions that we all had together. I liked your focus on, well, let's take what you're doing well and grow that. So, it was organic in a sense. Even our project, the poster project, wasn't even something that we all talked about beforehand. We had talked about wanting to offer choice, wanting to offer variation in assessment. And then me and Carla kinda went ahead with the posters and it really went off well and we said, "Hey, this is a great example of working on inclusion in the classroom." So, it's something I kinda think happened organically, and then it was able to be part of the research and the final product.

Several teachers compared this action research project to their usual PD’s, saying that they were going to miss our work together, and that they were not looking forward to going back to the regular PD, in which new acronyms were introduced every week, which they said was frustrating. Nevertheless, Rebecca talked about the hope that she had gathered that things could change as a result of this project:

Going through this project, it gave me a little more hope that at least someone is seeing it, and someone is making an effort to make changes, and I do appreciate the administration here for just even seeing that there is a need for change, so that makes me feel positive, and feel like I would continue teaching in this school.
Reflection on Limitations – Inability to Spur Structural Changes

While I think this project was generally successful in shifting teacher beliefs and practices towards inclusion, structural changes did not necessarily follow. In other words, this project successfully addressed the human resources and symbolic frames of the organization, but not the political or structural frames. Bolman and Deal (2011) describe how the human resource frame and symbolic frames encompass features of organizations such as how individuals relate to one another within an organization and how they make sense of their work. In these respects, I think there is evidence of significant positive change within this school. However, the structural frame, which involves logistical and functional features of the organization like schedules, job descriptions, and the like, remained firmly within the control of the administrators of the school. Even though there were robust recommendations issued by the action research team, they remained unutilized, and were easily ignored by the administration once institutional priorities shifted. Similarly, there remains significant opportunity to improve the outcomes that may arise from future projects by addressing internal political elements more actively and tactfully.

Inclusion Is A Pedagogical Stance

Inclusive pedagogy entails developing understandings of how learning needs can be met through a range of supports and opportunities that are made available to all students. Critical features of inclusive pedagogy are the recognition of learning as a contextual interaction, the interdependence of affect, and the development of expert learners. In conceiving this project, I had envisioned Universal Design for Learning at the center of it, as I believe it is the most complete framework for inclusive pedagogy, though it is limited in the ways that it understands culture. In this action research project, teachers came to significantly reenvision their pedagogy across several domains (a) with respect to how assessment and feedback is done; (b) with respect
to balancing freedom and structure; (c) with respect to Universal Design for Learning and its concept of expert learners (d) the importance of emotions in learning; and finally (e) with respect to how they came to view themselves as expert learners as well.

**Assessment and Feedback**

Traditionally, assessment has been seen in special education as a process akin to medical diagnosing (Valle & Connor, 2010), wherein professionals trained in the application and use of metrics use them to measure student deficits that then can be remedied through special education. However, in this project teachers came to question the value of those formalized metrics in constructing meaning about their students. In his summative interview, Cliff reflected on how the metrics used in IEPs do not provide a great deal of insight into student learning, especially for students who are changing and growing. In response to my question about whether or not IEPs help him teach his students, he replied:

I haven't ... I would say no. Except for the shorthand stuff like, "Requires additional time," things like that. That gives me some insight into how they're processing, assuming that that's right. So that helps me teach. But actually reading how they're performing in division, how they're performing in multiplication last year, I can see that this year what they're doing.

Teachers also questioned the value of state test scores as ways of making sense of student proficiencies. Lilith recalled wide inconsistencies in how tests were scored among teachers assigned to grading:

I wasn’t thinking about just the scores, I think the scores are just so skewed...like, it’s subjective, I scored before and it's like “eh, it's a special ed class and they tried, so...” you know what I mean? They train us, but not well, I guess, and I feel like,
as a teacher, there are some teachers who grade really hard, and I don’t, so I’m sure my scores [shrugs]. It’s one day, like if you have a bad day or it can just be a terrible test.

In contrast, the PD provided insights into new, richer sources of information about what and how students were learning that were useful to the teachers in planning. Diane described how the strategy that she developed in her poster with Rebecca yielded fresh information that could not be gained from the old ways that they were using to assess student classwork, reflecting:

It's also just easier to assess them on their classwork now, because instead of the messy notebook where it would take 15 minutes just to write a do now because they didn’t want to, so with the packets we basically eliminated, almost, not all writing, but they’re filling in a word for the definition instead of writing the definition, and they have no excuse for like “I don’t know what page it was on” or “this is 50 pages in front of what I did last time.” So it's easier for us to take that and say “there are 5 pages done and it's all right, instead of me looking at the notebook like “I have no idea what this is, I couldn’t tell you”

Insights about student performance were now used to create flexible groupings for students based on short-term appraisals of their knowledge, not based on once-yearly state test scores. Norm described how this approach also yielded a higher degree of engagement, noting:

So everyone is doing the same thing to start, and then I break them off, so I feel like, that feels like alot of kids are engaged into it, they’re like “oh, I have to be involved in this lesson” it's not just straight to groups “oh, I’m in the low group, I’m in the middle group, I’m in the high group,” it's like okay boom, now we’re going over here, and even today, I was nervous about telling the kids why they
were in the groups. Because alot of kids, if they hear they got something wrong, they’re going to shut down. But they were actually intrigued today. Like “guys, I noticed that you didn’t organize your facts, or it was really sloppy and that’s what I was looking for.” “Oh man, whoops, I forgot! I’m sorry” or whatever, and they went right to it, so I felt like, they were able to talk to their work, a little more like why they’re in certain groups. Even just telling them why group work is a big thing, telling them why they’re in it, but they did legitimately try to do what they realized they didn’t do today. This was new to me basically today too, but I did find that it worked today.

This integration of assessment and feedback into the lesson was something that teachers thought they could further involve students in. Cliff talked about how he gained insights from Norm’s self-assessment practices:

This self-assessment is something I really picked up from your [Norm] classroom. You give them the formative, er, summative assessment at the end of a module, then you record their answers but you give it back unmarked and you go through the answers and they mark their own paper, then you give them a reflection — how did I do on the test. One other thing I thought we could do there is have a red, yellow, and green folder in there, and have an exit ticket and they can put it in the red yellow and green as their self-assessment and how they think they did.

Sam described how the project-based assessment that was the core of their technique yielded helpful information on foundational skills. He talked about how this process of looking closer at student work to learn about how and why students need support expanded his understanding of what assessment is, stating that “One thing that Carla identified with [student name] was that he
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did his coordinate grid incorrectly. So right there, that’s an indication that hey, this is an assessment right there.” In turn, these understandings about assessment drove rich conversations about feedback. Below, a conversation between Sam, Carla, and me shows new understandings of how feedback is integral to the learning process by recognizing effort while also not reinforcing misconceptions. They also exhibit a departure from binary right-wrong thinking about student responses, into using assessments to learn about students, and using feedback to correct mistakes.

Carla: We shouldn’t hang the [student projects] that are wrong?

Louis: What do you think?

Sam: I think that if they made their best effort, and it has elements of success it’s okay to hang it if there is an error in there.

Louis: But there is a tension there because you also don’t want to hang stuff that’s incorrect.

Sam: Right. Some people would look to model incorrectly.

Louis: So think about how you can make it correct through feedback…

Carla: Because she really did work on it. These are two of my IEP kids— the only two that didn’t do it correctly.

Louis: So what were they trying to do with this one?

Carla: I don’t know. [laughter] it seems like they were trying to do a...

Louis: So it’s the same size—

Carla: What did they do here, Mr. Boyd? It depends.

Louis: It’s the same size and the same shape.

Carla: So it’s congruent. But it doesn’t tell us— this is off. Their grid is wrong...
Sam: I think they were trying to do a 180-degree rotation here, but they mislabeled. [crosstalk] so this would have been C, they mislabeled it. This would be C, this would be A, this would be B. So one, they mislabeled it, the corresponding points, and then—

Carla: So, it’s not wrong, then? They just labeled it— the grid’s wrong and they labeled it—

Sam: They need to relabel it. — so this one should be at (-1, 1), here.

Carla: Right. Here.

**Freedom V. Structure**

An important feature of teacher understandings of inclusive pedagogy was understanding the need to balance freedom with classroom structure. Striking a balance is important in any context, but (I would argue) especially so in this middle school where young adolescents are likely feeling restricted by the tight mechanisms of behavioral control that were so deeply imbedded in the school culture. In the beginning, Joey and Lilith discussed their aversion to giving students even modest choices by referring to a colleague’s classroom:

Joey: [pointing to Lilith] you said [teacher name], right? She lets them sit wherever they want.

Lilith: I like break out in hives every single time. [laughter]

Joey: But she says to them when something doesn’t work out, and they are 8th graders, right, so I think my [7th Grade ICT] that next level—one thing because you put it together and I heard you, she goes like this “if you don’t complete your work, or you’re talking, or if whatever reason, your choice is what is hindering you.”
In my field notes from classroom observations, I noted how in Joey and Cliff’s classroom, Joey played the role of classroom manager while Cliff taught on the chalkboard at the front of the room. This reflected the administration’s decision to pair Cliff and Joey because Cliff was “weak” and Joey was “strong” with classroom management. Nevertheless, there were important strengths within that classroom, especially both teachers’ recognition and encouragement of effort in their personal interactions with students. In debriefing the observation, Joey talked about how he understood classroom control as a way of minimizing threats and distractions (which is a UDL-aligned idea), enabling learning to take place:

Louis: So on some level, you’re building community, but the bigger thing seems to be that you’re trying to minimize threats and distractions, right?

Joey: yeah. Distractions.

Louis: ...minimizing the distractions that the students...

Joey: For our room, that’s the number one.

Rebecca, too, described having difficulty giving students freedom in class, saying, “I think they also need structure, and alot of them like the structure...because if you let them go off on their own, it’s kinda… a mess.” Indeed, this may reflect much of the curriculum of alternative certification programs which emphasize controlling classroom behaviors in addition to the reflecting the culture of the school.

Nevertheless, teachers also came to understand that student misbehavior was contextual. During the final destiny phase, Joey reflected on how many students will conform to the way other students in the class act:

If you take a kid in your class, any class, that’s one of those kids who’s constantly poking at you, frustrating you, and you take him and put him in a class where the
majority of the kids are doing work, that kid will eventually join the masses. Just like, the easier way is, you take the kid who does all the work, and you put him in a class where they’re having a party—

In the broader group, there was not ever a consensus reached about where the line between freedom and structure in the classroom should lie. However, it is clear that each negotiated this tension in different ways, with perhaps Rebecca remaining most in the same place, continuing to locate misbehavior in cultural standards. Lilith’s understanding of it as a “kid thing” is also important, drawing upon her own experience as a mother.

Rebecca: But that’s a society thing. I’m puzzled with this where, one minute I’m next to my kids and I’m standing in front of them and they’re quiet, and another teacher, like new teachers come in and they run wild. And I’m like wait a minute, what’s going on with these kids? Is it that they’ve not been trained to respect an adult, no matter what they look like?...

Lilith: I think it's a kid thing. I don’t think it matters.

Joey: especially at middle school.

Lilith: especially at middle school. But I put my son in a pre-k, and there was a sub one day and my babysitter texted me, “it’s like Lord of the Flies in there” ... Kids just know that. And I think that it's the kid, I think it's the subject.

Rebecca: I think it's a culture thing, because I’ve been to other schools where this is the culture— you respect all teachers, you respect all subs, you respect everyone who comes in there that is an adult. Or else.
In the end, Joey described his hopes for students to gain self-regulation skills, which he thought would allow students to earn more freedom in class. Importantly, he also noted how student freedom is a common feature of high-tracked classes:

As we go further into the year, that they're doing it more and more on their own. Where then they could see that we're going to give them the freedom to, "Mr. Pantusso, can I sit next to what-you-ma-call-it, we'll do our work." "Not a problem, go ahead and try it. Because you did this, this, and this, you have the freedom to choose that you're going to sit there. "And at one point the best ... the final result is going to be like, "You guys can get up and move around, or sit wherever you want." But when we get into groups, if they want to stay Homogenous, that's one thing, but if we're working on something, sit wherever you want, help wherever you want, and get your work done. I think that will be the angle. We're not ...

They're doing their work, and I see it in other classes, like in [8th grade high-track class], it happens every day. They come in, "Where do you want to sit, what do you want to do?" And they're happy. So we want to get there.

He also talked about his goals for students to negotiate the space between freedom and structure for themselves and how it relates to their engagement in school work, stating:

The end goal should be for all students to understand how the freedom to choose versus being told what to do is crucial in educational development. They will be more vested in the work they are producing if they can have some freedom in choosing what their possible roles may be.
UDL and Expert Learners

Teachers came to understandings of pedagogy through the lens of UDL’s conception of expert learners, though not necessarily explicitly. Gordon, Meyer, and Rose (2016) describe expert learners as students who embark on the process of learning expertise, therein becoming more strategic, motivated, knowledgeable, and skillful. Interestingly, many of the teachers had some awareness of the term “UDL” but none had deep knowledge of it. Norm recounted, “My entire undergrad they talked about it [UDL], I have like no recollection of it.” Similarly, Rebecca recalled a recent professional development at the school on UDL:

We did a PD [on UDL], and I tried to remember, we did a faculty...we did a special ed PD on it. It's just a different way to teach children with disabilities. I’m trying to remember exactly what the key words were, I’m sorry.

Nevertheless, they developed rudimentary understandings of UDL as a way of providing students with multiple pathways for learning. Rebecca summarized her newfound understanding of UDL, saying, “UDL [is] where you have like multiple opportunities, multiple resources, and that every kid can use and they’re choosing.” In sharing teaching strategies, Norm reflected on the strength of UDL in providing multiple ways to present new information:

I think that’s good too, because you gave them a bunch of different ways. We’re going to look at it in a reading, we’re going to look at in in a movie that we’re watching, we’ll do it in audio, you’re getting the multiple ways, and this kid might get it this way, this kid might get it this way.

The key ideas that undergird UDL were well represented in the teachers’ new understandings of inclusion, especially the idea of expert learners. Early on, Sam described the importance of persistence and his role in supporting students to develop persistence:
I like to help students develop confidence in themselves, that if they work at something, say mathematics, if they put the time in, something that was at first very difficult or something that they were not able to do, if they put the time in and they’re persistent and patient, they see that they can eventually get to the answer. So I think the idea of developing confidence, that if you work hard, and if you are persistent, that you can accomplish more than you believed you could at the start.

But teacher understandings of supporting students to regulate their own needs emerged as a feature of expert learners. Diane described new thinking about student self-regulation and giving students responsibility for their own learning outcomes:

Um, I’ve been thinking a lot about self-regulation and I’ve kinda been wrestling with their responsibility, and I’ve been thinking, am I giving them too much responsibility or am I not giving them any responsibility at all?

Even Norm and Lilith, who had successfully managed to support students in developing pro-learning classroom behaviors, described difficulty in supporting students to display those behaviors across contexts. Norm described how students who are well-behaved with him are “tough” on other teachers:

One other thing we're saying is like behavior from class to class. like that “you're showing it and here you can control it in here, can you control it take the next room” …because they realize that … [8th grade ICT] and we weren't able to, like a lot of them are now really tough.

By the end of the project, they had described their emerging awareness of the need to give students the tools to self-regulate without adult control by fostering leadership among the students in their classes. Lilith reflected:
Well that’s something that I think we’re definitely better at this year, the kids actually taking the ownership instead of you and I going around [to Norm], because we used to have para’s too, we used to have three para’s and two of us, so there were 5 adults...in that [8th Grade ICT] class, so really, you wouldn’t need student leaders, because there were so many adults that needed jobs to do. But now with the two of us, the 30 kids are alot needier than last year’s group, the student leaders have just kinda rose to the top, and we’re kinda telling them “well, ask your table first” which is something I never did in the past.

This reflected bigger thinking about supporting students through scaffolds. Diane expressed new thinking about using rewards as incentives for behavior in her classes, instead hoping to treat students in a more mature manner:

I'm like yeah, but I don't want to give them a snack after every time they answer a question correct. We're in school, we're not in preschool. That's just my personal opinion, it's great if that works for you but I'm not going to do it.

**Emotions and Learning**

Teachers also came to new understandings about emotions and learning. On the most basic level, teachers already had an awareness of how negative emotions, especially fear, should not be present in the classroom. Joey, the strict classroom controller, described this understanding, even early on.

aw, no—Just one other thing - I don’t think people should have the kids fear them. You brought up the word fear. They shouldn’t fear you, they should respect you, and going to the “you have all the freedoms in the world, if you can handle it.” so we do let the kids move around slightly, but it shouldn’t be a fear, they should
recognize that at the end of the day “oh, Mr. Pantusso is here to teach me, or Ms. Chambers, or Mr. Sternin,” and so we shouldn’t be scared, this is not about—we’re here to teach you and we want to help you. And through communication, and I always have conversations with them. We’ll stop class and we’ll talk to them, because we want to explain to them why we’re doing certain things. They shouldn’t be quivering or something like that. They should know why.

Some of these new understandings were fairly basic, such as Rebecca’s understanding of why students misbehave, stating “I know they're bored. That's why they bounce.” For Rebecca and Diane as first year teachers in segregated self-contained settings, these understandings were important as evidence that their strategy supported student learning. In drafts of their poster, they cited emotional engagement as evidence that their small group packet strategy supported their students. They wrote: “Team 1 results: engaged, calm, happier. Better understanding of concept. Not rushed.” Additionally, they noted that, “Having a consistent one-to-one pairing will establish a routine and relationship, which will enable better communication between student and teacher.” Rebecca noted a friendly, more relaxed dynamic within the group of students that she worked with:

What I’m finding with a small group is that the flexibility of I can talk to them at the beginning of class. How’s your weekend, then they’ll throw out some random questions, some off the wall questions, and we talk about the off the wall thing, and then we do our thing back. Let's Do This.

Rebecca and Diane further noted in their poster that students who newly experienced classroom success because of the emotional shift in the classroom, subsequently felt better about themselves, indicating new understandings of the reciprocal relationship between learning and emotions. They
wrote in drafts of their poster that, “The students that were unable to complete all their work on a regular basis were able to complete a piece of work to its entirety. As a result they showed pride and exhibited high self-esteem.” Sam went further, connecting student emotional engagement and success to teacher enjoyment:

What was clear to us is that [our strategy] improved inclusion because two guys that we were not able to get engaged all year, [student name] and [student name] were right on this and participating and working, um, so, as it were, the vast majority of the other students in the class, and there was very little behavior that needed to be managed in class, so they enjoyed it, they were engaged, they had fun, so we’re happy about it.

For Sam, he had long understood the importance of emotions in the classroom but did not realize how central relationships were in cultivating the classroom emotional climate, especially in middle school. In the summative interview, he reflected:

Kind of as a combination of this work together, this seminar together, as well as my first year as a middle school teacher, I’m focusing more on more intimate relationship building with the students. It’s more important to students at the middle school level to have that family feeling. It is important also at the high school level, but it’s more important at this age for them to really feel a part of the class on an emotional level before they’re ready to receive the content. The relationship building is more important in middle school.

Similarly, Carla developed a new awareness of how her actions as a teacher shift the emotional atmosphere of the classroom. She put this in the specific context of her work as a novice special education teacher, shifting from providing accommodations first to putting relationships first.
[This project has] impacted my pedagogy ... it's made me more aware of the teacher moves that I'm making that aren't necessarily, either are very inclusive and trying to include everyone or aren't necessarily inclusive and maybe could exclude some of my students. So I think what I see going forward for myself and then me collaborating with other teachers is ... I think especially with students with disabilities, we focus on, take a look at the IEP, provide accommodation, where we should try to first, we should try to build a relationship with the student so that we get to know them as learners and as individuals, so that we can try to build, accommodate them, and obviously take into consideration their disability. But also still a classroom where they're not being left out.

**Teacher as Expert Learner**

Teachers understandings of themselves as expert learners mirrors UDL’s conception of students as expert learners. Gordon, Meyer, and Rose (2016) describe teachers as expert learners not when they necessarily know more than other teachers, but rather when they commit to continually developing their expertise. In the beginning of the project, teachers talked about difficulty distinguishing between frustrating behaviors that were related to dis/ability and volitional behaviors. Early on, Diane told a story about a conflict with a student:

Well, with the same student today, the same group with me, I kept telling them to sit down, sit down, why are you standing, and he’d be like sorry, and I’d be like no, tell me why you’re up, do you need something? And he didn’t answer and was the whole time like sorry or like [other student] did it, so then before he went into your class, I pulled him aside and was like “is there actually a problem? Or do you feel like you can’t help it?” and he was like “there's a problem with another
student.” And I was like Okay, so if that ever happens you can come talk to one of us about it [Lilith nods], but the way you’re acting is not appropriate. Like that’s not okay behavior just because he’s bothering you, like you can come to us and tell us and we can settle it, but you yelling back at him and just refuting the same exact name, like calling him the same name is kinda like...so it's hard to gauge if they’re doing it because they can’t control it or like somebody's bothering them.

However, over time, teachers came to more sophisticated understandings of students and their actions. For both the new teachers and the general education teachers with limited experience working with students with IEPs, there was a tendency to blame issues on dis/ability that were actually contextual. In my field notes, I reflected on conversations with Sam, in particular, about the misunderstandings he had about special education, having only ever worked with high-tracked classes. I wrote about my impression that his new understandings about how special education serves to exclude students with disabilities reshaped the way that he understood what an IEP was and the purpose that it plays in school.

Teachers also came to new understandings of the role that reflection and adjustment play in their own learning about teaching children. Joey compared my role as an outside consultant to one of a robot mechanic, noting that I was different in that instead of trying to “fix” them myself, I was teaching them to reflect on their own teaching and make adjustments:

That's where you’re getting pushed. The changes in the system — when you’re a robot, you [gesturing to Louis] come in and fix the robot when his arm gets— or oil it up when the arm gets, and we just go back to work, versus, oh, no, the robot doesn’t need you, I’ll unscrew the arm or oil it myself, I’ll know, through reflection, what I need to fix.
Indeed, Carla talked about how this PD gave her a new ability to reflect on her own teaching practices:

I feel like this PD helped me just be aware of the moves that I'm making that may not necessarily be inclusive, or that are inclusive, so definitely helped me to keep it at the forefront. So that I'm always aware of what I'm doing, which makes me really critical of myself, though, because sometimes I get really heated, and I get really impatient with the kids, and so in that moment, I realize like, “Oh my God, that's kind of excluding someone,” or not being inclusive. You know, not making them feel included.

Rebecca commented how this approach made inclusive teaching feel more natural, saying, “I think my teaching style has ... because now I'm not thinking, pushing it into my brain that I need to implement inclusion, it just happens now.”

**Reflection on Limitations – Need to Expand Pedagogical Understandings**

Despite the significant changes in how the teachers came to understand assessment and feedback, the quantitative testing paradigm remained strong, especially for the math teachers. While, on some level, this may not necessarily be a bad thing—quantitative data analysis can certainly be an important part of a teacher’s repertoire of skills—overreliance on quantitative data for individual students can obfuscate who children are and what they need. Because Cliff, in particular, was interested in showing movement in test score data, he was not able to show any “measurable” value to their strategy in the short run. Similarly, the tendency to break down data by who has or does not have an IEP can obfuscate the nature of dis/ability as contextual and complicated. However, this overreliance on problematic quantitative data does not originate in this school and could not be erased by a few months of any project. What is realistic, in terms of
an outcome, is that teachers develop a greater criticality of the value of the data that is an obligatory part of their job. That objective was accomplished.

Relatedly, teachers only gained a basic awareness of the UDL framework itself. Even though the teachers started the section of the poster that aligned their strategies to UDL, I ended up taking a more active role in the drafting of those sections. In her summative interview, Carla even admitted that while she now understood why UDL was a useful set of tools, she did not feel that she had gained mastery of the framework. Future iterations of this project should give teachers physical copies of the checkpoints to keep (in a notebook or on a mousepad, for example) so that they can be more present in teacher’s thinking and planning. That said, I believe that the important part of UDL is understanding why it is useful much more than knowing all of the minutiae associated with it, like the checkpoints themselves. I think these are easily accessed and understood with a bit of effort with existing resources.

This inquiry also was limited in the ways in which it supported teachers’ understandings of the role that culture plays in learning. In this project, I had made a half-attempt to use the food to develop an analogy or common frame that I could leverage in order to have deeper conversations about culture. However, those plans were conceived too late, after the project had begun, and stalled once it came to the point where to bring in food that represented their own cultures. Going forward, I do think that food can be used as a way of developing an introductory frame for understanding what culture is, particularly for White teachers who may believe that they do not have a culture, or that their culture is standard. However, this needs to be extended further, well beyond what Barry Troyna (1983) referred to in the UK as “Sari’s, Samosa’s, and Steel Bands,” which tokenize and commodify culture. Future iterations of this project need to more explicitly address culture in framing inclusion, drawing upon established approaches to teaching,
such as culturally relevant teaching (Gay, 2010), culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017), and cultural reciprocity in special education (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012).

Discussion

This action research project was successful in developing teachers’ understandings of inclusive pedagogy grounded in discourses of civil rights and deep understandings of exclusionary practices that were a result of how special education functioned differently in this urban context than the suburban contexts in which they lived. Through this project, teachers gained critical perspectives on special education and imagined ways in which it might be redesigned such that students with disabilities might not face such profound exclusion. They interrogated the institutionally-created and context-dependent nature of labels and came to new understandings of what their roles in the classroom are.

This project was also successful in supporting teachers’ understandings of their job as advocates for structural changes. In particular, Rebecca’s newfound understanding of her power to move students out of restrictive settings stands out as an important shift. This resonated with the commentaries of several other teachers that students in self-contained classrooms had the capacity to do fine in ICT settings. Indeed, there is good reason to believe that this affected placement decisions in IEP meetings since the beginning of the project13. Similarly, Lilith and Joey’s newfound understandings about how tenure was more than just job security and could be used to both advocate for children and untenured colleagues was important. The bonds between the teachers themselves were strengthened and they were more willing and able to collaborate with each other to develop strategies that could support the learning needs of their students.

13 Though I have to leave this an unsubstantiated claim, as any of the data that I could cite is anecdotal and not able to be confirmed. For example, I have heard that a number of students have been moved into ICT settings from self-contained, but I have not attended IEP meetings or even seen those students in those classes.
While this project was able to shift many features of teachers’ beliefs and practices, there remains a need to develop this model further to include more active anti-racist, anti-ableist, and culturally relevant/sustaining/reciprocal elements. These frameworks should be actively engaged with in the “define” phase of the project as integral elements of inclusive education in urban settings. They should form an explicit part of the design phase, particularly if the posters format endures, as it would be straightforward and simple to ask teachers to reflect on the cultural dimensions of their projects. In that way, understandings about urban-suburban special education differences (as expressed by Norm and Rebecca, for example) could be framed in terms of cultural consonance with respect to how dis/ability is conceived of, as opposed to leaving notions of urban parents as fearful unchallenged.

Future iterations of this project should also have a more robust targeting of organizational change within the structural and political frame. Future iterations should ensure that those in control of formal organizational resources (i.e. schedules, finances, physical space) are actively involved in the process. While including administration in such a project would certainly have its downsides with respect to teachers being willing and able to speak freely, these would likely be offset by increasing the degree to which a similar project might actually spur school-level systems change.

Critical readers may be inclined to believe that many of the changes in teacher dispositions and practices outlined in this chapter were perhaps the incidental byproduct of institutional changes at or above the school level. While attributing change in research is always complicated, I maintain that attributing these changes to changes in confounding variables above the school level would not be reasonable. Quite the opposite, I argue that shifts by the administration of the school, district, and city actually undermined the degree to which these
beliefs and practices were able to take hold. If anything, external pressures pushed the teachers more towards a compliance or technocratic orientation, especially as the external parties neared a decision about whether or not the school would remain in the intense accountability status that it was in at the beginning.

It also might be argued that, since three of the teachers were concurrently attending graduate classes in special education, some of the documented shifts may have originated in those programs. Again, I would argue that this attribution of change is highly unlikely. Carla, Rebecca, and Diane all noted a strong dissonance between what we were discussing in our PD and they were being taught in university coursework. For context, they were all Teach for America (TFA) corps members who attended the RELAY Graduate School of Education, which is by design an expedited certification program that has been criticized for its undervaluing of theory in favor of specific acontextual teacher practices (Mathewson, 2016). Carla described what she earned about inclusion and UDL at RELAY:

The biggest difference [with this PD and RELAY], I think, is that RELAY talks about inclusion and talks about UDL and talks about special ed design instruction, but this is how I see RELAY. I see they just give us definitions. This is what UDL is, here's a one pager on UDL, here's a one pager on SDI [specially designed instruction], here's a one pager on inclusion, here's a one pager on diversity, and it's like ... Just it's vocabulary to me. It's never anything ... Till this day, I talked to Diane, and I talked to the other TFA people that go to RELAY. They have not taught us how to be special educators. So, that's a big challenge for us, because I was in banking and then I got thrown in ... Not thrown in, but like I willingly threw myself into it, and you know, you'd hope that grad school would teach you a thing
or two, but they don't. They just give you packets and then expect you to apply it.

But how, if you've never taught us it? You know?

A critical reader of this might also argue that little to nothing changed at all, and the teachers merely said what they thought I wanted to hear. On some level, there may be some merit to this critique, given the outsized role of performativity in teaching evaluations are (Ball, 2003). It may very well be the case that some early statements by teachers were driven by a desire to say “the right thing.” That said, I do not think that it is reasonable to assume that this was a significant driver of middle or late findings, as our conversations extended beyond our PD sessions. Through those conversations, I came to know number of teachers in the school who were familiar with the work of our team. I assert that those teachers could not have been so interested in the work of our team if it was not so grounded in sincere inquiry. Additionally, throughout the project, there were numerous instances of disagreement and challenging of my ideas, which I do not think would have happened were the teachers just performing PD. Moreover, since the project has ended, I have remained in contact with the teachers in the group. Ultimately, I argue that it would unreasonable to attribute the changes in teacher attitudes and beliefs to wanting to say the right thing.

In the following chapter, I will draw this dissertation to a close, returning to a discussion of the threats to validity identified in chapter 4 (methods), outlining further research that could extend the work of this study, and reflecting on the new narratives created within the school and the possibilities that may still exist for this work in the future.
CHAPTER 7 - CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I will bring this dissertation to a close by reflecting on the value that the project brought to the participants and the school in which it took place, as well as to the field of educational research as a whole. I conclude by identifying future projects that the data collected also may speak to, as well as avenues for further research.

Value to the Participants & School

What distinguishes beneficent fiction from such malignant cousins as racism is that the first never forgets it is a fiction and the other never knows that it is.

-Chinua Achebe (1990)

To me, the most powerful part of this project is also the most mysterious and unanswered part—that is, what new narratives were injected into the school culture and how they will be carried forward. In describing these narratives, I invoke Chinua Achebe’s meditation on fiction as truth (1990), as this project has both uncovered malignant fictions as well as generate new beneficent fictions. Broadly speaking, prevailing fictions of urban schools are ones of decay and damage (Kincheloe, 2010) which locate the particular problems of post-industrial American urbanicity within the populations that experience them instead of the policies, structures, and systems that create and sustain them (Anyon, 1997, 2014). Within special education, a similar dynamic exists, which locates systemic failures to provide equitable opportunities for “non-standard” learners within the bodies and brains of those identified by educational institutions as disabled (Valle & Connor, 2010; Dudley-Marling & Gurn, 2010). For students in urban special education, I argue that both dynamics are at play, often precluding the possibility of understandings student struggles as anything other than ableist or racist.
Through this project, a “third space” (Fox & Fine, 2012) was created, enabling the generation of new fictions about students and the school that counter prevailing ones in this school, even if incompletely. One of the key new fictions was a reframing of student misbehavior as children’s (sometimes futile or misguided) attempts to fulfill their own needs. Out of this, teachers within the group have created a new beneficent fiction, that students do not need to be controlled as much as they need to be supported in developing skills that allow them to find ways to regulate their own needs with the support of peers and adults. The importance of this shift cannot be understated in my estimation, as it is central to developing a pedagogical style that is humanizing and appreciative of the gifts that children bring with them to school, as those gifts are often obfuscated by perceived “bad” behavior. While incomplete in and of itself, I maintain that it is a crucial first step. Another important fiction reimagined the classroom as a family. This beneficent fiction reframed the teacher-student relationship away from the institutionalized fictions of producer-product, warden-inmate, or doctor-patient metaphors. This new fiction pushed teachers towards understandings of teachers as parents, caretakers and providers for children, even if sometimes disciplinarians as well. Finally, a third fiction enabled teachers to make new sense of their students, rejecting technical understandings of people based on flawed psychological measurement. Instead of seeing students as 1’s, 2’s, and 3’s they came to see their students in new, complicated, and humanizing ways.

In organizational scholarship, *sensemaking* refers to the ways in which individuals construct and reconstruct meaning about their lives within an organization such that they are able to make sense of them. This ongoing process is necessarily tied to the world outside of the organization in that the larger fictions and broader paradigms about reality in the wide world are drawn upon order to sort locally observed situations such that they are comprehensible to those
within the organization (Weick, 1993). The value of this project for those in the school who were not part of the project is that now those fictions live inside of the building, posted on the walls, and deeply embedded in the minds of the eight teachers who participated in this project. These narratives were not available to me in my teaching career, and I am proud that they will be available to all of the teachers in the school, even if we cannot know for how long.

But the work was frustrating at times. For me, there was frustration that despite the significant progress made in reimagining special education locally, even the systems within the control of the principal were not adequately changed. Neoliberal measurement schemes and behaviorist control mechanisms are deeply entrenched in the systems that created this school’s current predicaments, just as technocracy in special education systems continue to prefer addressing compliance instead of the learning needs of students. Political shifts at all levels—national, state, city, district, and school—work mostly out of concert with one another, making change incredibly difficult, as described in Chapter 1. Nevertheless, this frustration is was not unforeseen. I knew that there would be limits on what this project could address, and it while it did address teacher beliefs and practices effectively, what I was unable to foresee was the specific nature of the obstacles beyond. Now, I know a great deal more about promoting school-level inclusive change, which gives me heart to try again. Next time, there will similarly be obstacles, but nobody who has done significant work in schools should be surprised that change is hard. These racist and ableist systems were designed to exclude children from opportunity, and the work ahead to reimagine, remove, and reinvent them by design will not be easy, by design.

**Value to Educational Research**

This dissertation never primarily intended to address a “gap” in the existing literature, per se. In Europe and elsewhere, teacher collaborative inquiry of has widely been used to promote
inclusion (for example, Messiou et al., 2016; Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2004). Nevertheless, the ways in which teacher action research and collaborative inquiry have been used in this country have been limited by their adherence to problematic understandings of achievement through test scores, employment of medicalized understandings of dis/ability and inclusive education, omission of participants in program design, and even the ways in which they have served neoliberal profitmaking from the education sector, as described in Chapter 3. In that sense, the significance of this project is in translating that which has already been known to be helpful in other contexts into urban education by applying new theories of change.

This translation was not a simple application of the ideas of non-US scholars here, either. The methods employed in this project were a combination of critical participatory action research methods for transformation, appreciative inquiry methods for organizational development, and case study methods for program evaluation, drawing upon a wide range of validity, reliability, authenticity, and trustworthiness criteria in the design of the project (as described in Chapter 4). Further, the project itself employed quantitative and qualitative approaches to data collection and analysis to orient the tools of research towards change (as described in Chapters 5 and 6).

Ultimately, this *bricolage* of methods spanned disciplines, paradigms, and approaches in order to embrace the complexity of educational research specific to this context (Kincheloe, 2001). This project’s affirmatively asset-oriented approach, proactive theory of change, and embrace of subjective messiness represent novel developments in combination with one another. Ultimately, they proved powerful in changing teacher beliefs and practices, and could potentially be even more powerful in shifting structures in future work. I remain committed to this work and there will be future versions of it in some shape and form that I do believe will have deeper effects than this first attempt to use these tools in service of inclusion.
Potential Future Projects Arising from This Data

There are a number of avenues that the data gathered for this project could be analyzed more inductively in order to describe the context of this school and urban special/inclusive education further. I will briefly enumerate and develop a few threads which emerged from the data during analysis but were not discussed at any length.

“The Three Amigos”: Three Black Boys in Special Education

Once this school found that I had some degree of expertise in supporting students with difficult behaviors, they immediately wanted to me to work with three Black boys who were all isolated in a self-contained setting, gaining their class a reputation of being the “worst” in the school. The needs of those three boys each had very different learning needs, social backgrounds, language proficiencies, and academic strengths that were entirely obfuscated once they were pushed to the side and grouped alongside one another in that segregated class. I believe I have enough qualitative data from teacher utterances and my own field notes to describe how their placement in a self-contained classroom resulted in them being inscribed as ineducable and denied them an education comparable to their peers in the school, much less other twelve-year-old’s in America. This would look at these boys’ experiences through the lens of their teachers and administrators, and as such would be limited, as it would be far better in a sense to see the world through their eyes. Nevertheless, those perspectives would allow an intersectional approach that illuminates how racist and ableist oppression that is mediated by their schools, not their personalities or identities, worked to deny them educational opportunities. The story is not all grim, though, as Rebecca and Diane’s shifts in their beliefs about students and their own pedagogical growth fostered through this project led to very different classroom interactions with them, as well as one of the three boys being reprogrammed into a more inclusive setting.
What do the Test Scores Measure?: Trusting Data in Teacher Action Research

During the *discover* phase, teachers designed a mixed-methods study of their students that informed their action research into teaching methods for inclusive classrooms. They deftly negotiated their priorities and institutional pressures in conversations about the types of data that should be collected as well as how the findings should be communicated, such that they had an impact on students. Additionally, there was a moment in which the inquiry team was looking at state test data right next to the qualitative and quantitative data from an inquiry of students’ perceptions about inclusion. This juxtaposition of data types and quality led to a discussion of what data can be *trusted* to speak to who students are, especially when informing instruction. Broadly speaking, the teachers trusted the mixed-methods interview and survey data (even when they had sharp criticisms of it) in a very different way than they did the state test data, whereas the test data was criticized in terms of reliability, validity, and impact on students.

**PD in Inclusive Education as Identity Work**

At various points in the project, the ways in which teachers constructed their professional identities with respect to students with disabilities bubbled to the surface. Broadly speaking, there were teachers who had not conceived of themselves or their work as supporting students with IEP’s as well as those who thought of themselves as having little responsibility for general education students. This false dichotomy was broken down through the action research project, by illuminating common underlying learning needs for students with and without disabilities alike. Ultimately, teachers came to problematize the ways in which the dis/ability designations were constructed as well as expand the scope of who they imagined “their” students to be.
What is RtI?: A Response to Confusion

Response to Intervention (RtI) is an instructional framework for meeting the needs of a diverse student body by creating tiers of intervention and support. Perhaps as a reaction to calls for improvement in the identification and evaluation processes for special education, RtI was developed by special education traditionalists. Advocates for substantial change in the field of special education have criticized its atheoretical and ahistorical approach (Ferri, 2015), just as studies commissioned by the US Department of Education has found that it has hurt students’ reading progress (Balu, Zhu, Doolittle, Schiller, Jenkins, & Gersten, 2015). In addition, I offer that a major reason RtI has not had the desired improvement effects is that there remains a great deal of confusion about the nature of the framework itself, as it was inserted into federal special education law without imparting a clear vision of what it should look like in practice. In this school, I can describe how the on-the-ground manifestation of RtI is as a computerized test-prep program, creating static intervention groups in service of raising test scores.

“Do your work” as the Hidden Curriculum of Urban Special Education

Anyon’s (1980) identification of the hidden curriculum of class and schooling is examined for students placed in special education classrooms in urban schools. Broadly speaking, the expectation of these students is to “do your work” without attention to the nature of the work, or the thought involved. Teachers in these contexts clearly prioritize behavioral compliance and quiet industriousness over critical thought or expression. This has profound implications for student transition planning, in particular, when teachers are asked to collaborate with students and their families to develop post-secondary employment and education plans.
Promoting Inclusion in a “Struggling” School 215

Role of the Principal in Inclusive Schools

Riehl (2000) reviewed a wide body of literature regarding the role of a principal in mediating organizational elements in service of promoting inclusion. Using data from this study, I would reevaluate the claims emerging from that review, in particular challenging the assertion that the principal is the main mediator of beliefs and attitudes that are conducive to inclusion. In contrast I would argue, based on the data from this study, that the most important role of the principal in promoting inclusive schools lies in organizing local formal organizational elements (schedules, classrooms, professional development) such that cultural shifts towards inclusiveness can result in school improvements. Doing so would imply that shifting organizational cultures towards inclusion can transpire without top-down direction, clarifying the role of the principal in school change.

Convenience Evacuation: Achievement Triage and Students with IEP’s

In my time as a medic in the army, I learned how to conduct triage for multiple casualties, prioritizing those lives that could be saved most easily over those who would be difficult and those who were “expectant” and thus could be evacuated on the “convenience” level. I could use data from this study to describe how the work of tracking classes by ability in the context of schools facing sanctions to improve test scores is fundamentally similar, literally deciding who will have future opportunities and who does not. In this context, students who were labeled as “magnet” students had very different expectations from those who were placed in self-contained special education settings. I could go deeper, as well, reflecting on the nature of “saving” lives in urban education more broadly, drawing from my own experiences in both contexts.
“They Tell Us What To Do, But Not Why We’re Doing It”: Underpreparation of Alternative Certification Teachers

Three of the eight teachers in this study were TFA teachers attending RELAY Graduate School of Education. While they were trained in concepts germane to inclusive education to some extent, those understandings were willfully ignorant of sociological theory and rely heavily on problematic assumptions about students. In our work together, they noted the broad dissonance between the social justice messages of their expedited teacher education program with the deep ethical commitments that were central to this study. They also described their experiences within those teacher education programs with respect to “clumsy conversations” about race and ability (Carter, Skiba, Arredondo, & Pollock, 2017). This dissonance can be connected to the profound levels of turnover found among alternatively certified teachers serving minoritized communities (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Towards a Theory of Change for Organizational Helplessness

I entered this work very interested in Seligman’s theory of Learned Helplessness (Seligman, 1975), and how it related to urban schools and special education in particular. Without wishing to further pathologize individual parents, students, or teachers within those settings, I could describe how behaviorist policy impairs the function of collective groups of individuals within specific contexts even while the individuals maintain their own agency. More importantly, this could allow theorizing how organizations might escape this collective impaired function by developing collective efficacy in action research projects that are affirmatively asset-oriented and systems-critical. Development of this line of thinking may take a number of future projects and may take more time to support adequately.


Future Iterations of This Work

I am concerned about how broader trends of appropriation of “good” educational ideas in service of profit making might work on teacher participatory action research for inclusive education in the future. On the one hand, there is my personal conviction that this is a potentially important model for change that is worth developing and pursuing. On the other, it has become clear to me that it would be probably easier to pursue this in a non-academic capacity, and perhaps more impactful, as a degree of administrative support would be guaranteed with them literally buying in. Whatever the case, it is definitely worthwhile to continue to pursue this line of research in progressively larger spheres, by developing district and university partnerships over the long run.

Just as the work of Mel Ainscow and his many collaborators in the UK and throughout Europe (Ainscow, Booth, & Tyson, 2004; Ainscow, Goldrick, Tyson, & West, 2012; Messiou et al., 2016) provoked me to think about how teacher collaborative inquiry might shift systems towards inclusion here, I hope that there will be others that are provoked by my own work to find ways of translating theories of inclusivity into practice for vulnerable children. As stated earlier, this will not be the final version of this project. The adjustments addressed in Chapter 6 provide significant direction to future work, but there are several other key ideas that will need to be addressed. In order to sustain the work within schools that are indifferent or hostile to inclusion, it will be important to build networks of teachers across schools and districts. This will provide context for structural differences that support and impede inclusive change for participating teachers, as well as create community for teachers to sustain and grow their inclusive beliefs and practices beyond the scope of each project. I am also provoked to consider how Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) for the students itself might inform future growth in this
work. Including students and teachers from various communities with various degrees of marginalization could further illuminate the circuits of privilege and dispossession (Fine & Ruglis, 2009) for participants, strengthening their advocacy across those networks.

Ultimately, I see this dissertation not as the end of a journey, but rather the beginning of a new one, for myself and for those who I do not yet know. I am fortunate to sit on the shoulders of those who have pioneered this work in using research for change, and to walk in the footsteps of those who have reimagined special education as a project of inclusivity. Despite the frustrations, I am given heart in knowing there are others of similar mind, and there will be others after us who will carry this work forward in new directions and to new places that I cannot even imagine.
Appendix A – Interview Questions

1. Do you think meaningful inclusion is possible? What do you think inclusion looks like at its best?

2. How do you understand the connection between inclusion and civil rights? How has that changed because of this project?

3. How has your pedagogy changed as a result of this project? What shifts do you see next for yourselves?

4. How will you carry this work forward in your teaching?

5. What do you think about this type of PD?
Appendix B – Focus Group Questions

Impact on general education students

What impact do you think this PD project has already had or will have on the teaching of students without documented disabilities?

Impact on the school as a whole

What impact do you think this project has had or will have outside of the individual classes that you teach together?

Impact on relationships with colleagues

How has your relationship with your co-teacher in this group changed?

How have your relationships with the other members of this group changed?

How have your relationships with other people not involved with this project changed?

How do you think they might change in the future?

Impact on teaching practices

How has your school’s approach to pedagogy changed as a result of this project?
Transformation Posters
Carla Lopez and Sam Boyd
with Louis Olander

Defining Inclusion
Inclusion is more than ICT.

We believe that at MS 2222, it is realistic for all students, struggling and thriving alike, to speak to their work, have their opinions heard, and feel like they are part of a classroom family.

We believe that inclusion in our school has to be social, with students loving school and showing enthusiasm for learning.

In order to move to inclusion in our school, we believe that teachers must value their students and make them feel wanted.

Student Study Findings
Our team conducted a series of qualitative interviews in which we asked students about moments in which they felt included in school.

In order to confirm our findings, we followed our survey up with a quantitative survey, which we gave to 75 students in ICT and self-contained classes.

84% of students agreed that group work led to a sense of belonging.

• 100% of survey responses (n=11) from 905 agreed that their class feels like a family.

• Students said that the ability to get academic support from their peers helped them learn and made them feel comfortable.

92% of students agreed that clear expectations were supportive of learning.

Teaching Strategy
At the end of a unit on transformations, students created original transformations. Transformations are changes in position, size, or orientation of geometrical figures on a graph plane.

Students were first instructed to choose a transformation to do independently.

Students were then given markers to transfer a draft to a large poster with a partner of their choosing, in a format of their choosing.

Posters were displayed in the classroom with written feedback.

Alignment to Universal Design for Learning
This project aligned to Universal Design for Learning guidelines:

• Provide options for physical action (4) – Students were able to physically move around the classroom.

• Provide options for expression and communication (5) – Students were able to express their ideas verbally, numerically, and artistically.

• Provide options for recruiting interest (7) – Students were able to make choices about how they did their projects.

• Provide options for sustaining effort and persistence (8) – Students were able to work with peers and gain feedback at multiple points in the process.

Results
We found that the project had a significant impact on students and their ability to engage with learning about transformations. We have chosen to use qualitative data to illustrate the effectiveness of this technique.

We observed that students were more engaged in their work, and that students who are usually difficult for us to reach were more compliant. Some students who are usually disengaged or disruptive were completely absorbed in this task.

Student work shows that the students were able to demonstrate mastery of math skills and concepts.

School-Wide Implications
We believe that this project shows the benefits of project-based assessment. Students who struggle with traditional assessments were better able to demonstrate their competencies with a project.

We believe that the school will benefit from a wider application of active learning projects, by serving a wider range of learners.

We believe that students will benefit from having a greater degree of choices within assignments. Our students were more eager to learn given even relatively small choices.

What’s Next
Going forward, we are committing ourselves to using these techniques more often, particularly at the end of instructional units.

We also feel like these projects could be used to bridge student interests and preferences with standardized test assessments. In the future, we will use projects as a way of making test-based mathematics content more relevant for students.
Setting the Table for Student Self-Regulation
Cliff Malone and Joey Pantusso
with Louis Olander

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In order to move to inclusion in our school, we believe that teachers must value their students and make them feel wanted.

Student Study Findings
Our team conducted a series of qualitative interviews in which we asked students about moments in which they felt included in school.
In order to confirm our findings, we followed our survey up with a quantitative survey, which we gave to 75 students in ICT and self-contained classes.
ICT classes are less socially isolated than self-contained:
• 76% of students in ICT settings agreed that their classes feel like a family, compared to 56% of students in self-contained classes.
Many students in ICT settings are ready to learn self-regulation strategies:
• 71% of students in ICT settings agreed that it helps them to think about their actions when they make bad choices.

Background
We want our students to regulate their own behavior, instead of having adults controlling them.
We acknowledge that a range of factors inhibit our students’ abilities to self-regulate, including:
• Reward and punishment systems encourage students to exhibit pro-learning behavior when incentives exist, but do not support students in internalizing or maintaining those behaviors when those rewards and punishments are absent.
• In adolescence, students seek to establish their own identities, which often leads to conflicts with adults.
• Young children, especially those who live in poverty, may struggle to delay gratification, instead opting for impulsive behaviors.

Teaching Strategies
In order to create the preconditions necessary for students to self-regulate, we take the following steps:
• Assess all students student behavioral functioning, learning preferences, and academic levels. We then physically arrange the classroom, including assigning seats, based on that qualitative and quantitative data.
• Establish clear behavioral expectations at the very beginning of the school year. Those expectations are articulated frequently from that point onward.
• Assign academic work that is appropriately challenging.
• Support students in working together collaboratively.
• Assess student academic progress frequently and adjust instruction based on those assessments.

Results
We have chosen to use quantitative and qualitative data to show the value of this set of strategies:
Results are being measured quantitatively by class rankings on state tests and iReady diagnostics relative to class rankings on marking period 1 grades. Results so far are inconclusive.
We will continue to monitor performance to look for any meaningful student reflection.
We have observed that the majority of our students with behavioral issues remain near the bottom of class rankings, as their behavior continues to be below standard.
We have observed that students are able to access more challenging math content when they have fewer distractions.

What’s Next
We can support student self-regulation further by
• Developing self-assessment and reflection (9.3)
• Enhance capacity for monitoring progress (6.4)
We have already begun to give students the opportunity to review their tests and grade themselves, which gives them the opportunity to reflect on their performance.
We would like to incorporate the math content into the self-reflection process, inviting them to analyze their own test score data, graphing it, and identifying trends and strategies to improve.

Alignment to Universal Design for Learning
This project aligned to the following Universal Design for Learning check points:
• Minimize threats and distractions (7.3) – In order for students to learn to self-regulate, they need to not experience threats or distractions in their classes.
• Vary demands to optimize challenge (8.2) – Students need to have work that is appropriately academically challenging.
• Promote expectations that optimize motivation (9.1) – Students will be able to self-regulate in a context in which they are capable of learning.

School-Wide Implications
We believe that in order to successfully include students with disabilities into ICT classrooms and build a sense of classroom community, threats and distractions need to be minimized.
However, students also need to develop greater self-regulation and executive functioning skills in order to thrive academic settings in middle school and beyond.
Building a Family in the Classroom
Lilith Peterson and Norm Sternin
with Louis Olander

Defining Inclusion
Inclusion is more than ICT.
We believe that at MS 2222, it is realistic for all students, struggling and thriving alike, to speak to their work, have their opinions heard, and feel like they are part of a classroom family.

We believe that inclusion in our school has to be social, with students loving school and showing enthusiasm for learning.

In order to move to inclusion in our school, we believe that teachers must value their students and make them feel wanted.

Student Study Findings
Our team conducted a series of qualitative interviews in which we asked students about moments in which they felt included in school.

In order to confirm our findings, we followed our interviews up with a quantitative survey, which we gave to 75 students in ICT and self-contained classes.

76% of students in ICT settings agreed that their class felt like a family.

- Students wrote that they were eager to help each other.
- Students wrote that they appreciated the relationships that they have with their teachers.
- One student wrote that her ICT class felt like a place she could smile, even when she hurts inside.

Teaching Strategy
In our class, we have tried to cultivate a family feeling.

- Every day, we make sure to warmly greet our students, so that their first experiences with us are positive. We make an effort to share our own personal lives and stories with students, and ask them to share their lives with us.
- We set clear expectations, but allow room for adjustment. Bullying and unkindness are not tolerated at all. Sometimes this also means being able to admit being wrong and apologize.
- We take time each week to recognize students who have done exceptional work. We have family rituals in our classroom, including Friday shoutouts, which provide students with an opportunity to recognize each other.
- We keep our classroom open as much as possible. Students come up at lunch to clean and help out in the room.
- We return student work with comments and feedback as quickly as we can.
- Before doing group work, we check in with struggling students and students with difficult behaviors to maintain clear expectations for work.

Results
We have chosen to use qualitative data to show the effectiveness of what we do. We have observed that our students:

- Frequently ask for extra credit assignments and extra work.
- Take the initiative to help each other complete work. Students solicit constructive feedback from each other and from teachers.
- Are highly motivated and self-driven to do their best work.
- Avoid distractions, asking to move seats when peers are disruptive.
- Consistently turn in homework that is well done.
- Effectively regulate each other’s behavior during writing time.

We have also observed that:

- Once every few weeks, a student will call one of us “dad” or “mom.” This usually leads to a good laugh for the whole class.
- Parents have told us that their children work eagerly and diligently on their homework.
- Students are eager to bond with us.

School-Wide Implications
Some of the family dynamic comes from the roles that we play as “mom” and “dad” in the classroom. While we do not think this will work for everyone, other versions of family-type relationships can.

We also acknowledge that some of the family dynamic comes from our personalities.

Nevertheless, we think that all teachers can display kindness, respectfulness, positivity, and fairness.

While we acknowledge the value of incentivizing students, we also do not believe that the rewards systems contribute to the family feeling.

What’s Next
Going forward, we are committing ourselves to expanding these family relationships to all of our classes and deepening these bonds with our students.

We suggest to our colleagues that they try out at least one of these techniques (such as shoutouts) to implement in their classes.

Alignment to Universal Design for Learning
This project aligned to Universal Design for Learning checkpoints:

- Foster collaboration and community (8.3) – We make sure that the classroom is a learning community for all of our students.

- Minimize threats and distractions (7.3) – In making our classroom feel like a family setting, we take reduce the presence of student disruptions and make the class a welcoming setting.
Packets for Appropriately Paced Group Work
Diane Clavin and Rebecca Chambers
with Louis Olander

Defining Inclusion

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In order to move to inclusion in our school, we believe that teachers must value their students and make them feel wanted.

Student Study Findings

Our team conducted a series of qualitative interviews in which we asked students about moments in which they felt included in school.

In order to confirm our findings, we followed our survey up with a quantitative survey, which we gave to 75 students in ICT and self-contained classes.

Self-contained classes are more socially isolated:

• only 56% of students in self-contained settings agreed that their classes feel like a family, compared to 76% of students in ICT classes.

We believe that isolating problematic behaviors into self-contained classes makes them worse because it increases resistant behaviors:

• Only 56% of students in self-contained settings agreed that self-regulation strategies were helpful, compared to 71% in ICT.

Teaching Strategy

We created a packet of texts with guided questions on primary and secondary sources for students to complete in small groups. Given the number of adults in the self-contained classroom, we were able to assign an adult for each group. The groupings were based on levels of need for academic and behavioral support.

The packets had a concrete-real introductory activity that allowed students to engage with the content immediately, and visuals that supported comprehension and transfer of class content.

Alignment to Universal Design for Learning

This project aligned to Universal Design for Learning guidelines:

• Promoting self-regulation (9) – Students had clear expectations set for them, with formative feedback throughout the process, and team reward systems.

• Sustain effort and persistence (8) – Students had varying levels of peer and adult support in completing tasks, a collaborative community to work with in completing tasks.

• Supporting use of language & symbols (2) – Students had adults in each of their groups that were there to support decoding of texts and clarify vocabulary.

• Supporting comprehension (3) – The packets were designed to activate student prior knowledge, guide their information processing, and maximize content transfer throughout the assignment.

Results

We found that using packets had a significant impact on students and their ability to engage with and comprehend social studies concepts. We have chosen to use qualitative data to illustrate the effectiveness of the technique. We observed the following student results:

More academically advanced students are able to move at a faster pace that was appropriate to them. This led to fewer disruptive behaviors from them.

Students who typically struggle to complete work showed pride and greater self-esteem, having brought the task to completion.

Students who struggled academically were able to get a greater degree of reading and processing support from adults without being distracted by students with behavioral challenges or interrupting the pace of the class for students who were able to move quickly.

Students with fewer behavioral challenges were calmer and more focused.

One student who has a documented disability that manifests as disruptive outbursts was able to work independently with the support of a paraprofessional without disrupting other students.

School-Wide Implications

We believe that this technique shows the benefits of self-paced, small-group work. We acknowledge that not all classrooms have so many adults per child. Nevertheless, we feel like many classrooms will benefit from this technique, as many students have the ability to work collaboratively with their peers and have self-regulation skills.

We also believe that this technique reduces the social isolation that students in self-contained classrooms experience, and we think that it will reduce the frequency of resistance behaviors.

What’s Next

We believe that the packets can be used to greater effect by incorporating more UDL principles:

• Support for executive functions (8) – Packets can include space for goal setting, strategy development, and self-monitoring of progress.

• Recruiting interest (7) – Packets can explicitly incorporate and leverage student interests in their design.

• Provide alternatives for expression and communication (5) – online or computerized packets could support development of technological literacy and open new spaces for student inquiry through the internet.

• Provide alternative means of perception (1) – online or computerized packets could support perceptual differences by providing multiple formats for displaying content.
IMPROVING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AT MIDDLE SCHOOL 2222

Report from ICT Teacher Inquiry Team

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Decide which general education students are in ICT carefully.

Integrated co-teaching (ICT) classes should be intentionally designed so that there are a wide range of student abilities, not just struggling students. Inclusive classrooms are at their best when they mirror the real world wherein people with different types of abilities and preferences coexist, and thriving students can serve as peer mentors and leaders to struggling students (Danforth, 2014; Valle & Connor, 2010). Hehir and colleagues (2005) comprehensive review of special education in New York City found that co-taught integrated classes, then called CTT, were at their worst when they served as a homogeneous “dumping ground” for struggling students with and without IEP’s, effectively becoming a low-level tracked class. To that point, we recommend that general education students are carefully selected to be in ICT classes, and these settings are not seen as places for general education students with low test scores or difficult behaviors.

ICT should not be the primary location for general education students with behavioral challenges. A key principle of Universal Design for Learning is to minimize threats and distractions (Gordon, Meyer, & Rose, 2014). Students who have a greater need for a classroom environment that is focused and calm because of documented disability likely have a much harder time learning when students who exhibit challenging behaviors are placed into integrated classes alongside them. Moreover, placement of general education students with behavioral difficulties into low-level tracked classes may make their resistant behaviors more challenging. We recommend that, to the extent possible, efforts are made to minimize threats and distractions at the programming level, in addition to the efforts that we make at the classroom level.

Schedule ICT classes more carefully.

While scheduling general education classes alone can be challenging, planning for ICT classes involves a number of additional difficulties. These may include relationships between co-teaching partners, teacher curricular comfort and experience, as well as physical space that affords use of parallel and alternative teaching models. Given the complexity of scheduling two teachers, we recommend that logistical arrangements for ICT classes should be planned before all other arrangements or commitments are made.

To the extent possible, we recommend that teachers and students should have a consistent, corresponding schedule. While consistency is important for all students, it is often of particular importance for students with disabilities who struggle with relationships or executive functioning. Moreover, double periods of a single content area should not be separated by periods other content areas, so as to minimize disruptive transitions and maximize learning time.

Co-teaching needs to be done by two teachers in concert with one another; therefore, we recommend that steps are taken to ensure that teachers are reliably working in concert with one another. Removing special education teachers from their co-teaching assignments, in particular, significantly inhibits the ability of co-teaching pairs to meet their students’ needs, but so does the assignment of administrative tasks to co-teachers. Moreover, co-
teaching pairs need allocated reflection and planning time in order to ensure that their pedagogy reflects their high expectations for students while providing adequate supports for all students in order to ensure that they are learning. Given the widespread challenges of recruiting and retaining teachers certified to teach students with disabilities, peer mentoring relationships that can be cultivated through ICT pairings should further be prioritized (Tyler & Brunner, 2014).

Do more with SETSS.

In order to make the most out of ICT settings, and inclusive education in general, there are a number of unexplored ways that Special Education Teacher Support Services (SETSS) could be further developed in order to provide educational supports for students with disabilities in less restrictive settings (Olander, 2016). While this team wishes to highlight the strides made over the last year in implementing SETSS programs, we also feel that more could be done in order to make use of the flexible structures that it allows.

Push-in

One of the most successful elements of an ICT classroom is the consultative approach to curricular supports that knowledgeable special education certified teachers can share with their general education colleagues. We believe that this can be replicated on a smaller scale through the programming of a wider “push-in” SETSS program.

For an example of how this might look, students with SETSS services programmed their IEP can be placed in a general education classroom and receive the exact programming that a student without an IEP would. However, both the students with and without IEP’s would benefit from the consultation of an experienced special education teacher who could enter the classroom once or twice per week in order to provide support for the general education teacher. This teacher could use the one-teach, one-observe or one-teach, one-assist models for co-teaching, which typically require a less intense degree of coordination between the two co-teachers (Cook & Friend, 1995). Nevertheless, there would still be the need for time to coplan and consult, but not to the same extent that effective ICT would.

There are a number of questions that remain about how this would work, precisely. To that point, we recommend the establishment of a SETSS teacher inquiry group that mirrors this one, though primarily comprised of special education teachers who have experienced success in delivering both SETSS and ICT services.

Pull-out

Pull-out SETSS services (often called “resource room”) are challenging to implement because they often require that students be pulled from their general education classes in order to work on separate goals. This can undermine the intent of the civil rights agenda of inclusive education to ensure that students with IEP's have access to the same curricula as their peers. Moreover, research has shown pull-out services to be of little value, especially when they do not employ targeted, specially designed instruction (Moody et al., 2000).
However, we recommend exploring and implementing structures by which pull-out SETSS services can make use of existing resources at this school.

9th period, which is typically used for enrichment and remediation instruction for small groups, could be programmed as a pull-out SETSS period for small groups of students with IEP’s to work on IEP goals. This would not only support the students in meeting those goals, but also build relationships between students with IEP’s and specific teachers who take the lead in the development of those IEPs, allowing them the opportunity to use more careful assessment practices.

Similarly, iReady periods could be used as periods for specially designed instruction for students with specific needs that can not be met through the general education curriculum. For example, students with profound struggles in decoding could be placed with a teacher trained in multisensory reading programs (such as Wilson Reading Program or another Orton-Gillingham aligned system), and students with more profound social and emotional needs can work with educators working on an established curriculum that supports those needs (such as The Compassion Project or Second Step). This would align with the original intent of Response to Intervention (RtI), wherein students with specific needs that can not be met in a generalized setting can receive support in smaller, more intensive settings (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2011).

**Develop and articulate clear expectations for students to progress to less restrictive environments.**

We believe that students who feel isolated and “stuck” in segregated self-contained special education settings are more likely to present instructional challenges, especially behaviorally. To that end, teachers and administration should develop consistent language to communicate to students an expectation that they will, by default, progress to less restrictive settings. This stands in contrast to the typical model for placement in less restrictive settings that requires that students “earn” the right to the general education curricula by approximating normal academic and behavioral functioning (Valle & Connor, 2010). These expectations should be met with flexible programs that increasingly integrate students with IEP’s into general education settings from sixth to eighth grade. This will allow students to enter high school in less restrictive settings, which we believe will give them greater opportunities for academic success and graduation.

For an example of how this might look, students entering sixth grade in self-contained settings will be told that the expectation for them is to be moved into a less restrictive setting no later than the beginning of seventh grade. This expectation will be embedded in academic and social structures and communicated by administration and teachers early and often to both students and parents. Similarly, students with IEP’s in seventh grade ICT settings and their parents will know that there is a clear expectation for them to progress to general education settings with SETSS support in eighth grade.
While we acknowledge that there will be challenges in implementing this suggestion, we also believe that it is possible. One key element of making this successful is for self-contained classes to have a clear instructional focus on student self-regulation and development of executive functioning that will support student transitions. Moreover, while we acknowledge that there will be barriers for students to move to less restrictive settings, we also acknowledge that this process of transition should become the expected pathway with few isolated exceptions, instead of the isolated exception itself.

**Buffer teachers and students from institutional pressures.**

Broadly speaking, educational reform of the last two decades has lead to an increased surveillance of schools, teachers, and students who have received low scores on standardized measures of achievement (Olander, 2017). However, we believe that these measures undervalue our students’ capacity as learners, our capacities as their teachers, and our school’s capacity to be a thriving place of learning. While the sharpest effects of this surveillance are on the children and the test-driven culture of our district, this surveillance affects us as teachers most profoundly in the Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) system. Team members who have been teaching long enough to remember the time before APRR remember that while the old methods of teacher observation and evaluation were distinctly problematic, they did not transmit the culture of surveillance that frustrates us today.

We believe that it is possible for school administrations to buffer the effects of the APPR system on teachers, just as it is possible for teachers to buffer the effects of testing on students. In particular, we recommend that administrators conducting observations bring an explicitly asset-oriented and developmental focus to classroom observations. Especially since many of us are relatively new teachers, this is of particular importance to us in gaining instructional expertise and working towards tenure. We feel like this shift towards the affirmative will also reduce teacher attrition and turnover, which are problems that originate and extend well beyond this school.
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