



Discussion Paper

Inclusive Education: Beyond Popular Discourses

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The popular discourse of democratic education is home to numerous myths surrounding our conceptions of what inclusion means in today's schools. Certain beliefs like the idea that offering equal opportunities for participation to all students regardless of individual need, which conflates equality and equity, or that democracy in classrooms involves nothing more than limitless inclusion are upheld as go-to solutions for the inevitable dilemmas for educators committed to inclusion. This paper argues that philosophical clarification of the concept of inclusion is urgently required by teachers, policy makers, and theorists of education committed to both democracy in education and democratic education. Our most urgent concern is related to the inherent attitude toward deficit implied by different understandings of inclusion. This is not necessarily due to the unclarity and ambiguities associated with the concept itself, but rather reflect the calculated and anticipatory way educators tend to approach classroom practice. We argue that with careful philosophical clarification, along with an entirely new stance on the part of teachers regarding their pedagogical practice and a reconceptualized notion of student 'needs', the concept of inclusion can continue to remain not only useful but essential to creating a robust democratic community in the classroom.

Keywords: inclusion; democracy in education; deficit thinking; special needs

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Introduction

Despite the fact that inclusion is a relatively recent concept that developed within contemporary educational theory and practice, the achievement of inclusion has been a fundamental component of the teaching experience for educators and policy makers. Parents, teachers, students, educational theorists, and practitioners from all over the world tend to unequivocally proclaim that any quality educational program

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ought to be inclusive (Armstrong et al., 2011; Biesta 2009; Hansen 2012; Leyser & Kirk 2004; Odom & Diamond 1998; Purdue et al., 2009; UNESCO 2013). According to de Castell and Bryson (1997), the obligation to remain ‘positive at all costs’ in educational settings creates a space that gradually takes away the courage to address impediments and concerns and instead advocates for inclusivity and democracy in education with little substantive or prescriptive merit particularly when it comes to how teachers and policy makers should actually *practice* inclusivity in classrooms (de Castell & Bryson 1997). While inclusion may function as a categorical imperative in popular educational discourse, our concern is that it has become the kind of catchall phrase that few dare argue against for fear of criticism.

It is imperative to establish that despite criticisms leveled against inclusivity, we do not object to calls for inclusivity nor diminish its significance in educational spheres. In fact, we wholeheartedly affirm that inclusion is a necessary component of any truly democratic educational practice. Our concern relates to the illusive nature of the term inclusion which signifies that not all definitions, implementations, and justifications for inclusion enjoy equal merit. Hence, to problematize the notion that inclusion is a panacea for all issues related to equity and inclusivity in education we offer an argument in two parts. Initially, a brief overview of the various definitions of inclusion in current educational discourse is presented. This is followed by the argument that while the intent of ‘inclusive education’ is both educationally and ethically justifiable, the very notion of ‘inclusivity’ needs to be carefully reexamined, if not interrupted, by engaging in critically substantive dialogue on the democratic merit of inclusive practices in education. The second part of our argument addresses some of the most prevalent myths surrounding the issue of inclusion. While examining these myths, we suggest that to be faithful to truly democratic values in our educational practice, we need to ensure that inclusivity is not enacted within a systemic framework organized according to a deficit mentality on the part of educators, policy makers, or theorists. We believe that enacting or embracing a deficit mentality whilst dealing with difference undermines the most fundamental objectives of inclusion– to fulfill the basic rights of all in an equitable manner. In our effort to offer a more diverse perspective on the dynamics of inclusivity, we draw on our research and lived experiences in the North American context for a more nuanced and sophisticated mode of understanding regarding this very important concept.

Method

The word inclusion is frequently used as a slogan for action as well as a justification for a host of practices with very different implications. Key questions that arise in this context include: Inclusion of what? Who determines why, how, and who ought to be included? Whose values and norms are reflected in how we adjudicate the ethical parameters of inclusive education? Are inclusivity and equity the same? And most importantly, do our attempts at inclusion reproduce the very hegemonic norms that they intend to redress?

Clarifying the meaning of inclusivity has been complicated by the fact that it is given different definitions in various contexts. For instance, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2013) formally embraces a global conception of inclusion following the U.N.’s 1966 general assembly where education was declared a basic human right. UNESCO’s justification for inclusivity emphasizes that significant portions of the world’s population do not have access to basic, primary

education. UNESCO's mission statement explains that if "the right to education for all is to become a reality, we must ensure that all learners have access to quality education that meets basic learning needs and enriches lives" (UNESCO 2013, pp 12). Similar to inclusion, notions like 'quality education' and 'basic learning needs' are interpretive concepts that practitioners and theorists of education tend to accept as unconditionally good without a critical examination. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to investigate these concepts further, we believe they are in need of careful philosophical deconstruction and subsequent clarification. What is important to our present argument is that UNESCO's distinct conceptualization of inclusivity upholds the basic, unconditional human right to available, accessible, affordable, and/or free education for all.

An interpretation of inclusive education similar to that offered by UNESCO is not a reflection of the discourse on inclusion in North American circles of educational theory and practice. Usually when educators and theorists discuss the concept of inclusion, they are addressing the inclusion of developmentally diverse students into what are regarded as 'normal' classrooms. Odom and Diamond (1998) point out that the word 'inclusion' first appeared in educational discourse in the early 1990s in order to improve existing initiatives to integrate children with special needs into regular classrooms. The concept of inclusion, riddled with preconceived ideas about development and ability, emerged as an attempt to redress the shortcomings of mainstreaming developmentally diverse students into 'general education programs' (Odom & Diamond 1998). Similarly, Leyser and Kirk (2004) contend that the notion of inclusion is grounded in ability, highlighting the shift toward full inclusion, which involves integrated programs where children with special needs attend general education classrooms on a full-time basis. This is a departure from previous mainstreaming programs where children with special needs attended 'normal' classrooms on a part-time basis (Leyser & Kirk 2004). This framework might be referred to as the developmental definition of inclusivity where inclusion is defined according to developmental diversity and ability in accordance to what is considered to be normal student performance in standardized educational settings.

The manner in which we regard inclusion is also determined by how we understand its limits. Hansen (2012) points out that very different understandings of how to implement inclusion develop according to exactly how much inclusivity we think is possible or achievable in real classroom settings. Hansen (2012) notes how some see inclusion as an ideal that teachers and policy makers ought to strive "to secure the participation of all children while accepting that the vision never can be fully realized" (p. 92). Such a view of inclusion presents an image of what would be *perfect* which, as an ideal, could never be fully accomplished in reality. Conversely, Hansen argues that inclusion can be understood as an ongoing project or a continual process, which emphasizes on classroom intervention strategies that would likely be in constant need of appraisal and perhaps renegotiation. Finally, Hansen draws a crucial distinction between 'responsible inclusion' and 'full inclusion', urging teachers to acknowledge those times when "it is not beneficial to a specific child's learning and development to participate in the classroom" (2012, p. 92). Inclusivity can also be defined according to whether we understand it as an ideal or a practice, what we believe is possible with regards to that practice, and whether the results of our efforts toward inclusivity are evaluated as effective, desirable, or beneficial for the students they are designed to assist.

Concepts of inclusivity vary in fundamental and important ways across historical, theoretical, and practical contexts. As indicated, some understand inclusion to mean equal and unconditional access to educational programming while others view it as the inclusion and accommodation of diverse students or the ‘special’ needs of particular students within a ‘normal’ classroom. Meanwhile, there are those who might understand it in line with its perceived potential as either an ideal that guides the efforts of educators or as a practical strategy implemented in real classrooms (Hansen, 2012; Leyser & Kirk, 2004; Odom & Diamond, 1998). A seemingly common denominator in the aforementioned interpretations of inclusivity is that it is conceptualized according to a particular notion of difference that is demarcated solely along the axis of development.

Several problematic implications arise when development draws the line between ‘normal’ and ‘special needs’. Ideas on what constitute normal and different and what ultimately determine the contextual why, what, how and who of the questions posed in this paper are defined only by reference to the discursive paradigm of developmentalism. The developmentalist paradigm is itself highly criticized for being ideological, culturally specific, and falsely generalizable (Fleer, 2005). While it is understood that educators, policy makers, and theorists who use this rubric do so in order to meet the ‘special needs’ of children, conceptualizing difference according to ability is extremely reductive. If indicators of cognitive capacity such as standardized test scores or demonstrable performance in areas like reading or math are taken as the arbiters of normalcy, then students who do not fit into our predetermined categories or who have learning needs incompatible with standard school programming and pedagogy suffer certain punitive effects (MacNaughton, 1995; Rogoff, 2003; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1998).

The performance-driven conceptualization of inclusion seems to thrive within the dominant neoliberal system of contemporary schooling where inclusivity often reasserts the dominance of the standardized, federalized, and results-based programming that necessitate special accommodations in the first place. We find these conceptualizations of inclusivity defined along the lines of developmentalism, normalcy, and difference lacking since they fail to recognize *plurality as a social fact* and in so doing espouse a very narrow view of what constitutes *need* in educational settings.

Myths about Inclusion

In addition to the lack of philosophical clarification explored above, inclusive education is confounded by several common myths expressed both in practice and policy. Before outlining the definition of inclusive education that we wish to provide in this paper, it is important to address some of the most prevalent myths regarding inclusion. These include: (i) equality of opportunity is sufficient for achieving inclusivity; (ii) standardization coupled with equality ensures inclusivity; and (iii) democracy implies embracing inclusivity without limits.

Myth 1: Equality of opportunity is sufficient for achieving inclusivity

Equality emerged as a political response to the social and political conditions of the 19th century western world where non-white, non-western groups of people were marginalized and denied even basic human

rights. Human rights movements throughout the 20th century sought equal social resources, rights, and privileges for all human beings *qua* human beings irrespective of identity categories like race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and age. These movements embraced a basic commitment to the belief that everyone should be given equal social and political opportunity in order to be able to achieve their aims and aspirations based on individual qualities and capacities. This belief has formed the basis of many policies that continue to effect education, employment, and public institutions such as healthcare.

While we acknowledge that human rights movements have led to vast improvements in social belief and practice, today's understanding of equality does not necessarily mount to true inclusivity. While *certain* groups of people previously excluded from basic rights and resources are now formally included in the privileges and provisions under federal law in Canada and the United States, their inclusivity remains limited. Across North America, many people are still systematically denied basic rights such as healthcare or marriage and those who are officially granted such rights continue to suffer from social boundaries that prevent them from exercising these rights. Furthermore, equating opportunity with inclusion is rooted in the erroneous assumption that we live in a meritocratic society where a person's success is often the result of their capabilities. Equality does little to address the systemic inequalities embedded in western societies or influence social conditions or relations of power. While white supremacy, brutal classism, homophobia, heterosexism, and ableism are no longer written into federal law, they remain very real and productive forces that continue to actively constitute the fabric of everyday North American life. Although we may have equal access to compete but we do not have equal support and privileges to succeed accordingly. Equality of opportunity has not and will not guarantee full inclusivity since ultimately it is based on capitalist and individualist notions of competition and success. The fact that we so widely embrace equality as a slogan or rhetorical device only helps keep up the illusion that we have achieved inclusivity.

Myth 2: Standardization coupled with equality ensures inclusivity

This particular myth leads to the belief that equity is the same as one-size-fits-all standardization or equality. Equity, however, is not identical to equality or sameness. This argument has been most famously made by Iris Marion Young (1989) who asserts that true democratic inclusion requires not equal rights for all but special rights for some, particularly those who have been historically oppressed and systemically subjugated. For example, educators and policy makers might offer racialized youth in impoverished urban schools 'equal' opportunities to educational programming— the same curriculum, the same texts, and the same cultural examples in classroom materials— but ultimately they will still be racialized youth attending the impoverished schools of a federalized, neoliberal, and domineeringly white system of schooling. In fact, it is possible for such students to *not* benefit from equal access to a standardized program and instead suffer injustices as a result. If standardized classroom materials reflect white, upper-middle class social dynamics and cultural narratives, students who have access to these materials without being represented therein are at risk of self-image issues, frustration, and alienation.

We have demonstrated elsewhere that standardization is problematic regardless of whether it is exhibited in evaluation practices, curricula, report cards, and stereotyped behavior (Portelli & Konecny,

2013). Research (Portelli, 2012) has shown that the pervasive ideology of standardization can lead to fear and the silencing of diverse positions for both teachers and students in standardized systems of schooling. When standardization is coupled with the neoliberal emphasis on competition, narrow utility, and empirical evidence, its damaging effects are maximized (Portelli & Konecny, 2013). These conditions reproduce inequities even if that reproduction is unintentional.

Equity in education seeks to respond to the contextual pluralities, differences, and needs of students and teachers as individuals with multiple identities. As such, the concept of equitable inclusion, at its very core, aims to disrupt the validity of any notion of normalcy (Biesta 2009). In Canada, the Equity Strategy of Ontario (Ministry of Education, 2009) and the Toronto District School Board (1999), both adopt an understanding of inclusion that attempts to embody a destabilization of normalcy in school policy and practice, at least in an official capacity. The Toronto District School Board (1999)'s policy documents maintains that true inclusivity requires several components including equity, fairness, and inclusive practices, which are understood as "essential principles of our school system and are integrated into all our policies, programs, operations and practices" (TDSB, 1999, p. 37).

The myth of equality arises from the simple point that once we have created a standardized or purely normalized criterion for success, those that do not fit that standard are by definition marginalized. These individuals are included in neither equal nor equitable ways and are therefore rather unlikely to succeed. Ultimately, the myth rests on a purely logical fallacy: the part– what is standardized– is not equivalent to the whole– the inevitable difference and variation which arises in any diverse community of human beings.

Myth 3: Democracy implies embracing inclusivity without limits

There is no doubt that democracy without diversity and pluralism is an empty construct. Democracy attempts to create the conditions that ensure opportunities and possibilities for all, not just nominally but also existentially and practically. In this context, the central questions become: Possibilities for what? Are these possibilities endless or do they require certain limits? Biesta (2009) explains that inclusivity is one of the primary tenants of democratic ideals. At the heart of democracy is an affirmation that everyone has a right to participate in the deliberative processes of her or his community. While inclusion lies at the core of democratic practices, Biesta (2009) points out that any notion of inclusivity hinges on what we perceive to be its limits. Biesta (2009) argues that "the history of democracy is at the same time the history of *exclusion*. In some cases, exclusion is justified in the name of democracy" because not all members of a social group are considered 'fit for democracy' (p. 1; *emphasis original*). Democratic practices require that members of a community have the ability to engage in social decision making in a reasonable and responsible way. In other words, it requires, individuals capable of practicing democratic citizenship. The inclusion of individuals who are not capable of participating in deliberative practices required by a robust democratic society might be seen as one of the limits we would be wise to implement while attempting to enact democratic principles.

There is another sense where the statement that democracy means embracing inclusion without limits can be classified as an erroneous assertion. Biesta addresses this particular myth about inclusion by observing that people often mistakenly assume "that if we become even more attentive to otherness and difference we

will eventually reach a situation of total democratic inclusion” (2009, p. 5). The assumption that it is possible to work toward a thoroughly inclusive state, erroneously implies two points. Firstly, it denotes that not only is it possible to experience such an inclusive state but also that those working towards greater inclusivity could devise strategies *in advance* and in some formulaic fashion to bring about such a perfect state. Essentially, we are incapable of knowing in advance what a greater form of inclusivity might entail because the details of inclusive practices depend on the expressed needs of a community’s members. In addition, the existence of a flawless, predetermined, and all-embracing state of inclusion that requires no further action once it is reached is a myth that needs to be dispelled. Inclusivity is sporadic, spontaneous, and radically dependent on unanticipatable contextual facts (Biesta, 2009).

The Deficit Mentality

We proclaim that democracy is the most ethically sound political system and underline that social institutions such as schools must be in line with democratic values. We believe that a genuinely democratic spirit should inform the guiding principles of any educational practice or policy. Education in its fullest and most meaningful sense has to be as inclusive as possible since its aim is to open up a space where one can appreciate a variety of perspectives in dialogue with one’s peers. We know, however, that education has been historically misused and certain dominant views of education have been anything but inclusive. In fact, certain educational movements have marginalized people on racial and ethnic grounds, or according to their sexuality, social class, and abilities among other things.

Underlying the three most prevalent myths in educational discourse is a predominant way of thinking that has been labeled the ‘deficit mentality’. The deficit mentality privileges certain norms, particularly ones that reflect white, middle-class values, negating variation and refusing to consider contrary perspectives. Whatever is different from dominant norms is deemed to be less valuable or unworthy (Gorski, 2010; Valencia, 2010). Gorski suggests that the ideology of deficit thinking is linked to historical situations of negation and violence, arguing that the “ideology [of deficit] is a remnant of imperial history... a mechanism for socializing citizens to comply with a host of oppressions, from colonization to enslavement, educational inequities to unjust housing practices” (2010, p. 4). Valencia (2010) elaborates on this point by explaining that the deficit ideology blames the victim for her own oppression. It is the student, her family, her culture, or her context that are regarded as responsible for scholastic failures rather than the system itself. One danger of this mentality is that students and their families internalize these deficits.

Deficit mentality is the double-edged sword of inclusivity. Those who enact practices that are motivated by the ideology of deficit are likely to dismiss the need for genuine inclusivity, perhaps believing that a student must either adapt to the curriculum or attend a different program instead of developing program plans to meet the student’s particular needs. In a sense, deficit thinking negates inclusivity since those who subscribe to it are unlikely to strive for inclusion. On the other hand, educators committed to overcoming deficit thinking in their schools who turn to inclusion as a solution, could fall prey to the trap of an *us* versus *them* power binary where “those who stand outside of the sphere of democracy [are] brought into this sphere and, more importantly... included by those who are already on the inside” (Biesta, 2009, p. 6).

This is an absolutely critical issue for the concept of inclusion: it seems inevitable that any strategy of inclusion sets up an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ binary (Biesta, 2009). If inclusion constantly involves one group committing to the inclusion of an individual or another group or presents a situation where someone dedicates themselves to being *more inclusive* in order to accommodate some *other* person or group, then *Othering* might justifiably be seen as an inherent part of inclusion. This means that there could be an implied deficit attitude *inherent to the concept itself*, since ‘we’ are bringing ‘them’ into a space ‘we’ already inhabit. In this paper we argue in favor of Derrida’s (1999) deconstructions of the notion of hospitality and inclusion in an effort to push ourselves to the limits of our individual, communal, and cosmopolitan selves. It is in this space that our limits can in fact become openings for new possibilities of embracing and welcoming difference. With respect to inclusive education, Hodkinson (2012) explores how “inclusion as singularity acted as a lexicon of control operated by schoolteachers” (p. 6). In addition, teachers who seek to be more inclusive in their practice need to reflect on the ethical foundations essential in supporting the conceptualizations of inclusive pedagogy. Veck merges Levinas’s position on the Other with notions of inclusion in an effort to critique deficit models of teaching and learning and the legislation that often underpins them (Veck cited in Black-Hawkins, 2014; p. 447). In advancing our position, we have at no point sought to dispute the need for inclusive education. We have, nonetheless, tried to reflect Levinas’ (1998) view that the ‘excellence’ of inclusive pedagogy is tied to its awareness of its deficit thinking toward the notion of inclusion.

Plurality, Need, and Democratic Education

We have thus far argued that it is crucial to clarify what inclusive education entails or face the danger of acting in ways contrary to our own beliefs. In many instances, a distinctly political relation of power and privilege is implied by inclusion irrespective of the strategies taken up to achieve it. To address the vital issue of whether inclusivity can be redeemed in any meaningful way, Biesta (2009) recommends that we first reconfigure and redefine the way we understand the concept of democracy and see it as an event: as something that happens sporadically and spontaneously rather than a lasting state of being that a classroom or community can reach if they work hard enough. Democracy, then, becomes not something that we *are*—our classroom is a democratic space for example— but something that we *make*— democracy is something that happens in our classroom. Thus, stepping into an uncertain space that is a ‘no-man’s land’ (Levinas, 1991), can afford educators the opportunity to engage in practices of inclusion instead of excluding democratic discussions about the aims of schooling (McNeil, 2002). In this context, the notion of inclusion, particularly for the marginalized, can be open to disorder, non-organization, and unfixity. This is consistent with Derrida’s (1998) views where the moment we welcome someone, we enter a space of ‘not-knowing’ that is open to the possibility of an ‘absolute surprise’ (Derrida 1999; p. 70). Accordingly, an important aspect of Biesta’s argument is the emphasis on what cannot be anticipated in advance and the transformative effects that such an unknown has on inclusivity in education. Biesta argues:

We should understand democratic inclusion not in terms of adding more people to the existing order, but rather as a process that necessarily involves the transformation of that order. As long

as we restrict our inclusive efforts to those who are known to be excluded, we only operate within that order. (2009, p. 9)

We acknowledge that while perhaps such a way of approaching inclusion may have been effective in the past, the incredible heterogeneity of today's communities renders it obsolete. Yet, the standardized model of education continues to rely on this kind of strategy for inclusion. Our concerns are echoed by de Castell and Bryson who point out that:

In classrooms it is no longer enough (if ever it was) to 'make room' for the participation of education's traditional Others. The difference which makes a difference here is between 'diversity management'— a deceptively simple 'inclusion' of marginal subjects (e.g., 'Add women and stir!') — and radical inversion, which is construed here as a destabilization of 'the normal'— and as the invention and proliferation of multiple new centers and agentive subjectivities. (1997, p. 2)

Not only is it essential to problematize the democratic merit of the concept of 'inclusion' and place greater emphasis on the destabilization of normalcy but teachers, policy makers, and theorist must also alter the way they approach classroom practices in fundamental ways.

The particular vision of democracy we wish to uphold is a critical and participatory one in which what counts as 'democratic' cannot be anticipated or known in advance of participation and deliberation by the individuals who make up a given democratic community. If educators are attempting to achieve participatory spaces of education without the imposition of a false or homogenous standard of normalcy, then upholding certain principles in the name of inclusivity ought to be abandoned for an invigorated understanding of plurality, intersubjectivity, and difference in democratic education. This means that democracy must be seen as an event or something that happens in a classroom, but it also signifies that the expectation that curriculum and lesson planning be completed in advance must be eliminated entirely. Teachers who strive to create classrooms where democracy can happen must embrace a completely new approach to program planning: one that is dialectic in nature and actively involves teachers, students, families, and communities. The interests, identities, and needs of each and every student must be reflected in what is taught and the classroom materials used to teach them, which would make this approach not merely student-centered but student-directed. We believe that it is only by taking up this practical stance toward teaching and learning that *plurality as a social fact* can be acknowledged in our pedagogy.

Arendt (1998) places great value on the notion of plurality which we believe is incredibly useful for education. Arendt's notion of plurality is most explicitly developed within her theory of action and complicated by the fact that her political writings are essays on the existential state of humanity. Human beings, for Arendt, are infinitely unique individuals, which means that each person has the astounding capacity to do something utterly new and surprising at any moment. Arendt explains:

[i]n man, otherness, which he shares with everything that is, and distinctness, which he shares with everything alive, become uniqueness, and human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings [...] Speech and action reveal this unique distinctness. Through them, men

distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct; they are the modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but *qua* men. (1998; p. 176)

For Arendt (1998), then, human beings are all radically unique, each possessing a particular perspective that cannot be known by others unless we engage in truly intersubjective moments of interaction and action. This understanding of humanity places the radical plurality of human beings at the center of human engagement. For Arendt, any truly public space requires that those present within it engage with one another in a genuinely intersubjective manner. Dialogue is crucial for plurality:

[Since the] more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions. (Arendt 1998; p. 176)

In the context of education, taking plurality seriously would not mean that we merely integrate students who are 'different' and students who are 'normal' into a single, pre-determined program. Harwood asserts that the democratic educational project is likely not one of inclusion but one that "remain(s) concerned with the particular, while at the same time, (maintaining) a perspective of the notion of a wider appeal to youth citizenship" (2009, p. 2). Espousing plurality and difference requires teachers, students, and policy makers to embrace the fact that what counts as democratic educational practice cannot, under any circumstances, be known in advance. This is because *who* is in the classroom cannot be anticipated in advance. If we do not know who our students will be, we cannot anticipate their *needs* in the classroom or determine what would be the democratic or undemocratic classroom practices required to meet those needs.

Conclusion

This paper has problematized the very notion of inclusion and questioned its merit for achieving true democracy in education. We have argued that the usefulness of the concept is itself in question since it leads to several problematic implications including an 'us/them' dichotomy, an assumed and predetermined image of what democracy and democratic educational practices are, and the reductive way it engages with individual human beings in educational spaces.

The point that we wish to promote in this paper is a critical one grounded in an appreciation of plurality rather than difference. Following the critical framework for theoretically engaging with inclusivity in education, we believe that true inclusivity means not only mainstreaming or integrating explicit or developmental differences into 'normal' programs, but also troubling the very notion of 'normal' that organizes standardized programs in the first place. A desirable conceptualization of inclusion hinges on redressing the ways the neoliberal and neocolonial system of contemporary western schooling has been organized. In this respect, inclusion produces alterity and Otherness along axes that include but are not limited to identity, race, sexuality, gender, class, immigration status, or ability. This form of inclusion does not seek out integration of particularity and marginality in schools but works to disassemble the notions of normalcy that produce difference in the first place. The most essential part of our approach is not merely reconceiving

how to define concepts such as inclusion, normalcy, difference, need, or democracy in education, but to adopt an entirely new 'order of operations', so-to-speak, on how to plan and execute programming.

In essence, democracy values equity and plurality over a one-size-fits-all mentality. It thrives on critical and open discussion rather than the pervasive silencing of individuality and opinion. Democracy values social justice by constantly negotiating across difference in an effort to fulfill the particular needs of individuals rather than homogenizing their need according to a false standard of normalcy. In a nutshell, democracy values possibilities rather than an attitude of fatalism and deficit mentality. If it is possible to accomplish all of these goals under the name of inclusion, then so be it. But, for reasons we have addressed here, we believe that a new commitment ought to be made to the Arendtian notion of plurality as we strive in our theory and practice toward democratic ideals in education.

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