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Ability and Belonging: Reflections on Leadership

World Education Leadership Symposium
2021 Virtual Conference

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What does it take to belong?

Normalcy = Belonging

Overwhelmingly, schools prioritize normalcy as the key to belonging in classrooms. We talk about "general education" classrooms and a host of spin-off spaces in which "exceptional" students learn, for example.

Historically, U.S. struggles for civil and human rights have accepted this equation (Baynton, 2001).

- Abolition of slavery
- Women's suffrage
- Immigration

Let us in, because we are just as normal as the dominant group.

Being = Belonging

Mackey (2018) offers a different provocation on the ontology of belonging. Normalcy has no role in an Indigenous concept of belonging.

Indigenous people consider all to be fully participating members of the community regardless of ability, each contributing as intended by the creator, mediated through natural, relational forces. This is a direct reflection of Indigenous ontology that does not seek to establish one objective truth, but recognizes multiple realities exist in relation to one's orientation towards the truth (Mackey, 2018, p. 6)

Inclusion and Possession

Students legally own their education, which is the basis of due process provisions for any attempt to remove or significantly change it via discipline or special education policy and practice. (Cambron-McCabe, et al., 2014)

However… Whiteness as Property

White supremacy is implicit in conventional dynamics of inclusion and exclusion.

The power to define who can be in a space or use it implies the power of ownership. Harris (1995) defined whiteness as property in the context of law.

School owns the classroom, and demonstrates that authority by delineating who may be there. We regard those norms as deeply entrenched in ableism and racism, and consider it a moral imperative for leaders to disrupt them (Bornstein & Manaseri, 2018).

Being "smart" and "good" are the tickets into the classroom. Those qualities are synonymous with White expressions of cognition and compliance (Bornstein, 2015; Broderick & Leonardo, 2016; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011).

Globally

Dominant cultures v. Subaltern ethnic minorities

Harry (2013)

Koreans and Brakumin in Japan

Moroccans in Spain

Roma throughout Southern & Central Europe

Finns in Sweden

Maori in New Zealand

Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, & West Indians in U.K.

Shield's Framework	Leadership in Action
Tenet 1: Deep and Equitable Change	• Audit policies and practices that assume White and ableist precepts of normalcy. • Gain democratic buy-in that all students belong because they exist, not because they meet normative expectations.
Tenet 2: The Necessity of New Knowledge	• Convene stakeholders to redefine expectations.
Tenet 3: Address the Inequitable Distribution of Power	• Replace medicalized analysis in decision-making teams ; encourage multiple valid realities.
Tenet 4: Balancing Private and Public Good	• Disrupt argument that atypical students don't belong • Promote the benefits of differentiated instruction and universal design for learning. • Replace exclusionary discipline practices.

Shield's Framework	Leadership in Action
Tenet 5: A Focus on Emancipation, Democracy, Equity and Justice	• Reconstruct school mission emphasizing full citizenship to every student. • Emphasize that excluding some students harms the relationships of all
Tenet 6: An Emphasis on Interdependence, Interconnectedness and Global Awareness	• Highlight interdependent restorative practices • Support teachers to make difficult decisions that emphasize interdependence
Tenet 7: Balance Critique and Promise	• Emphasize the promise of UDL, while critiquing exclusionary conventions. • Audit curriculum for Funds of Knowledge (Moll et al., 2005) approach to cultural responsiveness.
Tenet 8: Exhibit Moral Courage	• Explicitly invite difficult conversations among stakeholders. • Trust decision-makers to solve problems collaboratively

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