Sarah L. Schlessinger

THE RESILIENT TEACHER

Creating Positive Change through Inclusive Classrooms

Education Studies

Collection Editor
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LPP

This book is dedicated to the people who have taught and continue to teach me about love.

Abstract

The work of teaching is nuanced, creative, and intellectual work, that is culturally undervalued. When that work is aimed at building inclusivity and social justice, it is often minimized or disallowed. This text offers narratives and practices for teachers for social justice and inclusivity to deepen their inclusive praxis for their students and simultaneously build the necessary resiliency to persist in doing the work. From curricular play to creating loving, trusting relationships with students, this book offers the stories of teachers who do their work brilliantly and, through their practice, sustain themselves and grow themselves in their profession.

Keywords

Acknowledgments

This text is a collection of narratives. Narratives are a fundamental way humans make sense of the world and share experiences. They help us understand complex ideas, emotions, and events by placing them within a relatable context. A narrative approach acknowledges that reality is multifaceted and offers a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of events or situations. A narrative approach also requires and relies on multiple perspectives coming together into one cohesive story. This is all to say that although my name is on the cover of the book, it only exists because of the thinking, teaching and contributions of very many people.

I would like to take this space to express my gratitude to those who helped create these narratives as I have represented them in this text. I am forever grateful to the individuals whose stories I share for their willingness to invite me into their classrooms, their thinking, and their hearts as we explored the complexity of teaching for social justice and inclusivity together. You are all actual heroes; you are brilliant, and I strive to be a little bit more like each of you as a resilient teacher.

The ideas that structure the analytic work in this text come from the many generative years of thinking, talking, and writing with Dr. Celia Oyler and Dr. Wanda Watson about a praxis of critical inclusivity, pedagogies of love, and how to prepare teachers who can pursue their social justice aims in the exclusionary context

of our schooling system. Thank you to Dr. Srikala Naraian for teaching me what goes into the writing of a book and for always pushing my thinking with your thoughtful brilliance. Thank you to Dr. Kara Hollins for all of the impromptu reads of my drafted chapters. Thank you to Dr. Janise Hurtig; it has been a pleasure working with you and learning from you throughout the production of this text. And to the team at LPP, thank you all for finding me, trusting me, and for bearing with me through the growing pains of new parenthood. And, of course, thank you to Jamie for talking every little bit of this through with me and to Jude for giving me the absolute best excuse to not write.

Contents

Learning objectives

1. To understand the barriers to and complexity of teaching for social justice and inclusivity in a schooling system designed to sort and segregate.
2. To explore the power to build teacher resilience by teaching for social justice and inclusivity.
3. To consider the importance of a teacher's education and stance as they work to be resilient.
4. To confront and disrupt hierarchical power as a tool for building teacher resilience.
5. To embrace love and vulnerability as central components of teaching for social justice and inclusivity and of building teacher resilience.
6. To question curricular design and pursue responsive, accessible, and engaging curricular modifications as an act of teacher intellectualism and creativity.
7. To consider the importance of collaborative and loving learning communities for teachers' resilience.

1
Introduction

Changing the world is hard and so is teaching

I came to teaching by way of a commitment to equity. I grew up on the south side of Chicago in a neighborhood with a complex history around race and socioeconomics. My childhood neighborhood is home to a prestigious university that worked hard in the 1950s and 1960s to counteract white flight, and in doing so, created a space where racial and socioeconomic diversity were lived realities of daily life. That, coupled with my parents' efforts to make sure that, living on the south side of Chicago, I knew I was Jewish, led to a seriously skewed perception of US society. I was pretty sure that Chicago was a predominantly Jewish city (it is not), knew to stand for the singing of "Lift Every Voice and Sing" (the Black national anthem), and was well aware of my white privilege, even if I didn't have a name for it yet. My best friends and I all came from different family structures, different levels of wealth, and different racial and cultural backgrounds, and we all loved each other and shared our homes, families, and experiences.

I couldn't tell you what curriculum or textbooks my teachers were using, and I know that we were tracked for language arts and math. I know that the few white kids at the school were always in the "high-level" math and language arts classes. I also know that we studied W.E.B. Du Bois, and I assumed he was part of the national social studies curriculum until I got to graduate school. We took field trips to the Field Museum of Natural History *and* the DuSable Black History Museum and Education Center. We learned to care for each other: when it was time to take the Constitution test in eighth grade, we knew that Devon's learning disability was going to impact his success on the test, but there was no way that we were going to let him not pass. It's a sunny recollection of a place and time that were also fraught with tensions driven by that very same diversity. Nevertheless, this formative experience grounded me in a naive and unrefined but passionate belief that we learn from people who are different from us and that we all deserve equal access to opportunities to learn.

As an idealistic undergraduate student at a liberal arts institution, the one clear learning I could take away from my studies was that society was operating within and through biased structures that regularly created inequities. Our systems and standards created the haves and the have-nots. And more often than not, those structures operated on the basis of human difference, valuing particular differences as strengths and others as weaknesses. If a liberal arts education is designed to help students find their passion, Connecticut College had succeeded in its mission with me: I knew that whatever my work was to be, I had to work to change systems of inequity. I had to invest my life in making the

world at least slightly fairer, and my theory was that the single most significant factor to invest in for a more equitable world was education. If everyone had access to excellent educational opportunities, anyone could develop the skills to change their own circumstances, they would have more opportunities to thrive, and if everyone had this access, everyone could succeed. Putting aside my obvious naivete regarding those very same systems I was sure I was going to change, this drive to provide equal access to excellent educational opportunities continues to be my driving motivation. It is a motivation that I share with the vast majority of teachers I have met across my 20 years in this field, especially when working from the most uninterrogated understanding of social justice: "'fairness' and 'equality' for all people and a respect for their basic human rights" (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017, p. xix).

My story is specific to me, but it is not unique. This commitment to equity and access are ubiquitous, although reached through a plethora of diverse lived experiences. Teachers, not all but most, come to the profession, as I did, because they want to make an impact. Those who come to teaching with social justice pursuits in mind generally want to make an impact for specific students regarding equity and access. On that path, they will likely deepen their understanding of social justice, as I did, encountering, recognizing, or being taught about the complexities and depth of our stratified society, the depth of this inequality in our daily lives and taken-for-granted ways of being, and the extent of the task and charge to make a difference (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017). They will encounter a great many frameworks to inform their mindsets and their practices, depending largely on the academic

programs they enroll in and the academics that guide their intro-duction to the field.

Finding my commitments and my theorists

I first fell in love with the critical theorists like Jean Anyon, Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, and Peter McClaren, who authored the texts that spoke to me in my undergraduate and early graduate career. Through critical theory, these scholars named the structures of society that were working to position some as "oppressed" and others as "oppressors" and offered critical pedagogy, a specific educational solution, as a path I might subscribe to in my pursuit of change. Critical pedagogy, they taught me, is grounded in the notion that teaching and learning are political acts and that we should all be given access to opportunities to question our world and to question power. As Giroux (2010) explains,

> Critical pedagogy opens up a space where students should be able to come to terms with their own power as critically engaged citizens; it provides a sphere where the unconditional freedom to question and assert is central to the purpose of public schooling and higher education, if not democracy itself. (p. 717)

This framework spoke directly to me and my democratic aims; it was about the political; it was about participatory citizenship; it was everything that I wanted to be enacting as a teacher. Until I learned more.

Geneva Gay and Gloria Ladson Billings brought culturally rele-vant and responsive teaching into my evolving framework. Their

work helped me understand that a dominant white culture had set standards that were not reflective of the lives, knowledge, or experiences of people of color. They helped me see that, because of this white supremacy, school curriculum was inequitable and more accessible to white middle- and upper-class students than to students of color or students living under the poverty line. David Rose and Carol Tomlinson introduced me to concepts of Universal Design for Learning and differentiated instruction, approaches to designing and implementing instruction that would, potentially, make the lessons that I taught accessible to all of my students, even my students with disabilities. Teaching with a commitment to equity and access kept getting more and more complicated, and I hadn't even learned to question the construct of disability yet.

The reality of the classroom

I studied these scholars and strove to enact their philosophies and practices as I began teaching in a seventh-grade Collaborative Team Teaching (CTT) classroom. I traveled from classroom to classroom with my students, 50 percent of whom were diagnosed with learning disabilities, behavioral disabilities, and speech and language disabilities, as they received instruction in various standardized content. Time and time again, I found myself struggling, mostly with but occasionally against my co-teachers, as we tried to make the content "work" for this group of students. While all of my understandings of and commitments to social justice rang out loud and clear in my head and heart, the phrase "he just doesn't belong in this classroom" was the loudest sound of all. Recognizing that the "he" in this sentence was more

often than not a male student and a student of color, I knew that I needed to dig deeper and understand why the Black and Brown boys were such a prevalent cohort in special education. I couldn't name what I saw, but I knew that it was something more complicated than coincidentally having multiple groups of students, year after year, where these "high incidence disabilities" were predominantly present in this particular cohort.

I knew that I was not supporting my students to access compelling learning opportunities or critical or responsive learning opportunities. Oftentimes, it felt like I wasn't helping them access any learning opportunities at all. As I sought to do better for my students and to understand what I can now name as the disproportionate representation of Black and Brown students in special education (Artiles, Trent, and Palmer, 2004), I found the scholars of disability studies and disability studies in education (DSE). By situating disability as socially constructed within our stratified society, by questioning who and what defined "good" or "smart," I began to see how disability as a difference continues to be seen as an individual human deficiency and a legitimate justification for exclusion in our society and schools (Valle and Connor, 2019). I also came to recognize how it is used as a mechanism through which to exclude people based on other markers of difference (Broderick and Leonardo, 2016) that deviate from a centered "norm," a white, affluent, male, cisgender, straight, English-speaking, Christian, and able-bodied "norm" (Garland-Thompson, 2017). Ferguson and Nusbaum (2012) offer that:

> the most important reason to explore the meaning(s) of disability is not to understand disability itself but to understand other categories of human difference. In

> other words, the study of disability (and the concept
> of "disability") is at the foundation of our understand-
> ing of the social construction of race, gender, class, and
> other ways in which we differentiate ourselves from one
> another. It Is essential, in short, to our understanding of
> how we see ourselves as same and different. (p. 73)

Difference was what mattered, or what we have made matter as
a society. The societally constructed ways we value certain differ-
ences and vilify others have a real impact on people's lives, their
access, and their opportunities. In disability studies in education,
I found a philosophy that accounted for the inequities I was see-
ing and participating in across multiple intersecting markers of
difference.

Finding inclusive education

I found inclusive education as the pedagogy that I could get
behind to do the work of societal change. Inclusive education
was somewhat of a revelation to me as I learned more about it.
From a DSE perspective, inclusive education is not the service
delivery model of inclusion, not my Collaborative Team Teaching
class with students with and without labeled disabilities. Inclusive
education is not a service delivery model, is not a place or loca-
tion. It is a stance, an active pursuit,

> an ongoing struggle toward (a) the redistribution of
> access to and participation in quality opportunities to
> learn, (b) the recognition and valuing of all students' dif-
> ferences as reflected in content, pedagogy, and assess-
> ment tools, and (c) the creation of more opportunities for
> non-dominant groups to advance claims of educational

> exclusion and their respective solutions. (Waitoller and Artiles, 2013, p. 322)

Inclusive education rejects inclusionism, which requires us to diagnose a person's disability, label them as different, push them out of typical classroom engagement because of that difference, and then allow them to be included in a general education classroom. Inclusive education instead embraces inclusivity, or "teaching all students, attending to the material needs of disability, and valuing all the differences in the classroom" (Schlessinger and Oyler, in press) full stop. I ground my commitments to teaching for social justice in a praxis of critical inclusivity, driven by critical disability studies and dis-crit and that is where I ground this book. In doing so, I hope to open the narratives and practices included to as many educators committed social justice pedagogies as possible. You have followed your own path to arrive at your commitments, and you may define them differently, but I hope to provide a space of connectivity where you know that you are not alone. I hope to support you to know that you are doing the work and that you can find ways to ignite and reignite your passion. This book is for teachers. You are resilient.

The struggle to teach for change

The work of teaching is nuanced, creative, and intellectual work that is culturally undervalued. To reach and teach a classroom of students well, a teacher has to know the students in the classroom, own the content and the formal curriculum, have enough confidence in their knowledge of the curriculum and of teaching and learning to manipulate the curriculum to be engaging for their specific students, know how to tell whether students

understand the content, and know how to respond and adjust when they don't. All of this is done on a tight schedule with little room to "fall behind" the curricular pacing and while also holding the responsibility to "manage" their classrooms. If a student is struggling academically, that responsibility falls to the classroom teacher. If a student is struggling emotionally, that responsibility falls to the classroom teacher. If a student is struggling attentionally, that responsibility falls to the classroom teacher. All of these potential struggles of the individuals in a classroom, likely a classroom with too many students, impact the class as a whole and the learning that goes on within those walls. Teachers get to school before they can drop off their own children for the day. Teachers become team coaches and after-school tutors or simply stay after dismissal to get a handle on what happened that day and prepare for the next. Teachers bring work home with them, grading 30 plus papers overnight and planning class for the next day. Teachers fall asleep trying to figure out how to help that one student that they are so worried about, or what learning activity will actually help their students understand the learning objective. Teachers hold a responsibility to families; they are providing what are arguably the most important formative experiences to somebody else's babies. And don't worry, teachers have endless paperwork to stay on top of and are asked to cover other teacher's classrooms when they are absent to help out across the school. Nothing about teaching is easy. Maybe the summers, but summers are getting shorter and many teachers spend their summers in professional development, planning curriculum for the fall, or working a second job to make a little extra cash.

One would think that a career that requires this level of traditional knowledge, creativity, reflection, inquiry, people skills, research, organization, follow-through, and love would be highly valued, highly paid, and highly respected. While some cultures within our larger American society do position teachers as respected members of the community, the salaries and lack of autonomy associated with the profession tell a different story (see working a second job for extra cash noted above). Teachers hustle. They tutor, they scrounge for "per-session" pay through their school; I've even known people to keep their jobs with airlines or tending bar just to make it all work. Beyond the salary, rather than being exalted for the difficulty and complexity of the profession, teachers are infantilized for their choice to work with children and blamed and vilified for the flaws in a system they did not design and are often working to change. Drew and Sosnowski (2019) put it bluntly when they write:

> Many refer to education as the profession that eats its young (Halford, 1998). Nearly 50 percent of teachers entering the profession leave in the first five years (Ingersoll and Merrill, 2012). Attrition comprises 90 percent of the national annual demand for teachers, leading to a persistent shortage (Castro et al., 2018). Working conditions are cited as the primary reason teachers leave (Sutcher et al., 2016) (p. 492).

This is the general context of teaching. When a teacher is committed to building inclusivity and social justice, they are working under the burden of this general context of teaching AND grinding against traditional schooling systems that are built on principles of assimilation, standardization, and normalization

which minimize or disallow social justice-oriented pedagogies. Teachers for social justice and inclusivity come to their work passionately and idealistically, eager to change a broken system built on underpinnings of white supremacy and ableism, eager to provide equity and access to their students. Whether it is the content that is taught, the ways of knowing and expressing knowledge that are privileged, or the behaviors that are deemed in/appropriate, teachers for social justice and inclusivity can see and feel the ways that traditional practices of schooling work to exclude and demoralize their students. They *want* to create change.

Managing the schedule and the responsibilities of teaching is a grueling task in and of itself. Doing so in a context that you are actively working to change can be overwhelming, disheartening, stressful, and isolating. Be it critical pedagogy, culturally sustaining pedagogy, anti-racist pedagogies, or inclusivity, all social justice-oriented pedagogies exist because the structures of schooling privilege certain people and oppress others. Teachers who come to know and love these pedagogies are committing themselves to being agents of change who can dismantle racist, classist, sexist, xenophobic, and ableist exclusionary structures (Ashby, 2012; Oyler, 2011).

I knew I was going to change the world from my position as teacher in my co-taught seventh-grade English Language Arts classroom. If I could reach all of my students, if I could find the right book to get each kid interested in reading, if I could create enough curricular space in the writing classroom to help them each find their voice enough to want to learn how to

write … I believed that this work would make a change for my students and that change for my students would lead to a change for the school, for the next group of students, for every teacher who interacted with my students in eighth grade and high school. I knew that it would ripple. I knew my choices could create change. What I did not know or understand was that my agency, my efforts to make change, were contextualized by the resources I had, the policies and mandates of my school, the norms of teacher professionalism and student achievement, and the larger sociopolitical context in which I was working (Naraian and Schlessinger, 2021; Pantic, 2015). I knew that I could effect change, but I was not experiencing the change I wanted to see, and I internalized this as my own failure to reach my students and my own failure as an agent of change. And so, like so many others, I left the classroom seeking more knowledge to do better. In my case, I ran to academia. This frustration to do the work and make an impact, the tension between social justice-oriented pedagogies and the reality of school contexts (Naraian and Schlessinger, 2018) pushes many well-intentioned teachers to their limits, out of the field, or to abandon their ideals. I do not think it has to be this way. This book offers narratives and practices for teachers for social justice and inclusivity to support them as they work to build resilience, persist in doing the work, and grow their careers in the classroom.

White supremacy and ableism

In this book, I use the term "white supremacy" to talk about the systems of schooling that we often take for granted in the day-to-day of working in schools. When I use this term, I mean to

refer to the complex and enduring systems of oppression that grant privileges to white people and disadvantage people of color (APA Task Force on Race and the Psychological Profession, 2017). White supremacy is rooted in historical power structures and continues to manifest through social structures, cultural representations, and economic policies (Sue and Spanierman, 2020). As Deliovsky (2010) argues, the very category of "whiteness" itself is a political construct used to justify the exploitation and marginalization of non-white groups for wealth, power, and psychological advantage. White supremacy can be blatant, like discriminatory laws, or subtle, like racial microaggressions, but its impact is undeniable, affecting everything from healthcare access to criminal justice outcomes and, of course, schooling (Jaffee and Casey, 2020). Understanding white supremacy as a system, not just individual prejudice, is crucial for dismantling its enduring legacy.

Ableism, a form of discrimination and oppression directed toward people with disabilities, is rooted in the assumption that people with disabilities are inferior or less valuable than those without disabilities (Goodley, 2016). Ableism can manifest in discriminatory attitudes, physical and social barriers, and societal expectations that exclude or disadvantage people with disabilities. It can limit opportunities for education, employment, and social participation, perpetuating a cycle of marginalization and inequality. Annamma et al. (2013) highlight how "racism validates and reinforces ableism, and ableism validates and reinforces racism" (p. 6) through their parallel and intersecting systems of oppression. Throughout this book, as I refer to white supremacy and/or ableism, I do not separate the two as distinct systems of

oppression. As I refer to teaching for inclusivity and for social justice, I am forwarding the belief that in order to dismantle white supremacy, we must also dismantle ableism, and in order to dismantle ableism, we must also dismantle white supremacy.

Resilience

Teacher resilience can be understood as the "capacity to manage the unavoidable uncertainties inherent in the realities of teaching" (p. 39) and to "maintain equilibrium and a sense of commitment and agency" (Gu and Day, 2013, p. 26). It is the ability of teachers to cope with the challenges of the teaching profession and to continue to be effective in their work. Resilience is not survival; it is more than survival. Survival suggests just making it through, sacrificing what you need to, keeping your head down, taking one day at a time, getting through the job. Resilience, on the other hand, is powerful. Resilience is the continued pursuit of commitments and goals, the continued confidence to advocate and push forward deliberately, even when it is a challenge, even when you get knocked down. Resilience is what it takes to work toward social justice and inclusivity day after day in the contexts of systems of schooling and societal constructs that perpetuate exclusion and inequity.

Resilience is not something that you can expect to find innate within yourself, nor is it a "capacity" that we can test for. It is situational and dynamic, shaped by personal experiences and contextualized (Mansfield et al., 2016). A commitment to teaching for social justice and inclusivity is one of those factors that shapes resiliency. On the one hand, working against societal structures to effect change can create more barriers for a teacher in the daily

practices of their job. On the other hand, it is this same commitment that can be drawn on as a resource to build resilience. The same thing that creates those barriers can be used as a mechanism to foster your resilience. I left the K–12 classroom after five years. I did not know how to draw on my commitment to equity and access to deepen my resilience. I have spent the years since then learning from teacher after teacher about their practices for social justice and inclusivity. I have watched their resilience grow. It is their stories that I want to offer you as you seek to build your own resiliency by/while teaching for social justice and inclusivity.

A caveat

It shouldn't be this way. To work this hard, this thoughtfully, and against so many taken-for-granted structures; to work with this much love and receive so little in return; it shouldn't be this way. This book is not intended to give the educational system validity or to suggest that this is what teachers should have to do in order to teach for social justice and inclusivity. Nevertheless, this is the system we have inherited. This book is for those people who are not Ok with this system and who want to try to change it, even knowing how much uphill work there is to be done. There may be moments in this book where you feel yourself getting angry and wondering why you should be asked to do so much extra just to do your job. And you are right. It isn't fair, but it is the reality of this work. My hope is to give you some tools to manage it and do the work that you are passionate about. The key to resilience lies in understanding the importance of being realistic at the same time as being aspirational. This means acknowledging

the current situation for what it is while still holding onto our goals for the future and for change.

Each narrative in this book is intended to highlight a particular practice of inclusivity that built teacher resilience for people like you. These practices intersect and overlap. They are also challenging and can take years to build into your practice. Take what is useful for you here, what feels like it will help you, and keep your focus on the purpose. You want to make change and you don't want this system to push you out. This is who you want to be, so let's help you be that teacher, that person.

2
Knowing your commitments

Teacher education programs aimed at graduating social justice-oriented educators tend to start their programming with a reflective moment for student teachers to consider who they are and what informs their decision to teach. These programs will then go into the foundational theories that guide the program's approach to teaching for social justice and inclusivity. Professors ask education students to reflect on their personal histories through the lens of these theoretically driven programmatic underpinnings. For example, student teachers might be asked to read portions of Kendi's (2023) *How to Be an Anti-Racist* and then discuss or write about their own biases or the ways in which they do or could begin to speak out against racism. They may be assigned chapters from Valle and Connor's (2019) *Rethinking Disability: A Disability Studies Approach to Inclusive Practices* and use a social model of disability framework to revise previous statements they made about teaching and learning or their ideal classroom. The learning theory behind this approach suggests that we must begin to teach for social justice and inclusivity by naming the systems that oppress and seeking to understand the ways in which we are complicit in that oppression through our

mundane, everyday actions (Oyler, 2017). It suggests that we must first reflect on and reframe our social justice commitments to make intentionally inclusive social justice-oriented decisions in our teaching practice. So much of what school is and what school does is taken for granted. So, in order to understand how to teach inclusively, how to be a social justice-oriented inclusive educator, it matters to understand the ways that schools and pedagogies are and are not working toward those same goals.

I met Catherine[1] when she enrolled in one of these teacher education programs aimed at graduating social justice-oriented educators who teach inclusively. In many ways, her choice to enroll in this particular program already illustrated that she had a commitment to teaching for social justice and inclusivity. Born and raised in New York City, Catherine, a Latina woman, had grown up through schooling that she could name as exclusionary. In her own schooling experience, she had seen how students who spoke multiple languages were positioned as "low-performing students" in classrooms that privileged the reading and writing of the English language. She had experienced her own family being alienated during parent–teacher conferences. And she had felt her own pushout when she began receiving speech services out of the classroom and regularly missing class content.

Catherine studied education and philosophy during her undergraduate career and came to her new teaching career and graduate studies ready to discuss structural racism, xenophobia, and ableism. Even with this in-depth experiential understanding of

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1   The names used in this book are pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of the participants.