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Critical Review

Philosophy, Politics and Economics: The Story of Inclusive Education in the US

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Abstract: *Inclusion has referred to different areas of culture throughout history. For education, inclusion refers to the merging of students with different abilities into a single classroom. On social, political, and economic levels, inclusion affects society in many ways. Because people comprise the core of American society, equity and accessibility in all areas is paramount. Current educational thought in America, resounding with the effects of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001 (better known as No Child Left Behind or "NCLB"), has led to attempts at increased equity and accessibility in United States' education. However, NCLB is tied inextricably to traditional education methods delineated by Tyler and other curricular theorists of his era. The pendulum of educational thought has begun swinging towards integration of constructivist theory. As curriculum is developed and stakeholders are consulted, one group of stakeholders has historically been ignored in the United States: Students. The consideration of the student as a significant stakeholder in the educational process, along with appropriate rights and privileges, is a key factor in expanding inclusion within the educational realm.*

Introduction

A working definition of inclusion in the United States is the practice of merging students of various mental and physical abilities' levels into one classroom to meet individual students' educational needs (Sapon-Shevin, 2007). Inclusion of all peoples has been a burgeoning issue since the early 1900s in the United States (Hamilton, 1999; Zinn, 2005). From the earliest days of school busing, through civil rights movements, to the myriad of curricular reform that was evident in the late 20th century, the United States has attempted to meet the needs of varying ethnic groups and learner differences under the umbrella of inclusion (Abplanalp, 2000; Lawrence-Brown, 2004; Rorabaugh, 2008; Sharpe, 2005). Even though students have neither had the opportunity nor been considered to have the wisdom to make their own curricular decisions, curricular reform needs to include the needs of all students because curriculum is a mirror of societal reform and economic success (Kantor and Lowe, 2007). The following analysis of inclusiveness, as it applies to curriculum, examines not only the historical, political, societal, and economic aspects of the issue but it also evaluates ideas of curricular inclusiveness for the current generation of school-aged children. The blending of students with different abilities into inclusive classrooms to promote instructional equity mirrors the societal evolution of the United States (Lawrence-Brown, 2004; Sass, 2008). Under the current educational legislation and climate of standards-based testing present in the United States, the practice of educational inclusion presents a challenge to educators for future generations of students: Should education focus on "no child left behind" or "all children included"? Furthermore, what will inclusion mean for the future of American students?

Inclusiveness in History

The story of inclusion in the United States began with ethnic roots as an issue whose roots extended to the beginnings of the country (Zinn, 2005). From the questions and economic implications of the African slave trade to the blending of the many different cultures that defined America, the country has struggled to honor the heritage and needs of all people

who call America home. Despite the desire expressed in the Declaration of Independence to include all peoples in a single country that includes as its backbone the phrase, "with liberty and justice for all", exclusiveness reigned and was apparent in politics, economics, religious practice, and education (Abplanalp, 2000; Shea, 2006; Zinn, 2005).

Inclusiveness and Society

Many issues of inclusiveness echo among historical, political, and social realms. The blending of the many cultures into the "melting pot" that became America has not been without friction (Weiss, 2007; Zinn, 2005). The feeling of belonging to a group is a basic human need that manifests itself in exclusion of people who are different from the group norm. America's push for inclusion is a result of the equality guaranteed by the Declaration of Independence. Paradoxically, the writers of the Declaration of Independence were wealthy landowners who themselves resisted inclusion (Zinn, 2005). Many works of American literature, including *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn,* chronicle the societal pressures that result from ethnic blending. Attempts at forced inclusion such as school and church desegregation initially met with resistance (Abplanalp, 2000; Murray, 1985). Over time, the struggle settled into an uneasy coexistence between people of various ethnicities and backgrounds (Shea, 2006).

Despite its societal problems, the United States strives to offer equity and accessibility of education for all students (Sadashiva, 2005). In education, inclusiveness extends to encompass all students regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnic background, and mental and physical abilities (Rusaw, 1998). However, if the United States' society is to grow to meet the needs of 21st century learners, a discussion of educational inclusiveness must include an examination of economic foundations.

Inclusiveness and Economics

People are the root of a country's economy. Economics in the United States is a curious interplay of conflicting ideas and political agendas (Wolfe, 1947). However, the United States' economy, built upon cultural diversity, thrives in the presence of societal semi-chaos. Inclusiveness across all levels of United States' culture strengthens the economic base of the country (Rodgers and Payne, 2007; Spanier, 2001). Since United States' economics is closely linked to educational equity and availability, the link between economics and education is tightly forged (Dale, 2009; Hogg, 2009). The push for inclusiveness on any level follows the same trend as educational reform: During periods of economic and military turmoil, inclusiveness wanes in importance. In the financial turmoil that the country experienced beginning in 2006, the economic despair in the United States shrouded much inclusive progress witnessed in the latter part of the 20th century. Once the country can regain its economic stability, human progress in the form of inclusiveness can once again regain prominence (Holmes and de Piñeres, 2006). As economic leaders work to rebuild the American economy, political agendas will dictate the future steps of inclusive education in the country.

Inclusiveness in Politics

Conflicting political ideas and agendas weave together with economic and societal issues in America. Reconciling the needs of the cultural diversity that characterises the United States can be a daunting effort because of the political dimensions that infuse the country's society. Inclusiveness in many realms has been a political issue for at least the last century in America (Sass, 2008).

One of the political efforts in the country is a goal of educational equity. The pursuit of equity in education in the United States stems from centuries-old roots and has risen to prominence over the last hundred years (Theobald, 2009). The increased intricacy in the societal and economics' demands of the last century has led to greater political complexity and debates ranging from distribution of governmental resources, to desegregation efforts, and to educational inclusiveness (Edwards, Crain and Kalleberg, 2007; Lee, 2009). Educational inclusiveness, which sometimes implies the need for extra resources, challenges the political framework in America (Miles and Ahuja, 2007). Under NCLB, additional resources went to schools that performed well on standardised tests. Inclusion of all students and any additional resources necessary may involve some political reworking of the educational system in America.

Inclusiveness and Education: Key 20th Century Events

In the 20th century, various legislative acts sought to promote equal access and inclusion to the United States' character of economic opportunity, religious freedom, and educational opportunities. Beginning in the 1930s, school busing initiatives marked the first tangible step toward inclusion of students from different socioeconomic levels (Sass, 2008). Because of World War II and the emerging Cold War, inclusiveness was a less prominent issue. It became evident that racial issues like ethnic segregation remained unsolved and grew in importance in the mid-20th century. With the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1960, America took a step toward inclusiveness in both societal and educational arenas. The next notable legislation regarding educational inclusiveness was the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, which sought to provide educational opportunities to minority ethnic groups and other disadvantaged students (Association for Educational Communication and Technology [AECT], 2001). The ESEA provided funding for schools designated to improve equity and availability of education.

As an extension of the ESEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 promoted the inclusion of students with disabilities and established special programmes to accommodate students of all physical and mental abilities. According to Harrower (1999), the inclusion of students with severe learning disabilities under the IDEA sparked debate about the academic achievement of disabled students in regular classrooms and the viability of inclusionary legislation. Under the umbrella of inclusiveness, schools have increased educational offerings to include multiple languages and opportunities for students to attend different schools (Algozzine and Anderson, 2007). American with disabilities became a part of mainstream culture (Algozzine and Anderson, 2007).

In an effort to guarantee academic achievement within an atmosphere of inclusiveness, the US government enacted the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) (US Department of Education, 2001). What NCLB ignored was the heart of inclusiveness: differentiation of instruction (Tomlinson, 2004). In its attempt to create a uniform curriculum that benefited all children, NCLB hampered inclusiveness because it stifled classroom differentiation in the name of standardised testing. The intent of the IDEA legislation in 1990 to NCLB in 2001 has been to include all students in quality education (US Department of Education, 2001). At some point, the quantity and measurability of education replaced the quality of education and inclusiveness became synonymous with chaos (Shea, 2006).

Inclusiveness: Current Educational Thought, and Future Implications

Never before in America have the boundaries that define the country been as invisible or the knowledge as accessible as that found on the Internet. A wealth of knowledge exists on the

Internet that changes and grows so rapidly that textbooks cannot capture it (Brown, 2006). Students are no longer restricted to traditional modes of learning, reflecting more inclusive curriculum (Lawrence-Brown, 2004). Students today access knowledge in a way unimaginable to the Committee of Ten of 1892, whose traditional school design still exists (Glatthorn, Boschee and Whitehead, 2009). The increased accessibility of information challenges and adds new dimensions to the inclusion debate, including computer and internet access and implications on educational equity and availability for families with different income levels.

Current educational thought in America is a product of the traditionalist beginnings and reform efforts spanning the last century, as evidenced by NCLB (Glatthorn *et al*, 2009; US Department of Education, 2001). A product of the curricular reform of the last few decades, the undercurrent of constructivism and experientialism runs through the educational system as well (Posner, 2004). The general feeling is that NCLB, for its good intentions, requires reform to serve the students as the act originally intended, that is, to guarantee academic equity and achievement for all students (McKenzie, 2006; US Department of Education, 2001).

The children of today are the leaders of tomorrow. Stakeholders of the educational process have traditionally included educators, political and legislative bodies, and the communities in which the schools are located. The reactionary legislation of NCLB that has defined the educational climate of the early 21st century in the United States has hampered educational reform by excluding from its decision making process another group of stakeholders: The students. Despite the fact that students are not qualified to make their own curricular decisions, it is important to find out what is important in their lives to help them become engaged in their own learning (The Pacific Institute, 2006). By considering the voice of the students in curricular decisions, students stand to gain an increasing sense of ownership of and investment in their own education (Amtzis, 2003).

The future of inclusiveness involves students and their input into their educational decisions because of the changing nature of available knowledge and the need for students to access and synthesise it (Brown, 2006). The top-down process of the NCLB climate has led to student apathy and watered-down education (McKenzie, 2006). A bottom-up process that includes stakeholders such as teachers, administrators, business people, and students is the future of educational reform. By including not only traditional stakeholders but also the students into the field of curricular reform, education can re-capture the interest of students and promote the desire for lifelong learning that has been stifled for the last decade (Amtzis, 2003). The inclusion of including student voice is the logical future step.

The recognition of the voice of students as a stakeholder in his or her own educational process implies that their input is of value to educational leaders (Amtzis, 2003; Bjarnason, 2005). For educational inclusion to move forward, leaders must attend to the needs of the students. By incorporating the reported needs of students into the educational decision making process, the intent of inclusion – that is, including all people – comes full circle.

Conclusion

Although students may not be equipped to make pedagogical decisions about their own education, students are the key to inclusiveness in curricular reform (Amtzis, 2003; Shea, 2006). Students are the people who need the inspiration and the tools to command and synthesise knowledge, and their inclusion is the post-modern piece of the curriculum puzzle. The buzzword in the early parts of the 21st century in the United States has been “no child left behind”. Perhaps the next part of the century will resound with the term “all children included”.

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