General, special and inclusive: Refiguring professional identities in a collaboratively taught classroom

Srikala Naraian*

Dept. of Curriculum and Teaching, Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W. 120th St., New York, NY 10027, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 23 October 2009
Received in revised form 8 June 2010
Accepted 24 June 2010

Keywords:
Inclusive education
Disability studies
Qualitative research
Collaborative teaching
Special education
Teacher education

ABSTRACT

In implementing inclusive education, special educators frequently collaborate with general educators in various settings. How does such collaborative practice complicate the configuration of their professional identities? This paper uses the framework of figured world (Holland, Lachiotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) to scrutinize the practice of one special educator, Stephanie. Alternatively assuming both subordinate and lead positions within a collaborative teaching team, Stephanie refigured her professional identity and practice contingently, initiating a trajectory of change that extended to “out-of-classroom” spaces (Clandinin & Connolly, 1996). Stephanie's improvisations in this process index the significance of teachers’ authorial spaces in the implementation of inclusive education.

© 2010 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

In some ways, I do feel like my role, aside from teaching writing, has been the special ed teacher. I will do the adjustments on the rug as they are listening to a lesson or I’ll walk up and I’ll start charting the instructions for what the kids are supposed to do so that they get a visual about what Jeanine [the general educator] is saying. But many times, I don’t have a voice within the actual curriculum itself. (Stephanie1, special educator).

1. Introduction: collaborative teaching in the context of inclusive education

It has been rightly pointed out that the discourse around inclusive education has emanated largely within special education (Artiles, Kozleski, Dorn, & Christensen, 2006). The Salamanca Statement adopted by the United Nations in 1994 at the World Conference on Special Needs Education placed inclusive education squarely on the map of international efforts to address the historical marginalization of students with disabilities. Within the economic, political and social constraints unique to their contexts, countries of both the North and South have been engaged in creating and developing the structures that can facilitate the greater inclusion of students with disabilities within mainstream settings (Peters, 2007). One mechanism that has emerged as pivotal in achieving inclusive education outcomes within the United States and the UK centers on collaboration among multiple stakeholders (Ainscow, 2007; Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2007). In the United States, the growing numbers of students with disabilities with primary placements in general education classrooms that are increasingly recognized as culturally and ethnically diverse coupled with recent legal mandates for increased participation of students with disabilities in general education curriculum and assessment, have stimulated a strong interest in collaborative planning and teaching, generating many models of such practice (Nevin, Thousand, & Villa, 2009).

While some have argued for collaboration as a necessary means to “make the profession better as a whole” (Pugach & Johnson, 2002, p. 7) the pragmatic goal of collaborative teaching is to increase access to a wide range of instructional options for students with disabilities in general education classrooms, thereby enhancing their school performance (Cook & Friend, 1995). So, despite the reservations of some about the scientific evidence supporting the efficacy of such practices (Magiera & Zigmond, 2005; Weiss, 2004) collaborative teaching remains an important objective in efforts to achieve inclusive education (Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2004). The implicit rationale that underlies the scholarship in this area is that when special and general educators collaborate effectively, students with disabilities will reap the
benefits. Such studies delineate the conditions that are most conducive to effective collaboration including adequate planning time, unambiguous delineation of roles and responsibilities, administrative support and personal compatibility (Cook & Friend, 1995; Mastropieri et al., 2005; Murawski, 2009; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007; Trent et al., 2003).

The countries that endorsed the Salamanca Statement, however, committed themselves to not only improving the education of students with disabilities but also to the development of schooling systems where “all children should learn together, whenever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have” (UNESCO, 1994, p. 11). The concept of inclusive schooling, therefore, has been broadened to connote schools and classrooms that are hospitable to the unique needs and characteristics of all learners (Ainscow & Miles, 2008; Kluth, Straut, & Biklen, 2003). Such inclusive classrooms deflect attention from apparent deficits of learners to the affordances of the context in promoting their achievement. As inclusive education comes to be viewed increasingly as a means to actualize the United Nations commitment to Education for All (Peters, 2007), preparing teachers to become inclusive educators has now acquired greater urgency within university teacher preparation programs in the United States and in the UK (Florian, 2008; Oyler, 2006; Pugach & Blanton, 2009).

Historically, teachers working with students with disabilities have been socialized into particular identities as special educators belonging to a profession distinct from the parameters of general education (Osgood, 1999, 2002). Now, teachers are presented, as it were, with an additional identity trajectory to the traditional dichotomy of general/special educator—the inclusive educator. These inclusive educators, in practice, however, continue to navigate distinctively separate systems of general and special education, both of which, it has been argued, spawn the same deficit discourses that challenge inclusive goals (Graham & Slee, 2008). As a site of inclusive education, collaborative teaching offers a transitional space that has the potential to blur the boundaries between these professions, unearth ideological threads and generate opportunities for hybridized practice. It can, therefore, offer important insights into the complexities of implementing inclusive education.

Co-teaching between general and special educators means “two or more professionals delivering substantive instruction to a diverse, or blended, group of students in a single physical space” (Cook & Friend, 1998, p. 454 cited in Weiss, 2004). However, the discrepancy between the ideal of “true collaboration between two equal partners” (Scruggs et al., 2007, p. 412) and the complex, dissatisfying, and contradictory illustrations of lived practice suggest that this may be a deceptively simple definition. Stephanie’s opening comment unambiguously attests to the perceived inequity in relations between partner teachers that has surfaced in the literature (Bessette, 2008). As teachers negotiate roles and responsibilities within various forms of collaborative teaching, they seem to continue to remain entrenched in the habits of mind that distinguish their particular professions generating problems of unequal status, incompatibility, and “turf” battles (Magiera & Zigmund, 2005; Scruggs et al., 2007).

Such incompatibility has implications for inclusive practice. Teachers’ subject positions are important narrative resources for their identity construction (Soreide, 2006). Investing in the iden
tificatory possibility (Hodges, 1998) offered by “inclusive” spaces such as collaborative teaching may be premised on a willingness to negotiate, even transgress boundaries (Huber & Whelan, 1999; Oyler, 2006). In the study by Huber and Whelan, a constructed vision of inclusive practice positioned the general education teacher as unknowing and incompetent. Restoring the teacher’s “story to live by” entailed her confrontation of such public understandings, even if that implied accepting a marginalized location within the school space. As that study suggested, teachers can and do alter their positionings, working both within and against the dominant discourses that frame their practice. The centrality of such identity work within teachers’ professional practice has acquired increasing prominence within teacher education research (Geijsel & Meijers, 2005; Gomez, Black, & Allen, 2007; Koo & de Freitas, 2007; Reio, 2005). The significance of teachers’ “becoming” (Marsh, 2002) has been shown to be particularly relevant as teachers negotiate and occupy varied professional spaces within diverse socio-cultural contexts (Gomez et al., 2007; Koo & de Freitas, 2007). So, as the role of a special education teacher within inclusive settings undergoes transformation from traditional singular meanings to encompass greater variety and leadership in responsibilities and locations (French & Chopra, 2006; York-Barr, Sommerness, Duke, & Ghere, 2005), the documentation of identity projects to understand the micropolitics of school change in the context of inclusive reforms becomes increasingly relevant (Artiles et al., 2006). This paper is an attempt to address that issue by considering teacher positionalities in relation to the enactment of inclusive practice.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. “Figured worlds”

Sociocultural perspectives on learning situate the development of individual identities within social and cultural practices (Holland & Lave, 2001; Holland, Lachiotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978). Individual selves are necessarily plural and inextricably embedded in everyday practices. To describe the identity work in which Stephanie engaged, I have drawn on the research by Holland et al. (1998). Drawing extensively on Bakhtin and Vygotsky, Holland et al. emphasize that though the development and production of identities are always mediated by cultural discourses they cannot be determined entirely by them. They seek explanations of human agency that are not circum-
scribed by determinist understandings of individuals in relation to culture. So, rather than envisioning individuals as only compliant with or resistant to cultural discourses, they propose a more expansive framework that considers subject positionality in relation to cultural discourses but also recognizes the multiple unpredict-
dable improvisations enacted by individuals from within those positions. In the meeting of persons, discourses and practice, Holland et al. are interested in how these improvisations can serve as heuristics in the subsequent production of behavior thereby leading to altered identities.

They offer, therefore, the construct of “figured world” which is a “socially and culturally created realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is attached to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others” (p. 52). Such “as-if” realms are not detached from real happenings, but are continually produced and re-produced within the everyday activities of such worlds. These everyday activities are abstracted by individuals to generate certain expectations of how particular events unfold within these worlds, while simultaneously affording the framework by which such events are interpreted. Figured worlds may be evoked by artifacts which are themselves constituted by discourses with peculiar histories (for e.g. the label of “special needs,” “at-risk,” classroom “rules” of behavior, etc.). It is through such artifacts that figured worlds are collectively devel-
oped and made personally meaningful. For example, the term “learning disabled” can evoke a figured world for a teacher in which (s)he comes to hold certain expectations of herself and her students. The same artifact of “learning disabled” might evoke
a figured world for a student labeled as such that mediates his/her relations with other students, with teachers and with his family.

Relations marked by forms of privilege and power characterize the experiences for the teachers, students and families whose figured worlds invoked by the term “learning disabled” might have significant overlaps but also remain distinct precisely because of these relational elements. Consequently, Holland et al. note that identities are as much figurative as they are positional. Figured identities are all about rules—how individuals engage with each other in the context of the activities that inform that world. These rules are assumed, so they originate in the imagination. Positional or relational identities develop in the context of social experiences that are marked by the relations of power that characterize the everyday workings of culturally situated persons. Through the enactment of such identities, figured worlds supply the contexts of meaning in which individuals come to understand themselves and develop the capacity to direct their own behavior. In this sense, the framework explicitly pursues the “everyday construction of actors” (p. 58).

The framework of “figured worlds” has been increasingly adopted as an effective mechanism to describe the social context of identification, especially among socially devalued groups (Bartlett, 2007; Blackmon, 2002/2003; Dagenais, Day, & Toohey, 2006; Rubin, 2007). This framework has even been utilized to investigate efficacy of instructional practices (Jurov, 2005), and to document the multiple worlds that students simultaneously navigate as they engage with varying curricular contexts (Luttrell & Parker, 2001). The construct of “figured world” then, is an important heuristic for understanding identity production in education (Urrieta, 2007) and therefore well suited to describing the identity work of Stephanie. Given the concern of some scholars about the atheoretical nature of current scholarship in collaborative teaching in K–12 contexts (Nevin et al., 2009), the concept of “figured world” presented a particularly constructive and generative tool in enhancing our understanding of the teaching—learning processes within collaborative classrooms.

2.2. Disability studies in education

My concern for teacher identity in inclusive classrooms is situated within the tradition of disability studies in education (DSE) that has emerged within the last decade from the nascent field of disability studies. While many leading scholars have explained the core values and philosophy of DSE (Biklen, 2007; Gabel, 2005; Reid, 2004, among many others), what they share in common is a recognition that meanings of disability emerge in the context of interaction between persons and institutions in society. Critiquing the “essentialism of neurobiology and body” (Biklen, 2007), the DSE tradition challenges the exclusionary practices in schools where the intersection of ability with other social categories have created systems that locate differences within persons, conceptualizing such differences as deficits (for example, Ferri & Connor, 2006). Rejecting the dominant narrative of professional expertise, it affords primacy to the voices of students with disabilities and their families in defining the meanings of the experience of disability. The DSE tradition remains committed to inclusive education seeking both the transformation of institutional structures but also acknowledging the contribution of critical special education scholarship (Danforth & Gabel, 2006; Gabel, 2005; Ware, 2005). DSE scholars frequently grapple with the immediate task of preparing preservice and inservice critical special educators. Locating the multiple identificatory paths towards inclusive practice recognizes inclusive education as a process while simultaneously affording teacher educators additional resources to help teachers develop an inclusive stance in the context of current general and special education systems.

3. Method

Data for this paper was drawn from an ethnographic study that was conducted within a first-grade elementary classroom in a large urban setting in the Northeastern United States. As part of a larger inquiry into the production of inclusive classroom communities, the selection of the classroom as the research site reflected purposeful sampling (Maxwell, 1996; Merriam, 2009). The criteria used to determine the site were: 1) there would be at least one student with significant disabilities in the classroom and, 2) this student would be identified in school records as being a member of a general education classroom. The emphasis on students with significant disabilities emerged naturally from my ongoing research preoccupation with their inclusion in general education classrooms (Narayan, 2008). Furthermore, I hypothesized that such inclusion provokes a deeper inquiry into the enactment of “community.”

After institutional approval to carry out the research was obtained from the university in which I was located and from the school district, permission to conduct the study in the selected classroom was granted by the school principal who had blazed a trail in the city in her commitment to include students with significant disabilities in general education classrooms. Signed consent forms with clearly stated procedures to maintain confidentiality were obtained from the families of students in the classroom and from all participants who were interviewed during the study. Ethnographic techniques of participant-observation and interviews with members of the setting (teachers, therapists and families) were used to collect data during the school year from March 2008 to June 2009. I located myself along various points on the participator—observer continuum (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992), sometimes as an observer in spaces such as the playground but mostly as participant within the classroom. For the first three months I visited the school twice weekly, each visit lasting about 2 h. These gradually tapered down to once a week and eventually once in two weeks. By the middle of May, I was paying occasional visits to the classroom. All visits, informal meetings and conversations were documented and described in detailed field notes that contained “thick descriptions” of events as well as a research commentary on emerging issues and trends (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Geertz, 1973).

Congruent with the model adopted by the district, the classroom comprised students with documented labels of disability and non-labeled peers in a pre-determined ratio of approximately 40:60, and was lead by one general and one special educator. The general educator, Jeanine, left on maternity leave for about three months, during which period another special educator, Angie, took her place. Over the course of 7 months, I conducted four interviews with the special educator, Stephanie (two separate, one with the substitute special educator, Angie, and one with the general education teacher, Jeanine). Each interview was 30 min to 2 h long. Merriam (2009) describes data collection and analysis as “recursive and dynamic,” (169) noting that the decisions about which participants will be interviewed and what questions will be asked are always emergent during the course of the study. I did not set out to investigate positionality of teachers within this classroom. But initial interviews established this as an important dimension to the work of Stephanie and to her implementation of inclusive practice. I pursued this issue in subsequent interviews, examining it in relation to my observations in the classroom. At the end of the period of the study, I conducted member-checking by meeting separately with each teacher to discuss some of the key themes that had emerged from the data.
The framework of *figured worlds* used in this paper is premised on identity development as inseparable from the social and cultural practices in which individuals are engaged. Stephanie’s stories of herself that emerged from her interviews and my observations of her practice within the classroom, therefore, constituted the primary text for this research project. Interview transcripts and field notes were analyzed using a constant-comparative method (Merriam, 2009). Codes were identified inductively, using open and axial coding and subsequently refined through an iterative process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 2009). As various categories of Stephanie’s practice emerged in the analysis, I looked for the evidence that could situate her perspectives within the context of this building and also categorized the changes within those perspectives that occurred over the course of the school year. This is congruent with the concern for teachers’ identity development and is mindful of the “commonplaces” of narrative inquiry, namely, temporality, sociality and space (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007). Such categorizing therefore served to be responsive to the purpose of the research (Merriam, 2009, p. 185). Simultaneously, care was taken to ensure that categories were exhaustive, mutually exclusive to the best extent possible, sensitizing (exacting in capturing the meaning) and conceptually congruent, when categories at one level are characterized by the same level of abstraction (Merriam, 2009). Categories were linked through various visual models to illustrate inter-relationships between them, thereby refining the relationship between teacher practice, teacher identity and socio-cultural context. The theme of relations between general and special education teachers that thus emerged from the data analysis coincided with the concern for positional identities within the *figured world* framework, marking teacher positionality as a significant element within teacher identification in this study.

This inquiry was stimulated by the following research questions: As the designated special educator within the co-teaching team, how did Stephanie construct herself professionally within this collaboratively taught classroom? What were the social relations among members within this setting in which such self-construction took place? How did her self-construction in the context of these social arrangements relate to her efforts to implement an inclusive practice?

4. The collaboratively taught classroom context

The collaborative team teaching model as utilized in this school setting involved one full-time special educator and one full-time general educator in a classroom where students with disabilities may constitute up to forty percent of its strength, with the remaining sixty percent of students comprised of students “without IEPs.” Teachers accommodated for differences in student learning profiles in their instruction, both in the design of classroom activity, as well as through intense support usually provided by the special educator in the room. There were many such collaborative team teaching classrooms within this building, with at least one at each grade level. Students with varying levels and kinds of disabilities were enrolled in these classrooms. Among students with significant disabilities, the group targeted to enter this building was clearly students with significant physical and communication disabilities, rather than students with intellectual/developmental disabilities. Assistive technology and augmentative communication technology, therefore, received considerable interest and attention within this building as teachers sought to make the curriculum accessible to their students. Stephanie and Jeanine had been co-teaching in this classroom for about four years now and according to the former, were considered one of the “better” teams in the building.

In the next two sub-sections, I describe in detail the world of teaching elementary students as figured by Stephanie, illustrating both her *figurative* and her *positional* identities. Within this world, she ascribed particular responsibilities for herself as she sought to implement her vision of a community of learners. However, as the second sub-section illustrates, the enactment of this figurative identity occurred in the context of social relations that she experienced as hugely disempowering.

4.1. Figuring identity as an educator: attending to the social context of learning

Holland et al. note that “figured worlds in their conceptual dimensions supply the contexts of meaning for actions, cultural productions, performances, disputes, for the understandings that people come to make for themselves, and for the capabilities people develop to direct their own behavior in these worlds” (p. 60). Stephanie was a dually certified teacher who had been assigned the status of a special educator within this collaborative partnership. Even as she remained cognizant of her role as a special educator, it was always located within a figured world of teaching—learning where achieving a community presided over immediate concerns of academic growth. Her identification of students and families as well as her rationales for both curricular and extra-curricular decision-making were inevitably informed by a vision of learning that was premised on the creation and maintenance of a community of learners who respected each other and felt empowered to express themselves. Consequently, she assigned herself the task of achieving transparency in this classroom while simultaneously instating the particular norms of behavior that would promote a communitarian ethic.

An important artifact that was clearly intended to evoke a certain vision of this community, was the set of classroom rules prominently displayed on the wall—“take care of yourself,” “take care of others,” “take care of the environment,” and “do your best work.” Describing these rules, especially the first two, as her “mantra” she (like Jeanine and even Angie) used them repeatedly to draw attention to various forms of behavior, so that they served both as a means of classroom management as well as a tool to illuminate desirable community behavior. So, for instance, it was not uncommon for Stephanie to note, as she waited for students to get into line for recess, that some students were taking care of themselves and of the group, by demonstrating readiness to leave (which largely implied not talking with one’s neighbor and standing in place). Yet, she might also note that the art teacher had “taken care” of them by allowing them extra time to finish their projects and so, they needed to “take care” of him by arriving to his class on time. The rules, therefore, were variously invoked in the public arena by adults, including Stephanie, who freely used them to interpret behavior as well as to require normative forms of behavior from students.

Still, in sustaining this community, Stephanie did not rely solely on these rules. Her expressed commitment to the objective of achieving transparency in her classroom was enacted in multiple ways, most prominent of which, was the extraordinary emphasis she placed on representing students to each other in respectful and empowering ways, and her attention to demystifying the work of adults in the room. She configured children as requiring careful and intentional scaffolding for their social-emotional development and
was particularly attentive to the use of language as a tool to achieve the ends of community.

I think the language of adults is so important. Like even asking them to go off the rug, they are so sensitive to the tone. So I always have to calm myself and just say (whispers) “why don’t you go off the rug and come back when you are ready?” (laughs).

Stephanie’s concern to create an emotionally safe space for her students through her own speech was reinforced by her partiality for engaging students in critical conversations around social conflict with their peers in order to help them develop empathy. She frequently incorporated role playing into such moments, believing that such methods could “also let them see that nobody is perfect in the way they think about a situation, and that we can take time to be thoughtful about what we are doing.” It was not uncommon for her to abandon a lesson in math or reading to take up a conversation on peer relations.

Embedding emotional growth within collective literacy practices such as role play or book-talk extended naturally to other conscious acts of representation such as assuring students that a peer was “not in trouble” when asked to step aside from the group, or actively interpreting student reticence during Morning meeting with a normalizing explanation. Nowhere, however, was the concern for representation more clearly suggested than the way in which Stephanie sought to include Trevor, a student with significant multiple disabilities in the classroom. Trevor’s speech was slow and labored and not readily intelligible. Besides a switch that produced recordings, he did not consistently use any form of augmentative communication. He was instead encouraged to speak on his own in the classroom. Not only did Stephanie purposefully encourage his participation in group experiences, she would unhesitatingly interpret seemingly unusual behaviors to his peers. For example, when Trevor was engaged with his aide Felipe who was softly coaching him about his “share” for the day, Stephanie normalized this activity by reminding the group “you know when you really want to share something and then you forget it?”

While Stephanie was committed to ensuring that students with disabilities had access to equal forms of participation in the classroom, she chafed under expectations that their needs should be addressed separately. Not surprisingly, when Jeanine left and she assumed the position of lead teacher (willingly granted by Angie, the substitute teacher) she sought to “spread” students around the room so that students with disabilities were not grouped together. She evoked their participation in the context of group activities rather than in isolated moments and spaces and held them accountable to higher levels of academic work. Still, reluctant to label children in terms of their intellectual capacity, she protested the expectation that students labeled as having physical disabilities are necessarily assumed to be “intellectually average.” Her argument rested on the unfairness of this requirement of intellectual competence for any child. She believed instead that documenting their learning and growth was more important. Clearly addressing the educational lives of students with significant disabilities, she explained further: “If we find that their academic life in our school is more important than a school that works on activities of daily living, then this is the appropriate setting.” This endorsement of inclusive programs over segregated/self-contained settings for students with significant disabilities was congruent with her preference to leave open and undetermined a student’s learning capacity.

Stephanie’s attempts to achieve a transparent practice within this classroom community stemmed from a recognition of the important opportunities it afforded students. She mused:

I think letting them into my head gives them a framework for thinking about the world. And I think that’s what’s missing from the world a lot. Like things happen and we don’t know why, and because of the misunderstanding and the confusion, people get angry and things happen.

Stephanie’s commitment to a communitarian ethic and to individual empowerment within community extended to her relations with the families of her students. She was watchful of how students were being represented within the family community and did not hesitate to remind families that conflicts amongst them adversely affected the community of children, even if such intervention meant risking the alienation of some parents. (None of the parents to whom I spoke either informally or during formal interviews, expressed any reservations about their relations with her.)

Stephanie figured herself as an educator entrusted with the responsibility of creating a just world which required its citizens to adopt multiple perspectives to foster the ideals of tolerance and respect. In practice, this meant that she was concerned with building the notion of difference into a working concept of community. This might be evidenced in provoking students to address how they might adjust their responses when working with different partners, enlisting support from students to modify an activity to allow participation of peers with physical disabilities, even choosing deliberately to avoid the use of assistive technology when it interfered with the development of authentic social relations among students, or openly resisting attempts of some parents to marginalize other families within this classroom community.

4.2. Stephanie’s positional identity in relation to general education colleagues

The positioning of participants is pivotal within figured worlds. Stephanie’s figurative identity of an educator striving to create a caring community was simultaneous with her understanding of her social positioning in this classroom and building—her positional identity. Her lived experiences of implementing this classroom community within the context of a collaborative teaching model that prescribed particular relations between general and special education, forced her into subject positions that were disempowering. Though such positions were often evoked within “out-of-classroom” spaces (Clandinin & Connolly, 1996) such as grade level meetings, the in-classroom space remained a prominent contested ground where Stephanie struggled to craft the professional identity she sought.

As Stephanie reminisced about the new freedoms she experienced as temporary lead teacher, she reflected on the relations between her and Jeanine where the latter’s general education background seemed to have automatically afforded her a permanent superior status.

As a special ed part of the team, Jeanine teaches all the curriculum except for one curriculum area that I’ve told her I loved and I would love to teach myself, which is writing. So I’ve been teaching writing all these years. But that’s really the one area that I actually [plan] and feel like I can, in some ways say ‘we should do it this way.’

She added with some resentment that Jeanine had wanted to “own it back again” and informed her at the beginning of the year that she wanted to take over “all the general ed pieces.” Jeanine was delineating roles clearly in a way that positioned her as a “second-class citizen,” someone who could offer support like a paraprofessional but who could never take charge. Stephanie expressed awareness that such devaluing of her perceived professional affiliation was a systemic phenomenon that pervaded not just this building but the culture of educational practice in general. Stephanie yearned to have a sense of ownership over all students and
felt eminently capable and professionally qualified to do so, given that she was dually certified in both general and special education. However, the general assumption that accompanied taking on the role of the “special educator” was that “you are here for the IEP kids and so you should be there focusing exclusively in some ways on the IEP kids.” Stephanie commented somewhat bitterly, but mostly matter-of-factly, on the unexpected and unshakeable weight that special education appeared to deposit on the career prospects of dually certified teachers. It seemed inconceivable to others—administrators and general educators alike—that even as a dually certified teacher, one could seek anything other than a special education position. In Stephanie’s view, the purpose and role of the special educator’s presence in the collaborative team taught classroom was unclear both to families and within the profession itself. This implied that the significance of dually certified professionals was even less visible or apparent to administrators, rendering inconsequential the collective worth of their preparation as teachers.

Insofar as the subordinate position of special education teachers was a distinctive aspect of Stephanie’s figured world, it was available for reflection. When positional identities are no longer available for such reflection they become dispositions, everyday aspects of lived identities. For some teachers, early experiences of such struggles in subordinate positions may have eventually fossilized into routine practices, perhaps even integrating with their dispositions, and consequently making them less available for introspection. Stephanie’s illustration of a phenomenon that has been documented in the literature on co-teaching—the apparent reluctance of special educators to accept lead roles in the co-taught classroom—substantiates this point. The administration had assumed that a dually certified teacher would adopt the role of a special educator and the special educator had been “living in that assumption and that expectation” for an extended period. Later, when it came time to hire someone to replace the general educator, this “special” educator acknowledged that there was “no way I could take the general ed curriculum” confirming for the administrators that dually certified teachers could not replace general educators. These teachers might have come to believe that they were too unskilled or unqualified to implement the general education curriculum. Stephanie’s story implicated the self-fulfilling prophecy contained in the specific demarcation of roles within co-teaching models. Citing her own forceful stance with the administration that she was dually certified, Stephanie commented somewhat bitterly, but mostly matter-of-factly, on the unexpected and unshakeable weight that special education appeared to deposit on the career prospects of dually certified teachers. It seemed inconceivable to others—administrators and general educators alike—that even as a dually certified teacher, one could seek anything other than a special education position. In Stephanie’s view, the purpose and role of the special educator’s presence in the collaborative team taught classroom was unclear both to families and within the profession itself. This implied that the significance of dually certified professionals was even less visible or apparent to administrators, rendering inconsequential the collective worth of their preparation as teachers.

Insofar as the subordinate position of special education teachers was a distinctive aspect of Stephanie’s figured world, it was available for reflection. When positional identities are no longer available for such reflection they become dispositions, everyday aspects of lived identities. For some teachers, early experiences of such struggles in subordinate positions may have eventually fossilized into routine practices, perhaps even integrating with their dispositions, and consequently making them less available for introspection. Stephanie’s illustration of a phenomenon that has been documented in the literature on co-teaching—the apparent reluctance of special educators to accept lead roles in the co-taught classroom—substantiates this point. The administration had assumed that a dually certified teacher would adopt the role of a special educator and the special educator had been “living in that assumption and that expectation” for an extended period. Later, when it came time to hire someone to replace the general educator, this “special” educator acknowledged that there was “no way I could take the general education curriculum” confirming for the administrators that dually certified teachers could not replace general educators. These teachers might have come to believe that they were too unskilled or unqualified to implement the general education curriculum. Stephanie’s story implicated the self-fulfilling prophecy contained in the specific demarcation of roles within co-teaching models. Citing her own forceful stance with the administration that she was dually certified, Stephanie commented somewhat bitterly, but mostly matter-of-factly, on the unexpected and unshakeable weight that special education appeared to deposit on the career prospects of dually certified professionals was even less visible or apparent to administrators, rendering inconsequential the collective worth of their preparation as teachers.

Insofar as the subordinate position of special education teachers was a distinctive aspect of Stephanie’s figured world, it was available for reflection. When positional identities are no longer available for such reflection they become dispositions, everyday aspects of lived identities. For some teachers, early experiences of such struggles in subordinate positions may have eventually fossilized into routine practices, perhaps even integrating with their dispositions, and consequently making them less available for introspection. Stephanie’s illustration of a phenomenon that has been documented in the literature on co-teaching—the apparent reluctance of special educators to accept lead roles in the co-taught classroom—substantiates this point. The administration had assumed that a dually certified teacher would adopt the role of a special educator and the special educator had been “living in that assumption and that expectation” for an extended period. Later, when it came time to hire someone to replace the general educator, this “special” educator acknowledged that there was “no way I could take the general education curriculum” confirming for the administrators that dually certified teachers could not replace general educators. These teachers might have come to believe that they were too unskilled or unqualified to implement the general education curriculum. Stephanie’s story implicated the self-fulfilling prophecy contained in the specific demarcation of roles within co-teaching models. Citing her own forceful stance with the administration that she was dually certified, Stephanie commented somewhat bitterly, but mostly matter-of-factly, on the unexpected and unshakeable weight that special education appeared to deposit on the career prospects of dually certified professionals was even less visible or apparent to administrators, rendering inconsequential the collective worth of their preparation as teachers.

Insofar as the subordinate position of special education teachers was a distinctive aspect of Stephanie’s figured world, it was available for reflection. When positional identities are no longer available for such reflection they become dispositions, everyday aspects of lived identities. For some teachers, early experiences of such struggles in subordinate positions may have eventually fossilized into routine practices, perhaps even integrating with their dispositions, and consequently making them less available for introspection. Stephanie’s illustration of a phenomenon that has been documented in the literature on co-teaching—the apparent reluctance of special educators to accept lead roles in the co-taught classroom—substantiates this point. The administration had assumed that a dually certified teacher would adopt the role of a special educator and the special educator had been “living in that assumption and that expectation” for an extended period. Later, when it came time to hire someone to replace the general educator, this “special” educator acknowledged that there was “no way I could take the general education curriculum” confirming for the administrators that dually certified teachers could not replace general educators. These teachers might have come to believe that they were too unskilled or unqualified to implement the general education curriculum. Stephanie’s story implicated the self-fulfilling prophecy contained in the specific demarcation of roles within co-teaching models. Citing her own forceful stance with the administration that she was dually certified, Stephanie commented somewhat bitterly, but mostly matter-of-factly, on the unexpected and unshakeable weight that special education appeared to deposit on the career prospects of dually certified professionals was even less visible or apparent to administrators, rendering inconsequential the collective worth of their preparation as teachers.

5. Changes

Thus far, the paper has described Stephanie’s enactment of her figurative identity in the context of her professional positioning. Her efforts to create a transparent inclusive practice emerged within disempowering relations with her general education partner and colleagues in the building. In some part, such relations were premised on a (mis)perception of special educators as insufficiently prepared in curricular areas, and therefore performing less valuable work. In this section, I attend to the disruption of her positional identity upon the entry of another special educator within the room and Stephanie’s consequent re-figuration of the world of teaching—learning in the elementary classroom. This new partnership would renew her affiliation to the profession of special education and simultaneously render it as possessing equal, if not greater utility, in meeting the needs of all students. In the first subsection I describe the immediate changes that she instated in her practice in the classroom, followed in the second by a glimpse into how she reformulated her role when her general education partner returned as well as her subsequent activism in “out-of-classroom” spaces.

5.1. Improvising to refigure the classroom community of learners

The notion of figured world disrupts the idea of an unproblematic and direct relation between cultural discourses and self. It is premised on the assumption that cultural discourses both position people as well as afford them the resources to address the problems they encounter, i.e. the tools to alter those positioning. Within their figured worlds, individual actors use the resources available to them to improvise in unpredictable ways. In this section, we see how Stephanie’s renewed affiliation with her profession allowed her to re-assert herself in several unpredictable ways within the classroom.

When Angie entered the classroom, Stephanie’s vision of a genuine co-teaching partnership that could stimulate individual growth seemed to be realized. Deriving genuine pleasure from the relationship, she noted the encouragement she had received from Angie to experiment with new ideas and techniques, a practice that she reported had been quashed by Jeanine. She also felt less compelled to project an exterior that satisfied others’ visions of learning, seeking instead to make every experience meaningful to herself and the children.

Jeanine would never let these [walls] go bare! (laughs) We would have things up there, but I would hate them! (laughs) I would look at them and just be like, ‘What is that up there?!’ (laughs) And I would want no part of making those bulletin boards ...

Accompanying the welcome personal support that she received from Angie was the discovery of a shared interpretive framework that informed their approach to student learning. Describing themselves as “universal thinkers” who did not see themselves as “information disseminators,” she explained the common language that she shared with Angie.

Sometimes it can get technical in the way that we’re kind of corresponding about a child. But I think the more important piece is that we both understand that the little progression that kids need to make in order to get bigger concept. And we are not afraid to go and spend some time on the little details … to make sure that they can get to that big point.

Stephanie may have been referring to the difference that has been reported to characterize special and general education approaches (Scruggs et al., 2007). General educators have been found to adopt an approach that is driven by curriculum coverage for the whole group contrasting with the special education hallmark of individualized instruction. As the lead teacher and temporary “general educator,” Stephanie utilized the benefits of her special education background to restructure her practice. This implied not only reflecting on individual student needs, but creating opportunities within the classroom for those needs to be met through practices such as small groups or guided discussion. Such flexibility differed from her perception of the general educator’s approach where “it’s the lessons that are going to get done, and we’re going to move on, and the kids who don’t get it, don’t get it.” Supported by Angie’s similar concern for individual student growth and with strong paraprofessional support for her methods, Stephanie reported laughingly that they had drawn the “ire” of the grade level team by their refusal to move along at the pace set by the general educators. Still, her new determined stance did elicit a reluctant admission from them that Stephanie was now
influencing the curriculum more and that her voice had probably been unacknowledged in previous semesters.

The changes in curricular and instructional emphases that Stephanie instated during this period produced inevitable repercussions on her approach to classroom management and her views on student learning. Even as she remained committed to creating a transparent practice and an inclusive community, she appeared to be re-considering her passionate attention to the social-emotional development of her students. She wondered if practices such as role playing or even her extensive scaffolding on interpersonal relations might actually have done her students a disservice. She commented that despite these efforts, students did not appear to have “internalized the kindness.” She speculated that excessive adult mediation of student conflict may have produced the unintended consequence of both student inability to solve problems independently as well as student indifference to academic learning as a primary goal of classroom life. In later conversations, she even commented on the child-rearing practices within the community represented in this building that diminished children’s resilience to disruptions in expectations and routines. As her beliefs on students’ social-emotional growth continued to evolve, she started responding differently to student issues in the classroom. While she remained empathetic to students, she de-emphasized the magnitude of the events, requiring them to adapt to changing circumstances. She also increasingly turned over responsibility for resolving conflict to the students themselves.

In early conversations, Stephanie acknowledged the shift in perception that characterized student responses when she moved from her subordinate role as special educator in the room to lead teacher.

I think before Jeanine left, a lot of it was, you know ’Stephanie, I love you, you help me, you’re so kind and you’re so gentle.’ And now there are moments where I have to call kids out and do a lot of management or saying, ‘That wasn’t kind.’ And I think for them it’s a different way of seeing this particular adult interact with them.

Stephanie’s refiguring of herself in her new role that she saw reflected in student responses to her, remained connected to her rediscovery of her special education roots that surfaced in the context of Angie’s entry into the classroom. Recalling self-consciously her earlier approach that prioritized student social-emotional development over evidence of academic learning, she acknowledged her gratitude to Angie’s presence, which, she noted, let me step out of that make-everybody-feel-good type of edge of students’ baffle.

Let’s temporary displacement of Jeannine morphed into other forms of action upon the latter’s return from her maternity leave. For instance, Stephanie’s realization that she too was knowl-edgeable in teaching curricular areas such as math subtly altered the nature of support that she offered Jeanine so that even if it still did not permit her to assume an equal status, it at least allowed her to experience greater empowerment. She also became more intensely aware of, and dismissive of, Jeanine’s imperfect knowl-edge of students’ social-emotional development. Jeanine’s baffle-ment at Stephanie’s apparent transformation during her absence in addressing this was not missed by Stephanie who came to document this reaction as another instance of the conceptual gulf that stretched between them. She could now, in fact, clearly articulate the conditions for her learning.

She found Jeanine’s method of developing her instructional repertoire through random trial-and-error events incompatible with her own practice of situating her attempts in extensive prior study to establish rationale and purpose. As Stephanie immersed herself in the pedagogical literature, she continually tweaked her own methods, but also found that Jeanine could not keep pace with her growth, forcing her to explain these transformations to Jeanine. She observed to me:

And as I’ve grown in my repertoire of understanding language, understanding curriculum, understanding how to talk to parents, the relation of children as a community to children as a community of people in the world, … I think as I’ve evolved in those aspects, (pause and then very slowly) I’ve wanted-to-change-my-partner.

Stephanie pushed for recognition of her re-fashioned identity in “out-of-classroom” spaces. She placed a request with the principal to be instated as the general educator within another co-teaching team for the following academic year. Stephanie, it would seem, was embracing her dual identity as both special and general educator, but clearly staking her claim on contested territory in
requesting to be paired with a special educator. Undoubtedly, she valued her own professional background in special education. Still, confident in her understanding of general education curriculum and not a little resentful of the power differentials that prevailed between these two professions, she sought to re-assert an identity that the structures of schooling had rendered inconsequential. In doing thus, she permitted herself an ‘identificatory possibility’ that could not be predicted by affiliation to either of these professions, yet still emerging within the context of both.

During our final conversation in the summer after the school officially closed for vacation, Stephanie informed me that her request had been denied. She would serve in the capacity of a special educator in the same classroom with a different general educator during the following academic year. However, as the more experienced member of the team (her general education partner was being ‘relocated’ from sixth grade) she seemed to be confident that she could actively create a different model of collaborative teaching in the classroom, one that differed from the “one teach, one assist” approach (Cook & Friend, 1995). Furthermore, building on the stimulating partnership she had briefly enjoyed with Angie, she now participated in a mini inquiry group that included herself, Angie, and Angie’s own collaborative partner for the new academic year. They engaged in reading and reflecting on books that challenged traditional ways of thinking about children and learning. While Jeanine’s perception of the relational space between her and Jeanine as being conducive to her learning and growth remains unavailable, she did indicate to me a growing discomfort within the relationship on her return. It was not surprising that at the end of the year, she informed me that she was “going back to her roots” and that she would be teaching the following year in a first-grade classroom as a general education teacher.

6. Discussion and implications

6.1. Teaching inclusively as general and special educators

Stephanie may not have perceived the availability of a distinctive identity as an inclusive educator, but she was clearly committed to an inclusive practice that was simultaneously grounded in her affinity to the profession of special education. Stephanie’s professional becoming (Marsh, 2002) in all its socio-cultural situatedness illuminates dilemmas that may be inevitable in efforts to implement inclusive education. Recent theorizing of inclusive education has cautioned well-intentioned efforts of policy-makers, practitioners and researchers alike against an uncritical leap into the discourse of inclusion. The latter posture served to cement her renewed identification with the profession of special education and her concern to meet standards of accountability, without placing a “blanket” over all students.

Stephanie’s identity work embodies the “messiness” that inheres in the practical commitment to inclusive education. The apparent contradictions in her practice reflect the tensions that may well be concomitant to “making special education inclusive” (Farrell & Ainscow, 2002), as she worked with available tools to realize her vision for this classroom community. The peculiar social arrangements of the collaborative classroom model defined in significant part Stephanie’s own course of professional identity-making as she navigated the complex relations between general and special education. Stephanie’s beliefs in students as learners, her commitment to tolerance and her desire to create a just community of “great citizens” coalesced to configure a unique form of inclusive practice. Such practice was not premised on the politics of group identities, but, nevertheless, it confounded to some extent the possibility that some differences are unequal. Minow (1990) describes the tension in the activity of identifying and responding to labeled differences that may simultaneously serve to endanger the commitment to equality and full inclusion as the “dilemma of difference.” Stephanie may be understood as working through this “dilemma of difference” in her practice, by widening the breadth of “normalcy” within her classroom so that the stagnating effects of perceived differences could be diminished to a significant extent. Simultaneously, she actively sought the mantle of a “general
educator” to enrich that position with her specialized expertise that could then be made available to a greater number of students. In “authoring” herself in these ways (Holland et al., 1998) Stephanie, it could be argued, was performing special education inclusively.

For teacher educators who prepare teachers to become critical educators, general or special, Stephanie’s story certainly reinforces the commitment to troubling the core of “normalcy” that pervades schooling systems in general (Florian, 2008) and to uncover the myriad ways in which it surfaces in everyday teaching practice. Remaining vigilant to the questions “inclusion into what?” and “different from whom?” may serve as guideposts to the assessment and planning that constitutes the daily work of teachers. Though Stephanie’s notion of ability was fluid rather than fixed, such questions may still have offered Stephanie other solutions in addressing the situations she encountered in her enterprise to create a transparent, inclusive community within this collaborative teaching context. For instance, they might have provided the impetus to struggle not so much for ownership of the general education curriculum but for the opportunity to refine its capacity to meet the needs of all learners. She might then have been able to recognize the complicity of both special and general education practices in constructing student failure and to conceptualize the purpose of collaboration as the joint provision of needed supports for all students rather than as an amalgam of two distinct professional knowledges.

6.2. Future inquiry

The limitations of the study reflect the particular nature of the methodology, i.e., the study of a single case, with attendant issues of generalizability. Still, Stephanie’s partial story may offer us some important lessons on conceptualizing the implementation of inclusive education. Teachers will be in different places in terms of their knowledge, beliefs and practices. In orchestrating these multiple, often conflicting “voices,” they come to create authorial spaces whence they are able to “make a voice by taking a stance” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 184) towards other discourses within their worlds. The important question then, is “how teachers can be supported to develop the knowledge, beliefs and practices that support inclusion” (Florian, 2008, p. 205). This study has documented one teacher’s configuration of inclusive practice while simultaneously suggesting that such practice was informed by particular social arrangements in that setting. It is through prescriptions for doing inclusive education research (Allan & Sree, 2008), meanings of inclusive education too may be realized differently in various settings. We need more descriptions about how educators, both special and general, orchestrate multiple discourses within their teaching—learning contexts and the authorial spaces they create in their efforts to implement inclusive classrooms. Such research would serve as a valuable resource for teacher educators who acknowledge the significance of individual subjectivities in initiating and sustaining processes of change within schools. Illustrating the significance of literary performances in altering figured worlds, Blackburn (2002/2003) proposed that individual literary performances may or may not bring about social change, but “it was the cumulative trajectory that created powerful opportunities.” (p. 323). Such powerful opportunities anticipate the potential for achieving the transformation sought by critical special education scholarship, when deficit-oriented, normatively based categorical systems of thinking will eventually give place to a reconceptualization of special education where the recognition of the need for transformation of schooling is accompanied by a commitment to disrupt taken-for-granted assumptions of normalcy in all spaces of teaching—learning (Florian, 2007).

References


