Socially Inclusive Pedagogy in Literacy Classes:Fostering Inclusion in the Inner City

Yiola Cleovoulou
University of Toronto

Drawing on case studies of five elementary school teachers in one inner city school, the author explored ways teachers foster social inclusion in their classrooms. Rooted in classroom observations and extensive teacher interviews, teachers' teaching methods and practices were examined as a base from which to explore socially inclusive pedagogy in literacy curriculum.The analysis suggests that: drawing on personal connections, teaching historical fiction and being culturally responsive, and letter writing foster social inclusion within literacy classes.

> Well my teaching methods don't seem to be going over as well as I'd hoped; a lot of the kids are resistant to my lessons. I can't believe how defiant of authority these kids are – and they're only grade five and six! (McLaren, 1980, p.13).

McLaren (1980) described his experiences as a beginning teacher in a Canadian, inner city school. There are many variables that can explain why his teaching methods did not go over well and why students were resistant. One such explanation was found in research that shows a correlation between student resistance and teaching methods that are disconnected from students' culture (Foster, 1997; Hale, 1994; Hollins, 1996; Tatum, 2005). Teaching methods that do not permit students to actively engage in their learning and that exclude students' cultural knowledge and experiences, are likely to result in student resistance and exclusion from classroom life. Three decades after McLaren shared his accounts of trying to understand inner city students, he has become one of the leaders in the academic quest to understand pedagogical frameworks that contribute to socially inclusive schooling. His work in critical pedagogy (2007, 2007a) invites new discourses and alternative approaches to urban teaching and learning. There is a call to institute a sense of inclusion for students in urban schools. Inclusion in urban schools is a well

researched area in the field of education (Kincheloe, J. et al., 2006; Armstrong, D., McMahon, B., 2006; Nind, M., et al., 2005; Povey, H., et al. 2001). Many teachers choose to address issues of inclusion as a separate curriculum and use notions of caring and sharing; others foster inclusive pedagogy within the practices of their subject curricula. This paper contributes to the discussion of social inclusion in urban schools by sharing how teachers foster social inclusion within their literacy classes.

Background and Framework

In this study, social inclusion refers to the practices and teaching methods teachers implement that promote issues of equity and develop social belonging in the classroom for all students regardless of their gender, race, class, ethnic culture, etc. Social inclusion referred to an empowered student body that problem-solves and voices their thoughts in a physically and socially safe learning environment. A variety of relevant research in the areas of classroom pedagogy were brought together, specifically in the areas of urban education, and social inclusion in order to further understand socially inclusive practices.

Haberman (1991) described traditional urban pedagogy as "the pedagogy of poverty" and explained it consists of teacher centred instruction where the teacher gives direct instruction, asks closed ended questions, monitors seatwork and assigns grades. He (1991) contrasted "pedagogy of poverty" with "good teaching" which places students and their lives at the centre of the curriculum. Haberman (1991) "calls for instruction to connect content to the lived experiences of students, include students' voices in the classroom dialogue and decision-making, engage students in meaningful problems, and involve students in tasks that require critical thinking" (p.56). It is this particular discussion – the discussion of what constitutes social inclusion - this study explored.

Scholars (Ladson-Billings, 2004; Henry 1998, Gay, 2000; Nawang, 1998; Kincheloe, 2006) have conceptualized forms of socially inclusive pedagogy and have described how teachers should implement such practices. There are fewer empirical studies on inclusive practices and more on theoretically descriptive contributions. This paper relates to and extends earlier studies in important ways; the work presented in this paper contributes to the empirical research of teachers' work that fosters socially inclusive pedagogy. Although many educational

24

theorists have discussed notions similar to socially inclusive pedagogy, precisely *how* urban teachers weave these pedagogical philosophies into daily practice is explored in this paper. Therefore, the examination of socially inclusive pedagogy was addressed with the following research questions in mind: How do teachers in an urban, inner city school foster social inclusion in their classrooms? What teaching methods are preferred when trying to foster social inclusion in literacy classes?

Methods

To answer these questions, a qualitative case study design was used. An interpretive, qualitative approach to study the socially inclusive pedagogies of five teachers was used in one inner city school in order to understand the experiences teachers have and to understand the practices teachers used to construct their classes (their pedagogy) (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). In order to make better sense of their socially inclusive pedagogy, a qualitative approach was selected to discover the processes, nuances, details and descriptions of daily classroom practice, directly from those under study. Merriam (1998) explained that the key philosophical assumption of qualitative research is that individuals interacting with their social worlds construct reality. The inner city school, and the social world associated with inner city life affect teachers' and students' reality – namely, their pedagogy. Insights into what socially inclusive pedagogy meant to the teachers in their particular context were gained by understanding their social worlds and experiences by observing, and talking about their daily classroom practice.

Data Collection

Five classroom teachers, in one inner city school were interviewed and observed, from October 2006 to September 2007, to discover the processes, nuances, details and descriptions of their daily classroom practices. Field notes, journaling, transcriptions and documents were used as tools for data collection. Each teacher was interviewed three times and the researcher visited each classroom fifteen times for observations. Documents were used to support the data gathered through the observations and interviews. School wide documents such as the school profile, staff meeting minutes, school vision statement, letters to parents, newsletters, inner city reports and other such materials were used to juxtapose teachers' work. The documents provided background information on school initiatives and school policies and programs. If

25

there was something of interest in the documents, the researcher asked questions about it in the interviews (Merriam, 1998, p.148).

Among case study types, multi-case studies (Bogdan & Bicklen, 1998; Merriam, 1998) were used. Data was collected from more than one case (5 pedagogical classroom settings), analyzed separately and then compared to see what was common and different among the pedagogies of social inclusion. This approach was taken in order to gain more data from a variety of settings and to build a design of triangulation into the data analysis.

The Analysis

The process of data analysis involves three stages of "data transformation" (Glesne, 1999, p.149). Analysis techniques used in this study included: organizing patterns, themes and categories, exploring the relationships between the themes and categories, and, developing new meanings and higher-level categories for socially inclusive pedagogy (Merriam, 1998; Wolcott, 1994; Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995; Patton, 1990). Techniques of coding, charting, and writing "observers comments" were used to organize and analyze the descriptive data (Bogdan & Bicklen, 1998; Merriam, 1998).

During fieldwork, themes were recognized in each teacher's class and issues related to social inclusion in each particular setting. In the latter part of the observations when patterns began to emerge, key words were recorded in the margins of the field notes that acted as reminders of what was originally perceived. Reflections and memos of ideas that extended beyond the description of the observations after each observation were also recorded. A similar technique was used when transcribing the interviews; a notepad was kept next to the computer and thoughts, themes and theories that were thought to be emerging were noted.

After the fieldwork, each teacher and their background experiences were described. This initial level of description offered insight into the cases and provided background information for the analysis of the pedagogical practices. Next, the participants' practices were reviewed and analyzed and the researcher continued to identify patterns in the participants' daily work. The patterns demonstrated teachers' socially inclusive practices in 3 broad areas: in classroom community building, within interpersonal relationships, and in curriculum content. Sub-

26

categories were created to more closely investigate and define what was happening in each category.

The different forms of pedagogies that existed in each category were compared and teaching methods were analyzed. The cross-case analysis aimed to represent key pedagogical strategies from each category that fostered social inclusion in the inner city school. In the last level of analysis, the categories were synthesized and the findings for socially inclusive pedagogy were interpreted.

Findings and Discussion

The central question guiding this investigation was how do teachers in an urban, inner city school foster social inclusion in the literacy curriculum? To answer this, the pedagogical practices of two participants in the study; Sharon, a primary teacher (grade 3), and Margaret, a junior teacher (grades 5 and 6) are explored in the paper. Three teaching methods: drawing personal connections, using historical fiction, and letter writing were selected from the findings to illustrate how these two teachers fostered social inclusion.

Personal connectedness

> Connectedness – a stronger link between what children learn and what they live, harnessed in the classroom in order to develop critical consciousness – is accomplished through culturally relevant pedagogy (Hunsberger, 2007, p. 422).

Sharon began each Monday morning in the same way; her group of language students seated on the carpet and Sharon seated in her chair in front of them. She asked each student, "Good morning. How are you this morning?" and each student would reply, "Good. And how are you?" Sharon replied the same way to each student, "I'm fine, thank you. How was your weekend?" Students shared what they did on the weekend and Sharon asked questions that prompted further description, for example, "Oh really? And what did you do at the park with your cousin?" Sharon stimulated ideas through reflective discourse. The goal was to have students write a weekend report. Sharon was able to teach basic skills (oral language, communication, retell, sharing, reporting, journal writing) and offered a simple way of practicing those skills in a routine manner. This was also a good opportunity for Sharon to gather information about students and how they may have been

feeling at the start of each week. This process of gathering information and individualizing the content helped Sharon plan her lessons and interact with each student according to their social/emotional needs and their academic needs.

After sharing their stories as a group, students went back to their tables and wrote a weekend report in their journals. Most students wrote feverishly. In an interview, Sharon explained this was likely due to the familiarity of the lesson (repeated weekly) and a high level of comfort with the material (being about themselves). By connecting content to the lives of students, a level of confidence is built into the content that guarantees students that what they write cannot be wrong. With a certainty for correct content and an interest in the self, students could focus on their writing and practice basic literacy skills. Social inclusion was fostered in this example as students were socially included in the content of the literacy lesson.

In another lesson Sharon wove culturally relevant content into the Ministry curriculum expectations. Students seated on the carpet, Sharon asked a broad question, "What is the difference between a town, city, and village?" There was a long pause followed by attempts to make sense of the abstract concepts. The class discussion demonstrated that students did not conceptually understand the differences between a city and a town. Sharon tried to make the concepts relevant by asking students to think about the city they currently live in. Students described buildings and busy roads, a lot of stores and a lot of people. Sharon knew that many students have not been to a village or town in Canada but may be familiar with a community that is different from their city. She asked students who may remember another country they lived in and asked them to describe it and how it may be different from where they live now.

Students shared their ideas and the more they shared about what they knew (their lived environments) the more comfortable and willing to participate they appeared. One student shared details of her home in Afghanistan, another student talked about his village in Somalia. As students described their environments, Sharon classified the different characteristics on the chalkboard. For example, one student shared, "Where I'm from, there are lots of houses and cars and markets. My family would go to the market and it was very crowded" and from that information, Sharon asked others, "Well does that sound like a city or a town?" Student replied, "city" and Sharon asked, "okay why?"

28

and they proceeded to examine the concept of city. By the end of the discussion, students were able to share some understanding of different communities. One student shared, "a city has a lot of buildings, a town has farms and a village has less people". Sharon acknowledged the answer and more students raised their hands to share their ideas. The process of drawing connection to their personal knowledge fostered inclusion.

Use of historical fiction

In the upper grades (fifth and sixth grades), Margaret employed culturally relevant pedagogy in her reading group. "Naomi's Road" by Joy Kowaga, was the novel used for her group's novel study. Margaret used the text to explore issues of race, class, gender, power, and oppression in historical, global and personal contexts. The historical fiction of a young Japanese girl's experiences in the internment camps of British Columbia after the Second World War introduced students to a part of Canadian history and was later used to discuss broader social issues.

After reading the text and making sense of why Canadians thought Japanese-Canadians were the enemy, Margaret asked, "what does it mean to be Canadian?" Students began to identify their nationalities. One student said, "My mom is from Angola and my father is from the Congo", another student said, "I am El Salvador" and another Black student, with his head bowed mumbled, "I am Canadian" and then others chimed in, "Oh yes! So am I". One boy proudly stated, "I am human". Discussing and situating issues of nationhood and racism in a broad social context was also considered socially inclusive as it brought to the forefront issues some students faced in their daily lives and situated the issue of power in a context that extends to their personal lives.

During the observation period, one boy was noticed sitting quietly, contemplatively. He sat with his head tilted and his brow squinted. He appeared to be in tense thought. He slowly raised his hand and asked, "Has there ever been a time on earth when all countries were at peace?" His comment left his teacher, Margaret, speechless for a split second and then she responded, "That is a wonderful and thoughtful question". This student was engaged. He was reading, thinking and critically considering what it meant to be in this world. His classmates paused and responded with "yeah…", "Has there ever been peace Margaret? It doesn't seem like it". This is a snapshot of socially

inclusive pedagogy because students were engaged in their learning. They were thinking about the world and seeing themselves in the curriculum by placing themselves in the context. Students were asking questions about issues related to inclusion and students were listening to each other. Small groups, culturally relevant pedagogy, and carefully selected literature fostered social inclusion.

Letter writing

Margaret was teaching her students when she sensed unrest and resistance towards their work. It was during a period of escalated violence in the neighbourhood and students were stressed and afraid because they knew what was happening around them. Margaret stopped the activity she had assigned and initiated "circle time", where the class sat in a circle and students shared what they were feeling.

During circle time, students had the right to pass and not share their thoughts; however, most students shared their concerns and fears. Some expressed worry about their fathers who worked night shifts driving taxis and who were being threatened by drug dealers, others talked about their mothers being attacked in the laundry rooms of their buildings, about cameras getting spray painted over relinquishing security measures and others talked about drive by shootings.

Students decided to write to the mayor, to share what was happening in their community and to offer suggestions for change since they felt little was being done. In their letters, students suggested hiring people from the community to police the grounds, more cameras, greater police presence and hiring people to accompany people walking at night. Margaret mailed the letters, and months later students received personally written responses from the mayor himself. The mayor came to the school for a visit and he and the students talked about what was happening in the community.

This was socially inclusive pedagogy because students became engaged in the learning process and as they shared ideas and voiced their concerns to the mayor. Students were included in the broader social aspect of community and a space was created where students could share their feelings. When the mayor came to the school, students were acknowledged as having a voice and Margaret confirms that students felt empowered. When "children feel they belong and find their realities reflected in the curriculum and conversations of schooling, research has demonstrated repeatedly that they are more engaged in learning and that they experience greater school success"

(Shields, 2004, p.122). Teachers developed a socially inclusive pedagogy, which in turn generated purpose and interest in developing basic literary skills. Margaret added to the discussion by explaining that through inclusion and engagement, skills would be fostered,

> I find with our kids, they have so much
> context. I think you can introduce difficult
> social concepts despite their lack of academic
> skill, whether it be in literacy or social studies.
> You have to be creative… they have so much
> knowledge. They might not be able to get it
> down on paper yet, but the more you engage
> them, the more that's going to come. And, the
> more you engage them the more they are going
> to read and the more that's going to come. To
> me, that's the key to it all.

Thus, the teachers who were interviewed and observed, felt that socially inclusive pedagogy, while challenging to foster, is an essential component of their teaching practice.

Conclusion

> The rationale is that pedagogic problems in
> our cities are not chiefly matters of injustice,
> inequality, or segregation, but of insufficient
> information about teaching strategies. If we
> could simply learn "what works"… we'd then be
> in a position to repeat this all over Chicago and
> every other system! (Kozol, 1991, p.51)

In this study, how teachers foster social inclusion during literacy class to address the pedagogic problems we face in urban schools, namely exclusion, inequities and unsafe environments was examined. The teaching methods of socially inclusive pedagogy in literacy that "work" included: drawing personal connections, use of historical fiction, and letter writing. Within each of these teaching methods are particular nuances that contribute to social inclusion, including but not limited to: groupings, teachers' language, tone and mode of questioning, content material and cultural and personal connectedness. Culturally relevant pedagogy, power pedagogy and critical urban pedagogy are theoretically interwoven into the teaching methods that

31

foster social inclusion. There are other components to consider that influence "what works" when instituting socially inclusive pedagogy that were not included in this paper. The teaching methods teachers used to build interpersonal relationships and classroom community also need consideration.

Limitations

This study offers descriptive and clear examples of how teachers attempt to foster social inclusion in their literacy classes. In depth interviews with teachers and observations that span a school year were used to gain data that is based on rigor and clarity. There were however limitations that should be noted. Socially inclusive pedagogy existed in several other classes that have not been included in this study; that is, socially inclusive is not limited to these experiences or examples. Here snap shots of only some of the more significant examples were recorded. Further studies should be done to explore different classes and approaches teachers use with students in urban schools. Another limitation was that information gained in this study was derived from just the teachers. Further studies should be done to hear from students and to include their voices and explanations of how they perceive the attempts of teachers to foster social inclusion.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study teachers have choices for ways to think about how to foster social inclusion in their literacy classrooms. Thinking about creating opportunities for personal connections, using historical texts, and letter writing as a way to promote activism are three ways teachers in one inner city school fostered social inclusion. These approaches can be used in other subject areas as well and are not limited to the literacy classroom.

Socially inclusive pedagogy in this study refers to the inclusion of students through participation and engagement in what is being taught. It also refers to students having something to share and that their perspective is validated and appreciated by the teacher and classmates. The examples provided here show how students find space in the classroom to share and contribute. In these examples, students are not resistant to the teaching methods.

The research in this article might help teachers who feel as McLaren did several years ago – frustrated and at odds with how to

engage their young students. The approaches presented here might "work" in terms of teaching strategies and may contribute to the hard work of teachers who strive for a socially inclusive environment.

References

Armstrong, D., McMahon, B. (Eds.). (2006). *Inclusion in urban educational environments: Addressing issues of diversity, equity and social justice.* Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.

Banks, C., & Banks, J. (1995). Equity pedagogy: An essential component of multicultural education. *Theory Into Practice, 34*(3), 152-158.

Comber, B. (2006). Pedagogy as work: Educating the next generation of literacy teachers. *Pedagogies: An International Journal, 1* (1), 59-67.

Culpepper, S.M. (2004). The role of communities of practice in supporting first year teachers' learning to teach mathematics in urban schools. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.

Foster, M. (1997). *Black teachers on teaching.* New York: New Press.

Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research & practice.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Haberman, M. (1991). The pedagogy of poverty versus good teaching. *Phi Delta Kappan.* 290-294.

Hale, J. (1994). *Unbank the fire: Visions for the education of African American children.* Baltimore: John Hopkins Press.

Henry, A. (1998). 'Speaking up' and 'speaking out': Examining 'voice' in a reading/writing program with adolescent black Caribbean girls". *Journal of Literacy Research, 30* (2), 233-252.

Hollins, E.R. (1996). *Culture in school learning: Revealing the deep meanings.* Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Hunsberger, P. (2007). Where am I?: A call for "connectedness" in literacy. *Reading Research Quarterly, 42* (3), 420-424.

Kinchloe, J., hayes, k., Rose, K., & Anderson, P. (Eds.). (2006). *The Praeger handbook of urban education.* Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Kozol, J. (1991). *Savage inequalities: Children in America's schools.* New York: Harper Perennial.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *Dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of*

33

African American children. San-Fransisco: Jossey-Bass.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). But that's just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy. *Theory into Practice, 34*(3), 159-166.

McLaren, P. (1980). *Cries from the corridor: The new suburban ghetto.* Toronto, ON: Methuen Press.

McLaren, P. (2007). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education* (5th ed.). Boston: Pearson, Ally and Bacon.

McLaren, P., & Kincheloe, J. (Eds). (2007). *Critical pedagogy: Where are we now?* New York: Peter Lang.

Nawang, P. (1998, April). *The magic of culturally responsive pedagogy: In search of the genie's lamp in multicultural education.* Paper presented at the Annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association. San Diego, CA.

Nind, M., Rix, J., Sheehy, K., Simmons, K. (Eds.). (2005). *Curriculum and pedagogy in inclusive education: Values into Practice.* London: Routledge-Falmer.

Povey, H., Stephenson, K., & Radice, M. (2001). Four teachers talking: Social inclusion, professional development and (un)contested meanings. *Journal of In Service Education. 3*(27), 377-403.

Shields, G.M. (2004). Dialogic leadership for social justice: Overcoming pathologies of social silence. *Educational Administration Quarterly. 40*, 109-132.

Stake, R.E. (1995). *The art of case study research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Tatum, A. (2005). *Teaching reading to black adolescent males: Closing the achievement gap.* Maine: Stenhouse Publishers.