# Rethinking "Those Kids" : Lessons Learned from a Novice Teacher's Induction Into In/Exclusion

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## My Own Resistance to Inclusion

I was not always a believer in inclusion; in fact, I actively resisted it initially. It seemed far-fetched idealism at best and injurious practice at worst. Much of this resistance came from misunderstandings about inclusion that were driven by my own teacher preparation course work and by poorly implemented quasi-inclusion structures in schools where I worked. Admittedly, my resistance usually materialized in the teachers' lounge as common grumbling and probably did not amount to much in terms of actual action. Nevertheless, my somewhat passive-aggressive stance was generally motivated by retaining control over my students, who were often derisively branded as those kids by general education teachers and administrators. This was largely because I felt that I could help them more that way, as I probably overestimated my own capacity to do good in their lives.

When I returned from a yearlong combat tour as a medic in Iraq in 2005, I struggled to make sense of my diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder. I did not think the mold of a "disabled veteran" fit me, and I resented the guys who I came home with who had reconstituted their identities around an aggrandized sense of self-importance and sacrificial injuries. In a practical sense, though, I came to discover that I had a poor grasp of my temper, something that would come to make my work teaching unnecessarily difficult.

I came into teaching in 2007 through an alternative certification program in New York City and was assigned to become a special education teacher. I was told that my medical experience would make me a good fit for the position since I already possessed the mindframe to diagnose and treat illness. Per the terms of my fellowship, I received subsidized tuition at a public university, and my graduate course work followed a "clinical" model, emphasizing evidence-based practice. Inclusion was discussed solely in terms of technical skills: collaboration, co-planning, differentiation, and classroom management. In my teacher preparation program, reflection had one purpose—not to examine ways in which privilege

of all sorts colored our perceptions of our kids and of schooling—only to evaluate the effectiveness of implementation of didactic techniques. In no uncertain terms, my cohort of teacher candidates was told that our sole mission was to make large measurable gains in student test scores; that was why we were selected for the program. Like many others, I walked into a class in September woefully underprepared and with my own biases unchecked.

## Collaborative Team Teaching and Class 633

At the end of my summer crash course in high-impact teaching strategies for urban students, I secured a placement position in a large middle school in central Brooklyn with some 1,500 students in grades six through eight. I would later find out from a colleague that the principal had been reluctant to hire me, fearful that my military service had rendered me mentally unstable. In some ways, perhaps some of her concerns were well warranted; I had faced significant issues readjusting after returning home. Nevertheless, it felt lousy to be labeled. I did not think of myself as unstable—just as a person who sometimes experienced instability in certain contexts. At that point, I understood my own disability medically, as a set of symptoms that were exacerbated by triggers in my environment. As long as I could avoid those triggers, I thought, everything would be fine.

The first class that I taught had 38 sixth graders and was known by its number, 633. The class employed the collaborative team teaching (CTT) model[1] and had, by design, a ratio of 40% students whose disabilities were documented in their individualized education programs (IEPs) to 60% general education students. I was to collaboratively plan and deliver lessons in English, math, and social studies with three different co-teachers who would rotate into the classroom where I stayed with the students all day. Unlike most novice teachers, I was able to keep the class orderly and well behaved. However, doing so required occasionally unleashing a rage from within me that felt good to neither me nor the students. While my administration appreciated my ability to keep the kids in line, I felt like there was much I was not being told about who they were and what they needed beyond being controlled.

Michael[2] was a young, very dark-skinned 11-year-old boy from Jamaica who had an obvious speech impairment and an irregular gait. Though his IEP stated that he had a learning disability, what I came to know about him led me to believe that that label was either inaccurate, or, at best, incomplete—in any event, the result of a poorly done evaluation of his educational needs. Not mentioned in his IEP

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1   Collaborative team teaching was renamed integrated co-teaching in 2009, but the model remained the same. This paper describes events before the name change.
2   All names have been changed to pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

at all was that he was in many respects a very strong student. He often made intelligent, insightful comments in class, though they were difficult to understand because of his accent and a slur in his speech.

Michael would come to my class during lunch, sneaking in from the playground, crying because he was teased and called a "retard" by other students. His writing showed that he was not struggling cognitively, but his handwriting made his insights tough to read. The occupational therapist and I eventually unearthed his cumulative record file from a dusty cabinet and discovered that he was born with hemiplegic cerebral palsy, not at all the learning disability his IEP indicated. His mother, a hotel room cleaner who worked irregular hours, was baffled by the jargon and paperwork of special education. She would say, "he was born this way," but she did not know when or why he was labeled as having a learning disability. The words "special education" were an insult to her. "He's not a retard," she would say.

Kris was an incredibly intelligent, short Black 12-year-old boy with a fiery, mischievous smile. He was placed into 633 because of his behavioral issues, which were reported to our middle school by his elementary school. I remember the programmer telling me that she thought that it would help Kris to have two teachers in the room. He was loud and rambunctious, but never malicious—he always tried hard to make his friends laugh. At one point, I was trying to keep food out of the classroom (the room was infested with roaches), and he brought a rubber sandwich to class and would pretend to sneak bites. When I caught him with it, he threw it on the ground and it bounced up at me, eliciting laughter from everyone, including my co-teachers and me. Later, when I had his parents in for a conference to discuss his report card, they told me that they were afraid to let Kris play in the unsafe streets in their neighborhood, as they were recent immigrants from Haiti. It was then that I realized that he was so energetic in class because he did not have an outlet for his playfulness outside of school.

Kris did not have an IEP, but my mentor who was an older veteran special educator swore he should be referred for an emotional disturbance label. Since she thought he belonged in a self-contained class, the school's administration requested that the parents sign a letter requesting a special education evaluation. When I spoke to them about it, I quietly cautioned them against consenting for him to be evaluated, sharing my worries about the possible consequences of him being classified. I thought that his naughty behavior clearly seemed to me to be a function of his context, not of an intrinsic "disturbance" within him. Mostly, I was worried about what would happen to him if he was put into a system that he did not belong in—in my mind, very much like a patient taking someone else's medicine,

as I still saw special education as a para-medical field. Kris's parents ultimately did not sign the pretyped form letter requesting evaluation. In class, Kris also mellowed out quite a bit when I learned that the best way to manage his behavior was to enjoy the humor in it and find outlets for his energy.

I first encountered Quamasia when I went to get a bookshelf from her general education class. She was repeating sixth grade, having failed the tests for promotion, and was bigger and louder than all of the other children. When I walked into the room, she turned her attention to me and began to catcall me as I picked up the shelf and carried it out of the room. I contemplated yelling at her, but the crowd was clearly hers, and her teacher was clearly unsuccessful in trying to rein her in. Three months into the school year, in just enough time for a referral, IEP meeting, and placement, she was given an IEP with a Learning Disability label and placed into 633. She regretted her earlier actions the second she walked in and saw me, but I tried to be welcoming and forgiving. She sat quietly in class, ashamed of being in "special ed."

I came to understand that 633 was a big dumping ground for students who were unwanted, even though it masqueraded as an inclusion setting. Michael, Kris, and Quamasia were just three of *those kids*, joined by 35 other students with significant learning needs who were excluded from general education classrooms because of disability, academic struggles, or behavior management needs. 633 was not diverse at all; in fact, it was a somewhat homogeneous group of struggling learners. In my mind at the time, whatever benefits there were of educating students with disabilities alongside their nondisabled peers, they were far outweighed by the challenges associated with having so many needs in one place. Moreover, whatever advantages came with having two teachers in a class were outweighed by the demands of not having time or resources to plan collaboratively. While I personally got along with my co-teachers, they were weak classroom managers, which put me in the position of perennial disciplinarian.

That was how I came to misunderstand inclusion. It did not make sense to me to lump all students with significant—and often conflicting—learning needs together in one place. I became the disciplinarian, and my co-teachers delivered content in an endless "one-teach, one-assist" arrangement. Nevertheless, there were a few successful aspects of this arrangement. I was able to work closely with students, building relationships with them and their parents; I believe I got to know the students of 633 better than any other group I encountered over the course of my career. I still keep in touch with Quamasia and Kris, almost 10 years later. Additionally, the arrangement was successful in the sense that it met the administration's most immediate demands: I was able to control 38 of the school's most disruptive

students at one time. When I got sick, though, I would have the security guards in the building tell me that I was not allowed to take days off, as my students literally could not even be kept in the classroom when I was not there. I felt that I could do better on my own.

At the end of my second year of teaching the group, I wrote my master's degree thesis, which ended up being an indictment of CTT and, by association, of inclusion. It seemed that the promise of inclusive methodologies was entirely undermined by poor implementation of the critical features that would enable inclusion to be successful: purposeful pairing of co-teachers, time for co-planning, thoughtful selection of the general education students who would be in the class, and most significantly, a shared and clearly articulated vision of what inclusion should actually look like. As my wife and I moved to a new home across the city, I needed to find a new job. One of my main criteria was that I would not have to work in a CTT setting. I ended up finding a school that did not have an inclusion program to speak of. However, that school would prove to be an even bigger problem for me.

## Convenient Segregation and the Self-Contained Model

Through a friend of a friend, I easily got an interview at a small high school with 300 students in the Bronx. The school consistently scored at the highest levels on both New York State and New York City accountability measures, based on its high pass rates for standardized exams.[3] When I interviewed there, I was told that they did not have any CTT programs and that students with disabilities were mostly placed in a self-contained setting made up of one teacher, one paraprofessional, and 15 students identified as having "moderate to severe" disabilities. A small number of other students with IEPs received special education teacher support services (SETSS) in their general education classes, probably because those students approximated what the school considered to be normal. I strongly preferred self-contained settings, as I enjoyed working by myself: there were no conflicts with another teacher regarding classroom management style, no need to find time to plan how to collaborate, and most crucially, a much smaller class size.

I was assigned to work with a tenth-grade class, teaching algebra, global history, and foreign languages— one semester of French, one of Japanese. I was told that there would be opportunities for me to take on a leadership role as well, even though I was only in my third year of teaching. I was also told that the students were a bit wild and needed a teacher with strong classroom management skills to keep the

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3        It is worth noting that while many students passed the exams, very few scored very high. Accountability metrics at that time tracked only pass rates, not overall scores.

class in control. The administration was seemingly happy to hire a male with a military background to that end.

What I was not told was that during the previous year, the students' behavior had led their ninth-grade teacher to quit after a few months and driven the long-term substitute to have an emotional breakdown; she was, stories said, taken away from the school in an ambulance. This created the opening of the position I was hired for. Given their past successes at disruption, this group of kids was emboldened to resist my control and was in truth difficult to manage. The administration also added an English class to my teaching load and appointed me as the transition coordinator. My supervisor, Ms. Santana, was a brand new assistant principal. She was charged with managing everything related to special education and oversaw all aspects of my work, most notably lesson planning and writing IEPs.

My class had its share of students who displayed distinctly troubling behaviors, but there were also a few who were curious and eager to comply. Emily was a 15-year-old Black girl with an obvious physical disability. She was overweight, walked with a limp, and had one immobile eye. Additionally, she wore long sleeves and pants to cover up a skin condition, even in hot weather. Yet, she, too, was labeled as having a learning disability. She was a dream to teach: she was curious, funny, and very supportive of her peers' academic and social needs. In many ways, she acted as the mother of the class. At Emily's IEP meeting, there was the suggestion of moving her to a general education class and providing her with SETSS there. However, she did not want to do that. "As bad as things are here," she said, "those teachers don't have the time to take care of the students who need help. I'd rather be in here."

Barry was a 15-year-old Black boy of unremarkable height and build who had a perpetual smile on his face and seemed kind. He was classified as having a learning disability, but the scores that the school psychologist computed for him qualified him for a Mental Retardation label.[4] He was unable to read or write independently, but he liked sitting with his friend Juan, a thin, light-skinned boy, born in the Dominican Republic. Juan often associated with the few notorious gang members in the school and was frequently involved in fights in and outside of school.

Barry increasingly became a pawn in the scheming of Juan and his associates, taking orders from him to pick fights with suspected members of rival gangs and destroy school property, so Santana decided that it was time for Barry to transfer to a more restrictive setting. Once a placement was secured for

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[4]     The disability category "mental retardation" was renamed "intellectual disability" in 2010 by PL 111-256, also known as "Rosa's Law." At the time of this story, the term mental retardation was still in use.

Barry in a special school—which was in a more distant neighborhood that was not easily accessible by public transportation from his house—it was put on me to convince his grandmother to approve the move. When the grandmother resisted by not showing up at several arranged meetings, Santana and her secretary began to phone her every day, until she eventually signed the papers.

Santana and I also began to bump heads. It started on Veteran's Day, when others were thanking me for my service—a popular expression of gratitude that I, like many other veterans, neither enjoy nor welcome (Richtel, 2015). She told me that I was culpable for the deaths of innocent civilians just because I had participated in the war. I did not control my reaction to her suggestion well, barking aggressively back at her in front of a few other teachers in the department. From that point on, she targeted me with unannounced observations, gave me poor ratings, and directly threatened my career. I struggled to keep my composure, often drinking too much at the bar after school hours, and my teaching and professionalism distinctly suffered. I was unable to keep up with a workload that was probably unmanageable in the first place. My teaching performance deteriorated and I failed to complete paperwork on time, which made Santana even angrier with me. One of my colleagues told me she encouraged two ninth-grade boys to fill up paper bags with air and pop them behind me, causing me to startle. I felt more disabled during that year than at any other point since coming home.

I complained to Principal Bullock about Santana, but he did not want to interfere. "I just want you guys to work together and deal with *those kids*, so I can worry about the ones who are going to college," he said. He pointed at his bookshelf, full of Department of Education manuals, saying that he had his plate full. Driven by accountability measures calculated from test scores, Bullock explained that his vision was to create a true prep school that would send poor Bronx kids to his own Ivy League alma mater; it was clear that my students were not part of his vision. In fact, I do not believe that he even expected my students to graduate. On the contrary, I think the school was required to take a number of students with disabilities and just needed a place to store them. Receiving no support from him at the end of the year, I found work teaching elsewhere.

With Bullock and Santana at the helm, the school was successful in achieving its goals: to segregate *those kids* so that they were out of the way of students who were deemed to be more capable. As a result, the standardized test score pass rates for the school flourished, and at one point the school was ranked among the top ten highest-achieving schools in the city. Yet, few students with IEPs ever graduated from the school, and when they did it was because their parents fought for them to transfer to alternative programs wherein special education did not exist.

In 2012, Mayor Bloomberg initiated special education reforms that were targeted at placing students with disabilities in less restrictive environments (Wheaton, 2011). On the face of it, this would seem to be a systematic move toward inclusion. However, if we conceive of inclusion as a "principle of practice" (Kozleski, Yu, Satter, Francis, & Haines, 2015) instead of as a concrete set of implementable models, it is tough to maintain such an optimistic stance toward those reforms; in reality, the result was that decisions about the placement of students with disabilities were entirely in the hands of education professionals whose primary concerns were compliance and accountability, not accommodating student needs. Moreover, many parents and educators understood that the impetus for this reform was to cut costs (Wheaton, 2011). Indeed, the common practice of hiring alternatively certified special education teachers at the bottom of collectively negotiated pay scales is probably similarly driven by the desire to lower the cost of staffing fields with high turnover.

## Systematic Exclusion

Connor and Ferri (2007) described how special education settings are used as a way to keep the peace through removing students that overextended educators fear to be disorderly or disruptive. There is little doubt that both of my former schools employed this rationale for exclusion, and that it enabled them to achieve their desired ends. Thus, in these schools, "special education literally [became] a way to 'keep the peace' by removing students who might disrupt the status quo of the general education classroom" (Connor & Ferri, 2007, p. 69). In this sense, Hockenbury, Kauffman, and Hallahan's (2000) claim that special education is "already in most aspects well enough integrated as a sub-system" (p. 5) seems analogous to arguments made in the late-19th and early-20th century for "separate but equal" racial segregation. Some may consider the comparison to be a bit hyperbolic; however, Ferri and Connor (2005) have convincingly demonstrated how the special education apparatus has in fact contributed to resegregation since the Supreme Court's decision in Brown v. Board of Education in 1954. Moreover, I seriously doubt that any of my former students would agree that they were "well enough integrated" into the fabric of school life.

Furthermore, when Mayor Bloomberg and his education chancellors instituted changes in compliance with the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), what Danforth (2014) called "technocracy" became the *lingua franca* of the entire New York City school system, including its separate and unequal special education sub-system. Under this technocratic regime

The complexities, vagaries, and inconsistencies of everyday life are distilled into fields of

metric regularity and schemes of statistical determination. In this view, technocracy is a mental state, a way of thinking about, organizing, and interpreting the world that yields mechanized symmetry, predictability, and efficiency. What most teachers would describe in terms of human interaction and relationships is recast as a series of calculus problems. (Danforth, 2014, pp. 313–314)

There can be little doubt that this quantification of students drove Principal Bullock's triage of my students into the hands of the abusive and inexperienced Assistant Principal Santana and her similarly inexperienced staff (myself included). In his quest to improve the statistical measures of student learning, Bullock saw to it that those whose performance would not yield the desired results were marginalized by technocratic management. It would be nice to believe that this was an isolated case (and perhaps the more extreme aspects of it were), but I would contend that the proliferation of technocracy is likely to be a general feature of post-NCLB American education and underlie the marginalization of students with disabilities in a range of settings.

Tied to this phenomenon is the proliferation of so-called evidence-based practices, or instructional methods that purport to be scientifically validated. Gallagher (2010) convincingly argued that through dubious applications of statistical research methods in education, this paradigm contributes to the further marginalization of students who are already conceived of as being "abnormal." All of this helps create a broad system of exclusion, which Slee (2011) describes as "scraps from the table for children who, when all is said and done, are sometimes tolerated but never welcome" (p. 43). This would surely resonate with my former students, as it resonates with me and my experiences.

## My own Paradigm Shift – Inclusion as Social Justice

My understanding of inclusion has changed from a fundamentally technical definition to a much broader and abstract understanding. Critical to this has been a shift from accepting a primarily legal definition and rationale for inclusion, such as compliance with the least restrictive environment requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, to a moral and ethical rationale based on the civil rights of children with disabilities to not be segregated. The work of disability studies in education (DSE) scholars, especially David Connor, has been crucial in changing my perspective in this way. I first met Dr. Connor when I was seeking admission into my current doctoral program, and I remember him explaining DSE as an alternative to the field of special education. I was confused at first, I must admit, because I had never heard the professional, medical, and legal underpinnings of special education

questioned. I now realize, having worked with and learned from him, that desegregation of special education is not just a matter of compliance with the mandate of implementing accommodations "to the maximum extent possible" or even "with all deliberate speed"; it is a moral imperative to destigmatize disability in our schools.

Broadly, inclusion has been conceived as a way of meeting the learning needs of students with disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers and as a way of meeting the needs of all students by focusing pedagogical energies on the most marginalized students, with varying degrees of emphasis on disability-specific issues (Kiuppis & Hausstätter, 2015). For my purposes, the distinctions between groups for whom inclusion is done do not matter very much; on the contrary, I think inclusion can be best understood in opposition to the systematic "scraps from the table" exclusion that I witnessed and experienced as a teacher.

To this end, teacher education in inclusive practices must be grounded in a commitment to equity and acceptance of diversity first. This needs to be articulated in a vision for inclusivity that goes beyond technocratic notions of achievement; indeed, what I had missed in my training was the "why" of inclusion. Without that context, it was much easier for me and for those around me to accept the convenience of segregation. Much can and should be learned from teacher education programs that emphasize inclusive practice, notably at Syracuse University (Ashby, 2012). In my work as a teacher educator, I teach many of the very same technical foundations of inclusive practice that I once was taught: collaborative co-teaching, differentiation, assessment, and classroom management. However, though I finished my initial teacher training, my understanding was that those technical skills were to be used specifically to teach students with disabilities or perhaps could be stretched into benefitting "at risk" students; now I focus on framing those technical skills in a context of equity and civil rights for individuals with disabilities. Moreover, I seek to teach a more comprehensive but abstract concept of inclusion in order to convey that those skills need to benefit all students, from those who are profoundly disadvantaged by prevailing pedagogical models to those who are already the most successful in general education settings. Finally, by drawing attention to questions of who has access to those so-called inclusion spaces, I ask my students to be critical about whether the structures that they see in their fieldwork or in their schools are truly inclusive.

In addition to reframing inclusionary practices as pedagogy for equity, new models for inclusion need to come into practice, particularly in urban school districts, wherein disability, race, and socioeconomic status overlap profoundly. Slee's (2011) claim that theories of inclusive education are too often technical

prescriptions noted, there remains a need for practical suggestions for that can be put into practice, given the frequent inadequacy of existing structures in these places. This problem is particularly acute for secondary schools, as many models for inclusive practice are based on early childhood and elementary settings (Beckman & Odom, 2002; Cross, Traub, Hutter-Pishgahi, & Shelton, 2004). In the broader context of inclusive education, the design of structures for inclusive practice requires some capacity for local flexibility in finding ways to address the non-negotiables, including meaningful collaboration, accommodation for student needs, and purposeful assessment, given the real world-fiscal and personnel problems that urban school districts face.

Finally, I am finding that working toward inclusion means coming to terms with my own disability. I understand my own disability and relationship with society differently now. My years of teaching changed my awareness of segregation and disability in profound ways, not least of all because the way that I was treated when my disability came to light and paralleled how the students I worked with were treated. For me, my "symptoms" are connected not merely to "triggers" in a direct causal relationship but also, in complex and dynamic ways, to the broad contexts in which I work and live in complex and intersecting ways. My awareness of how my own medical condition turned into something that was genuinely *disabling* also emerged. The ecological factors that I experienced that affected the expression of my own difference separated me from my peers, in much the same way that ecological factors affect the academic and behavioral performance of students with perceived disabilities in segregated classrooms. Michael, Kris, Quamasia, Emilie, Juan, and Barry's exclusion therefore should never be justified on the grounds that they were less "able" than others. Rather, their disabilities need to be viewed in the context of an exclusionary system that makes whatever unique characteristics that were intrinsic to them truly disabling.

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