

Leading through a critical lens: The application of DisCrit in framing, implementing and improving equity driven, educational systems for all students

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Abstract

Purpose – This article focuses on the strategic importance of framing cultural changes in special education through a critical lens. The article explores why cultural responsiveness must be understood from a critical perspective that accounts for the historical sedimentation of racism that exists within special education organizational policies and practices. This sedimentation affects current and future organizational features that sustain historical, persistent and pernicious racial and ableist structures, relationships and outcomes.

Design/methodology/approach – By examining the role of power within organizational systems, the authors trace its contribution to reproduction of these systems through special education leadership. Special education leaders along with their peers in general education can frame transformative change through a systemic lens designed to address structural, regulatory and cultural practices that perpetuate raced and ableist outcomes. The pernicious and sustaining structures and practices that have created unequal outcomes in our educational systems need strategic intervention, prevention and re-creation to create equitable supports and services programs.

Findings – By examining the role of power within organizational systems, the authors trace its contribution to reproduction of these systems through special education leadership. Special education leaders along with their peers in general education can frame transformative change through a systemic lens designed to address structural, regulatory and cultural practices that perpetuate raced and ableist outcomes.

Practical implications – With clear outcomes that are responsive to all students, including those identified with dis/abilities, education leaders can make consequential shifts in access, opportunity and the distribution of social and intellectual capital throughout education.

Social implications – The pernicious and sustaining structures and practices that have created unequal outcomes in our educational systems need strategic intervention, prevention and re-creation to create equitable supports and services programs.

Originality/value – The application of DisCrit to educational leadership practices offers an opportunity to frame leadership through a powerful equity lens.

Keywords Culturally responsive leadership, DisCrit, Equity in education, Inclusive schools, Educational or systems change

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

This article employs a dis/ability critical race studies theoretical (DisCrit; [Annamma et al., 2013](#)) frame to educational leadership. DisCrit, as a shared branch of critical race theory (CRT) and disability studies (DS), incorporates theoretical and methodological principles and tools that allow exposing purposefully missed and hidden systems, structures and manipulations with socially constructed identity markers that perpetuate injustices among groups. This approach simultaneously centers race and dis/ability and emphasizes their interconnected



nature in examining and dismantling oppressive practices (Annamma *et al.*, 2013). DisCrit primarily examines the mutually constitutive nature of racism and ableism, two forms of oppression that manifest within and across individuals and systems.

Although DisCrit was initially conceptualized to understand and tackle issues in education, its utility spans multiple disciplines. Influenced by a number of scholars, the authors apply DisCrit to leadership that has advanced White, hegemonic forms of hybridization that erase individual and collective minoritized experiences and histories. For multiple generations, the dominant education discourse has proclaimed that democracy, freedom and access to opportunity lie in acquiring intellectual tools and networks of knowledge that advance emancipation and participation in the economic, social and political engines of modernity (Kozleski and Thorius, 2014). Yet, the inequities in school outcomes are as severe as when United States (US) policy makers confronted them in the era following the resolution of World War II through the days of the Great Society in the Johnson years (Peurach *et al.*, 2019). The Brown decision and the legislation passed in the 100 days following the Kennedy assassination, spurred on by the Civil Rights movement, foregrounded federal policy change that has not realized its rhetoric (Smith and Kozleski, 2005). The passage of P.L. 94-142, the [Education for All Handicapped Children Act \(1975\)](#) created access to public education for students with dis/abilities [1]. Yet, in 2019, students who identify as Black, Latinx and/or English learners are more likely to be referred for special education, identified in high incidence dis/ability categories (e.g. learning dis/abilities, emotional disturbance, speech/language and intellectual dis/abilities) that require subjective judgment and are placed in restrictive special education settings (Artiles and Kozleski, 2016; DeMatthews, 2019; Skiba *et al.*, 2016). Without leadership intent on transforming general education ecologies including the pipeline into special education and its implementation, little will change these outcomes.

DisCrit reminds us that we live in the US within a dominant culture that is ableist (Hehir, 2005). The dominant frame for dis/ability positions ability differences as problems that need assessment, diagnosis and repair. Most of our social systems, including education, are founded on normative notions (Thorius, 2019). The height of a dining chair, the placement of a door handle, the introduction of text at a particular age, the emergence of language are determined by assumptions about the human frame, its range of motion, how knowledge is transferred, the privileging of speaking and listening over other forms of communication. Indeed, the ability to speak and listen is assumed. Faced with human performance variance, the multitude of standards used to assess and measure outcomes often focuses on changing the human rather than varying the standard. Policy work most often addresses inequities, inefficiencies and power issues within the bounded world set by those standards without challenges to the assumptions that create those standards.

Further, failure to achieve specific educational standards or benchmarks is located within individuals rather than the systems that set up a competitive, sorting mechanism. The prevailing normative stance frames failure as dis/ability that needs mending (Tan and Thorius, 2019). This ableist view of difference permeates US professional, familial and community lives, traveling from childhood through adulthood shaping our ideas and questions. For many who fit, or pass as fitting, within the standards, broadening, removing or reforming the standard is not the first or obvious policy move. One reason is that leadership positions often go to individuals who have accumulated sets of competencies built to achieve within the standards and accumulate status markers (Saatcioglu and Skrtic, 2019). Fitting the standards and achieving status markers opened doors as future educational leaders participated in schooling, reached social, educational and professional milestones, honed their skills, entered the education profession and took on increasingly complex responsibilities. Each step in the process solidified conceptual and craft knowledge of the standards through which they passed, paving the way for higher status in the hierarchy.

Accumulated social, political, situated knowledge and practices also permitted entrance into a community of practice bounded by specific sets of professional shared knowledge, practice and custom. Entrance conferred abled status. This process reproduces the “dis” part of DisCrit.

The critical theory in DisCrit recognizes that the US culture is not only ableist, it is also raced, gendered and heteronormative (Annamma *et al.*, 2013). Heteronormativity is the idea that heterosexuality is the legitimate expression of one’s sexuality. US history and contemporary life is rife with attempts to separate, segregate and regulate ability, race, ethnicity, national origin, sexuality, language, religion and other differences perceived as existing outside the dominant cultural norm. Each of these identity metrics draws on normative ideas of what counts as meeting specific cultural standards and norms. Just as ableism emerges from a set of uncontested, normative standards about what constitutes ability and dis/ability, racism conflates skin color with specific forms of behavior, cultural practices, capacity, criminality and competence, in spite of evidence to the contrary. This conflation is indexed in the pernicious incarceration of generations of Black and Brown men and women, the persistent gaps in educational outcomes and the disproportionate identification of students of color in special education (Annamma and Morrison, 2018). Power and privilege accrue to those who conform, or pass as conforming, to the existing standards, including whiteness and ability. The demographics of the education field reflect this. As of the 2015–2016 school year, White women comprised the majority of the US teacher workforce ($n = 77\%$; U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Data from the same year show that while teachers who identified as Black declined (from 8 to 7%), teachers identifying as Hispanic increased (from 6 to 9%). In the same year, teachers who identified as White comprised 80% of the workforce.

DisCrit provides a lens to understand how ability, race and other marginalized differences become conflated through interwoven systems that trade in dominance and subordination (Roland, 2018). DisCrit can help educational leaders create opportunities for their communities of practice to understand and respond to multiple forms of identity and their expression and oppression. This is particularly true in special education where the boundaries between dis/ability and ability blur with boundaries (and individual internal, figured worlds) around special and general education. Made at the building level, decisions determining who enters special education shift from school-to-school, district-to-district and state-to-state (Shepard *et al.*, 1983; Skiba *et al.*, 2016; Sullivan, 2011). This alone is powerful evidence that local custom, privilege and power drive the process of determining special education eligibility and placement. Coupled with the variability in special education identification and settings based on race, it is difficult to deny the presence of profound biases in how policies that govern our education are set up, regulated and practiced. This article explores how leadership to reshape the cultural, political and social contexts or **ecologies** (Annamma and Morrison, 2018) in which special education is practiced is critical to transforming how communities embrace difference as basic to human experience. It will take leadership informed by DisCrit and focused on the disruption of historically legitimized normative standards within schools, districts and states. Further, DisCrit reminds us that identity is not a singular dimension, defined solely by race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, ability, sexuality, cultural history or language. Leaders must respond to and sustain notions within education communities to design learning that sustains and emancipates the multidimensional complexity of identity through education.

An array of interwoven challenges

Four interwoven challenges face educational leaders who disrupt old systems patterns and engage equity-based leadership to address structural, cultural and historical inequities in resources, opportunities and outcomes. Leaders can hold a host of roles such as teacher,

school psychologist, special educator, principal and special education, assessment, curriculum or personnel director, as well as superintendent and school board member. Leaders work in classrooms, schools, school districts and state education agencies that influence student categorization, curriculum design and delivery, individual, group and program assessment, workforce entrance and development. These activities set the institutional ecologies in which teachers and students labor. Ecologies describe the complexity of the human, material and organizational layers that interact and produce activity and outcomes recognized as schooling. Little happens inside classrooms that are not subject to the pressures of institutional ecologies. To transform classroom activity requires disrupting and transforming the institutional ecologies, which leaders absorb, resist and sustain through their activities and policies. Equitable education requires shedding dis/ability as a core institutional construct in order to emphasize human capacity and variability. By foregrounding capacity and personalization, education can absorb and act on the lessons learned from the rigorous, but unfortunate, foregrounding of standardization to affirm the importance of personalization. DisCrit reminds us that personalization of learning can (1) be built upon recognition of ways in which race, dis/ability, sexuality, gender, language, socio-economic status, ethnicity and religion are intertwined and play out in particular contexts; and (2) problematize the ways in which socially constructed binaries (e.g. able/disabled, normal/abnormal, general education/special education) produce and prioritize certain type of knowledge, performance and place and exclude existence and exposure to intersecting forms of knowledge, dispositions and cultures (Annamma *et al.*, 2013). Disruptive change that challenges conventional norms and standards emerges when outsiders have access, engage and offer leadership for system reforms. Leadership requires reflexive practice, defined by inquiry, design, rapid feedback and continuous improvement.

Human capacities

Ableism permeates everyday cultures, weaving across cultural, linguistic and national boundaries. It travels within educational communities that focus on repair, remediation and exclusion. To disrupt the social construct of dis/ability requires knowledge of its historical, cultural, social, political, legal and economic roots as well as its reliance on outmoded notions from biology and cognition (Connor *et al.*, 2019). A focus on human capacity and the importance of multiple forms of diversity helps to advance the importance of community and learning in creating opportunities to learn, eliminating margins and ensuring that each person has access to lives saturated with the full range of human experience. Understanding the roles of political, religious and educational systems in framing practice around human capacity will propel us forward. To do so requires deep knowledge on the part of educators. Two examples highlight the importance of critical consciousness of DisCrit and its component parts to counter business as usual.

Using data from two youth participatory action research projects, Bertrand (2014) examined the interactions between students and educational decision makers (e.g. a superintendent, two school principals and two school board member staffers) during a presentation on school change given by students of Color. Bertrand (2014) discovered that most of the decision makers focused on students' performances rather than the content of their presentations, which ultimately limited the possibility to build on students' grievances and recommendations for change. Moreover, Toure and Dorsey (2018) investigated how White school leaders (e.g. three White principals) interacted with teachers, families and other community members at a largely African American elementary school. The researchers found that the school leaders engaged in all aspects of the White racial frame. For example, one White female principal relied on racial narratives when she suggested that all children who live in poverty face the same dynamics, and she utilized racial images when she

described seeing African American children through the image of a “whole child.” The two studies presented highlight that administrators have to do more than simply interact with members of historically marginalized groups. They must be committed to disrupting conventional and normalized notions of development and achievement through those interactions.

Access

Universal design originally applied to the built environment including steps and narrow passages, doors and walkways, which prevented access to multiple community spaces, limited quality of life for individuals and families who could not navigate these spaces, and denied services that others were able to access freely. Universal design for learning refers to inaccessible transportation as well as the lack of pedagogies designed to anticipate the needs of individuals with a variety of neurodiverse, physical, sensory and social-emotional needs (e.g. Braille, signing, audio aids, cuing systems and social signposts). It also extends also to attitudinal barriers in communities, businesses, homes and educational facilities that foster low expectations, overprotection and ostracism from teachers and peers. This is partly due to mythical patterns of attribution and tradition, which rationalize shame for, and rejection of, dis/ability or deformity through various historical filters perpetuated through colonialization and standardization (Connor *et al.*, 2019).

Moving away from sorting, categorizing and separating means creating a practical, working definition of inclusive education. It must remind practitioners, school leaders and district policy makers that serving students in classrooms located in the same school without opportunities to engage in learning together is not inclusive education. UNESCO’s (2005) working definition states that “inclusion is seen as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion **within** and **from** education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a common vision which covers **all** children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the **responsibility of the regular system to educate all children** (p. 13).” Waitoller and Kozleski (2013) go on to discuss inclusive education:

Inclusive education is a continuous struggle toward (1) the redistribution of quality opportunities to learn and participate in educational programs, (2) the recognition and value of differences as reflected in content, pedagogy, and assessment tools and (3) the opportunities for marginalized groups to represent themselves in decision-making processes that advance and define claims of exclusion and the respective solutions that affect their children’s educational futures (Waitoller and Kozleski, 2013, p. 35)

Access and recognition require systemic work to ensure that opportunities to participate and learn are afforded all students. The education workforce needs to understand its role in eliminating the impact of colonialism, linguistic isolationism, racism and ableism. It begins with the recognition of multiple forms of knowing, the value of cultural experiences, funds of knowledge and the varying developmental pathways to adulthood experienced by children (Waitoller and Thorius, 2015). The US dominant culture masks these processes. As a result, its educator workforce lacks complete understanding of the powerful tools that mediate how our children collectively mature through and learn from the systems that manage their growth and education.

Rebooting individualization and personalization

Buffeted by the demands for standardization (Peurach *et al.*, 2019), the impact of special and inclusive education on students identified with and without dis/abilities expose contested relationships between the needs of students and families and school systems. Globalized

countries are characterized by rapidly shifting capital, complex and diffused information and communication technologies, as well as highly mobile populations, rapidly hybridizing cultures and bureaucratized management and development patterns (Waitoller and Kozleski, 2015). Social efficiency has been embraced by intergovernmental organizations, large corporations and individual citizens, as well as national governments (Ball, 2018). A major consequence is that local (student, teacher, school and community) education cultures experience rapid hybridization intended to accelerate homogenized outcomes.

While globalization and neo-liberal economic policies are catalysts for improving technical skills within the labor force, they are also a form of colonizing. Educational homogenization is a recipe for colonizing labor, not accelerating innovation (Gee and Estaban-Guitart, 2019). Thus, they design for homogenization and a narrowly defined set of school outcomes. Education's emphasis on market driven workforce development has serious implications for students with learning differences. The focus on narrowly defined outputs produces a bifurcated education system that provides an inadequate educational experience for students with dis/abilities (Waitoller and Thorius, 2015). Many argue the same forces produce a woefully inadequate education for all students (Peurach *et al.*, 2019). In the US, high school graduation rates for students with dis/abilities persistently register far below the national average. A third of students with dis/abilities fail to graduate from high school (McFarland *et al.*, 2018).

To counter these forces, DeMathews (2019) notes that principals can use specific stances to resist and reframe school culture and practice from standardization to personalization. Personalization seems to be everywhere, from making individual purchases online to choosing the ways of traveling from point A to point B. However, the K-12 world remains untouched. It continues to operate within the "one size fits all", a core principle of standardization. Rejecting normalcy as a way of understanding and predicting outcomes is a powerful tool for disrupting standardization. Learning happens when it is tailored to the needs of learners, designed to support their exposure to and development of knowledge, skills and ways of understanding what matters to them, and aids in improving their mental and physical health and well-being (Gee and Estaban-Guitart, 2019). Innovation emerges from knowing past and contemporary cultures, ways of thinking and the ability to construct for an imagined future. However heroic the work of individual principals may be, it will not be enough to counter the overall emphasis on standardization. Educational leaders in all parts of the education system must provide direction and support for the ecologies that educators need to reboot a focus on personalized learning and meaning-making. The tenants of DisCrit such as rejection of singular notion of identity and focus on multidimensional identities, recognition of Whiteness and ability as property and privileging voices of marginalized communities (Annamma *et al.*, 2013, p. 19) can become leading principles associated with the personalized learning and change.

Leadership as reflexive practice

Leadership as a reflexive stance means that members of professional communities co-construct map the design and processes of learning with their students, families and communities. A reflexive stance means that leaders respond to the political, economic and cultural needs of the individuals they work with as well as those they serve. Yet, leaders' responses are constrained by the systems that they lead. These systems are saturated with the mutual constitution of racism, sexism, cis-conforming [2] notions of sexuality, colonization and ableism (Connor *et al.*, 2019). For instance, a cisgender man is a person who identifies with the gender (i.e. boy/man) that correlates with the sex (i.e. male) he was assigned at birth. Not everyone identifies this way; for instance, transgender people may not identify with their assigned gender. Without this consciousness, leaders may locate responsibility for the deep inequities in social systems in the people being served rather than in the systems and structures they lead.

Leaders understand their roles and the needs of the systems they lead through observation, interaction and the distribution of power among constituencies. When leaders listen, observe and interact with constituents who claim roles and identities that are diverse and representative of local communities, they have the opportunity to learn and respond to a rich pool of interests, cultures, beliefs and activities (DeMathews, 2015). School leaders do this when students, teachers, families and community members collaborate in pursuit of equity outcomes (Kozleski and Choi, 2018). Special education leaders help support powerful change when their networks are diverse, complex and inverted. Rather than power flowing in one direction, leaders facilitate its flow from many directions, generating expansive possibilities. Diverse perspectives emerge not only from individual psychological attributes honed by familial and community experience and history but also by cultural, racial and linguistic abilities and expectations. Education leaders help to shape action in response to the affirmations and expectations of the professional workforces they lead and the families and community members they serve. Thus, leadership derives expansive innovation and transformation through reflexivity and the development and maintenance of networks of influence and practice (Peurach *et al.*, 2019).

The exercise of power

The sources and locations of power within organizations vary, despite the best attempts in bureaucratic organizations like schools to centralize decision-making. Power is often associated with specific roles like teacher, principal, director, superintendent and school board member. However, it is also distributed informally through political, social, knowledge and economic capital. Power is bonded to the White, dominant culture that pervades the educational system (Annamma and Morrison, 2018). The teacher in a school whose partner sits on the school board is likely to have more capital in decision-making in the school than other teachers who may have more experience and more teaching expertise. However, if the teacher and her/his partner are identified with a non-dominant group, their connections and potential power may be seen as threats. Further, the accumulation of various forms of power occurs over time, creating a highly stable organization that is likely to have a variety of sources of decision-making authority that by-pass the formal distribution of authority within a bureaucracy. The intersectional nature of marginalization helps to maintain informal and formal authority within an organizational culture built on standardization rather than personalization. Power diffusion begins in education by engaging students, families and communities in the redesign, retooling and re-resourcing of schools. Leadership for transformation draws on the principles of DisCrit (Annamma and Morrison, 2018) and leverages change through three ongoing activities: (1) sense-making; (2) centering marginalized perspectives and (3) creating sustaining and emancipatory policies.

Sense-making within educational bureaucracies

Sense-making involves examining the moral and ethical outcomes of system design and outcomes as well as understanding who benefits from their current configuration. Schools that successfully include students who are often marginalized and minoritized elsewhere find paths around, under and over policies that seem to block progress in other settings (Geier *et al.*, 2008; Scheurich and Skrla, 2003). The education reform literature is rife with examples of classrooms and schools that have engaged in disruptive practices that offered access, voice and empowered students and families with the ability to shift curriculum and pedagogies through shared dialog and action with teachers and other school professionals (Annamma and Morrison, 2018; DeMathews, 2015; Scheurich and Skrla, 2003; Tan and Thorius, 2019). Although these idiosyncratic, locally driven learning spaces emerge from a complex policy

landscape, their features and outcomes seem to travel poorly into other locations (Fullan and Hargreaves, 2009). Likewise, equity-driven attempts to reform US public schools through federal (i.e. macro) and state (i.e. meso) policy development and implementation have been unsuccessful at scaling reform across large numbers of schools or districts (Lipman, 2011). Policy intended to de-stabilize historically-embedded practices that result in uneven, inequitable educational outcomes such as special education over-identification seems particularly vulnerable to failure. Implementation appears to fail to account for the ways in which local histories, politics, knowledge frameworks and practices temper policy intentions (King Thorius *et al.*, 2014).

Understanding this contextual complexity helps to clarify why attempts to improve the quality of education systems need to account for regional variation in the constellations of culture, economics and workforce traditions such as a reliance on union/management relationships or the focus on a history of professional bureaucracies. Local politics such as the selection and composition of local boards of education, the hiring of superintendents, the clout and influence of state departments of education, the involvement of governors in education agendas, the consolidation or sizing of local school districts influence the design of local education systems (Kozleski and Thorius, 2014). Increasingly, cities, suburbs, small towns and rural areas are sharply divided by demographics, values and expectations for their local education systems (Henig, 2013). Within each community, shaped by the culture of a White dominant society ranging from resistance to acquiescence, schools and teachers struggle to meet the burgeoning influx of English language learners, racially, ethnically and culturally diverse learners (Paris and Alim, 2014). Disappointing outcomes and multiple demands seep into local and state policy, competing for curriculum, assessment and performance regulation (Peurach *et al.*, 2019).

Sense-making requires understanding that human interaction, participation and progress is rooted in participation in everyday activities, mediated by cultural artifacts, and oriented toward outcomes (Cole, 1996). For example, Kozleski and Artiles (2012) engaged with state level policy makers and a diverse range of constituencies to examine data on disproportionality at the classroom, school and school district level. These data were mapped geo-spatially to understand patterns and relationships among patterns to describe the issues and problems that generated problematic and generative data. This participatory process in which the policy makers and their constituent groups sought to understand the links between macro policy and local practice, generated strategies for moving forward that included changing practice and policy in an inquiry led process. As Tuck (2009) has noted, not all social justice transformation builds from similar solutions. It is through understanding the unique histories and experiences of marginalized groups in their specific contexts that progress toward re-imagined outcomes can be made, even within bureaucracies.

Centering marginalized perspectives

The exercise of power and privilege is part of the political process that undergirds policymaking and implementation. Examining policy and analyzing its purposes with some nuance requires understanding that such policies are the product of multiple agendas, discourse communities and compromise (Ball and Exley, 2010). Even with this mix, the perspectives of marginalized groups remain untapped, neglected or ignored in schools (Pazey and DeMathews, 2019). In response, development and implementation of educational policy must account for the access, participation, and sustained feedback of individuals and groups that represent multiple perspectives and ways of knowing (Kozleski and Smith, 2009). Specifically, leaders need to engage marginalized groups. Engaging in this kind of diverse leadership and constituency development while policy is proposed augurs well for the political will to implement and sustain change. However, representation alone is not enough to center marginalized perspectives. Participatory policy and practice inquiry are critical to

disrupting the status quo and engaging shifts at the center as well as the margins (Artiles and Kozleski, 2007; Penuel, 2019).

Politics, which according to Laswell (1936) concerns “who gets what, when, and how?” are a critical dimension of how solutions that are expansive and inclusive of diverse perspectives can be initiated (Apple, 1994). Through politics, dominant views about things such as where students with dis/abilities are best educated or what shall be taught and to whom can be mediated by alternative perspectives to the degree to which individuals and groups gain access to informing and designing new policy. Once at the table, those who have not been served by educational systems and the policies that drive them may challenge the presiding policy agenda by poking at its vulnerabilities and providing solutions to those vulnerabilities through story telling about the ways things are and ought to be from *their* perspectives. These stories set up a counter-narrative that shakes faith in current initiatives and also proposes a new vision for how things ought to be (McDonnell, 2009).

Administrators and other leaders generally understand the importance of narrowing equity gaps that exist between able-bodied White students and students from historically marginalized groups. However, they are often unaware of the best approaches to take to achieve academic and social parity. Researchers, including the authors of this paper, often stress the necessity of focalizing the voices and experiences of those most impacted by harmful policies and practices, understanding that their voices are essential for comprehending particular schooling contexts. Research by Pazez and DeMatthews (2019), for example, reveals that students with and without dis/abilities recognize and can verbalize the systemic challenges they face in school and can also express the supports they need. The high school students in the study communicated their desire for a positive school identity, stability and to be recognized and heard. Centering marginalized perspectives is vital—yes—but administrators must do more. Specifically, when working with marginalized groups, administrators must be mindful that they do not engage in practices that limit future dialog with those groups, and White administrators must reflect on their practices to ensure that they do not engage in alienating practices situated within a White racial frame (Feagin, 2013).

Emancipatory intent. Given the current contexts of standardization and accountability, we suggest that macro level policies as such as common core learning standards are being misused to constrain and contain local actors’ daily practice in ways that are counter to policy that promotes inclusive educational systems. Current neo-liberal concerns have created contexts where the individual has become the policy target (making teachers better, looking at parts of the whole), and the roles of families and neighborhoods in creating the fabric of local communities are diminished (Lipman, 2011). Rather, just as we suggest the utility of participatory policymaking in opening the playing field to new (i.e. historically marginalized) players, this also means local schools must be open to new roles and opportunities for engaging in policy enactment, including the substantial and sustained engagement of students in redesigning educational opportunity (Pazez and DeMathews, 2019). This line of thinking is consistent with the view of policy as an emancipatory agent (Apple, 1994; Habermas, 1981) rather than edicts which bound the rules of engagement. Instead, we write from a policy perspective that, by design, engages and encourages policy participation by offering opportunities to “eliminate the causes of unwarranted alienation and domination and thereby enhance the opportunities for realizing human potential” (Stahl, 2008, p. 163). Toward this end, youth, businesses and civic organizations along with religious groups, government agencies, health and education, social services and local government all have a stake in what education is and should become. Their roles in forging transformation are critical to this process.

In a site where the authors researched equity in schooling, a popular superintendent remained so because of the work that she did with community members to excavate historical legacies of racism in the city and district and reveal their connections to students’ learning opportunities. The police chief told the researchers:

But if you really want to look at one thing, like if you want us to start going backwards, just remove the superintendent. It's the one factor that has moved us from a community that first became aware, to a community that started talking about it quietly, very quietly behind the scenes, almost whispering, and we did not quite know how to get beyond that because of the great ethical moral difficulty with the root cause of the problem, if the root cause of the problem is racism and all these kids are coming from the north end of the city and they're all black there and it's all white here, well, who put them there? And nobody really deals with that question, how'd they get there? How did it get like this? Well, it must be our fault because we're white. Why did not you do something about it? You know, I mean, those real basic questions never get addressed so people go around not knowing how to address them and therefore they stay away from them, so, the conversations on race I think helped.

Emancipatory policy and practice, then, start with excavation. That is, they require deep unearthing and analysis of oppression and disempowerment patterns and histories in any system. Leaders must be able to engage this process and be prepared to address the issues and solutions that emerge.

Creating sustaining and emancipatory policies

Unexamined everyday practices reify historical patterns of interaction in which some groups benefit because of the existing informal or unspoken rules of conduct that marginalize other perspectives and frames of reference. The tension between technical solutions, that is, what should be done and in what detail, and a critical analysis of the power and privilege dynamics that maintain certain structures must be continuously present in our discussions. Bureaucracies like schools, school districts and SEAs, because of their underlying assumptions about the flow and control of people and information, prevent and obstruct critical inquiry (Peurach *et al.*, 2019). Skrtic has suggested for more than 2 decades that we need to conceptualize adhocracies in which communities of practice organize, design and deliver education that involves, responds to, and draws on the specific needs and knowledges of their students. These communities of practice must bring deep knowledge of the histories, needs, and aspirations of local communities as well as deep professional knowledge about learning, disciplined inquiry and knowledge to design effective schools (Skrtic, 1995).

Transparency in installation and impact. The multiple people and groups who sponsor and drive policies from conception to installation are often invisible to the publics that receive and experience these policies. We contend that transparency in the process of installation also contributes to the degree to which any policy becomes sticky and sustains influence over how organizations and individuals behave. Kozleski and Thorius (2014) emphasize that in order for any policy to become sticky, it has to be developed with conscious attention to the challenges that local communities face and their direct involvement in policy design and implementation. Sticky policies resonate with multiple forms of access, engagement and recognition. Such policies become effective and last longer because they represent and support communities that they weredesigned to serve. Local district leaders, including school principals can facilitate sustaining change by acknowledging the influencers and networkers who helped to design and develop new tools for organizing activity. Part of legitimizing change comes from recognition of the individuals and groups whose efforts created the climate for re-invention and designed the processes through which transformation occurs. Relatedly, information about the impact of any policy on practice and outcomes also contributes to its vigor and sustainability. The public rationales used to explain new policy initiatives sometimes tell only part of the history behind any given decision. Each policy comes with a particular mix of fiscal resources, political gain, organizational merit, opportunity for improved outcomes for students and community satisfaction. Transparency is a key to realizing sustaining practice (DeMathews, 2019). The degree to which a policy satisfies the individuals involved on all these dimensions contributes to its impact upon

launching, the consequential nature of that impact, and the degree to which the policy creates lasting shifts in the work and experiences of the affected people and organizations.

As policies move closer to everyday action arenas in schools and classrooms, decisions tend to rest in a smaller and smaller group of individuals. A school board may only have seven to eleven members setting local policy. A superintendent's cabinet may have as few as two or three individuals or as many as 10 to 15, depending on the size of the district. These individuals and the constituencies they represent negotiate policies together within the constraints of school financing arrangements. What they decide has immediate influence on the lives and livelihood of teachers and students in schools. Schools may be closed, bus routes canceled, teachers let go, contracts for school maintenance issued and retracted. Repercussions of these policies can change individual career trajectories, and they have lasting effects on the capacity of whole systems to make sustained progress over time. Each time administrations shift, the accumulated capital created in service of a change mission begins to crumble. New coalitions are created when new leadership is constituted, but they rarely are able to capitalize on what has already been built and disassembled. New leadership must build its own social capital working on different targets. These targets are shaped by the new coalitions, emerging agendas within external change organizations (e.g. non-government agencies, advocacy organizations, universities and technical assistance arms of the state or federal government) and state and federal mandates. Understanding who and what benefits from the leadership fragmentation in public education is an important key to sustaining a positive change trajectory (Skrtec and Knackstedt, 2018).

Further, the agency that teachers exercise in their own classrooms reminds us that the politics of policy initiatives cannot afford to disregard individual decisions and actions of these players from their unique positions of power and privilege. This idea is illustrated by teachers' assumptions about what matters in terms of student behavior, language, social interactions and academic behavior that undergird many of the decisions they make to recognize, support and challenge their students. Although teachers are undoubtedly constrained by prescriptive curricula, increasing administrative record-keeping burdens that sap time and energy and pernicious evaluation procedures, they retain a significant amount of decision-making authority in their classrooms. Many of the decisions they make have long lasting impact on how children understand themselves, the institutional practices of schools and their notions of what it means to learn and innovate.

Making policy sticky means acknowledging the extent to which culture is central to how people make sense of the world around them. Policy is a way of disturbing everyday life; rebalancing or adjusting course to redress inequities as well as propel and fuel specific kinds of innovation; and building particular kinds of collective capital (e.g. social, intellectual, creative and material). Disturbances that emerge either from within or outside a group with a conferred authority initially can mediate the group's work; but to do so over time the policy must provide a benefit to the group so they will continue to refashion its cultural habits and daily work (Penuel, 2019).

Reframing possibility

An ecological systems lens

Two social space designs are critical for sustaining equity-based change in systems ecologies: (1) design spaces for learning and (2) design for scaling through establishing and nurturing transformational networks that travel within and between activity arenas. These social design strategies allow leaders to infuse an introspective dimension through activities that promote a "double move" (Hedegaard, 1998). When participation structures compel personnel to shift from an experiential problem-solving approach to theoretical sense-making, purposeful activity becomes linked with active, engaged inquiry. Exposing hidden

assumptions and tensions within the roles and identities that schools adopt for their public purposes is a key to this work. Building networks foreground capacity building results from careful analysis and sustained learning and system designs to address hidden assumptions and tensions. So much rides on the shoulders of street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980) like special education and curriculum directors, school principals and teachers. They need critical consciousness about human capacity, access, personalization and reflexive practice. They can gather the networks that can engage the work. And, they can support the direction and feedback of rapid cycles of improvement and learning occur within the networks. Networks respond to the problem of “stickiness” (Gladwell, 2000) or sustaining design. Leaders with their communities create policies and practices that can stick over time, creating sustaining work. Policy must be transportable into locally viable implementation strategies. Leaders work together with their communities to ensure that the people who install policy understand its importance, how it benefits students and the institutions that support them, and the connections between implementation and context. Policy created without conscious attention to the challenges of localized implementation lacks stickiness. In such cases, even though policy is enacted, the tendency of the educational system to maintain stasis constrains such policy from becoming part of the local culture. For example, resistance to policy is readily exemplified by the ways in which No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was modified, critiqued and negotiated at state and local levels. By the summer of 2012, more than half of all the states in the US had received waivers from many of its provisions (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Its replacement, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) passed in 2015 transferred much of the responsibility to states and school districts. Many state education agencies worked with stakeholders including educator unions to prepare state ESSA plans. The contrast between implementation of NCLB and ESSA suggests the value in participatory design. NCLB’s failure offers many lessons about understanding the strength of local context including history, culture, demographics, politics and economics (Bonilla and Dee, 2020).

Leadership for systems learning begins with examining the outcomes of current practice, inquiry designed to examine links between current practice and outcomes, an assessment of weak links, and the design of new practices developed to forge stronger and more robust links to outcomes. This means that practitioners are no longer recipients of technical knowledge. Instead, they engage with leaders who understand the messy nature of retooling, the use of analytic tools to assess progress, and the use of feedback to refine and improve outcomes. Leaders help to support the process, facilitate the discourse and inquiry, and, with their teams forge new strategies subject to the same ongoing inquiry in practice. Kozleski and Choi (2018) found that targeted, specific design and learning activities led by building leaders resulted in improved outcomes for all students, including those with dis/abilities. The importance of this work requires active engagement by special education leaders who reshape the design of systems of support for students with dis/abilities beginning with the underlying boundaries between normalized conventions of ability and what passes as difference or dis/ability in schools. Together, school and special education leaders can challenge the design elements that maintain these boundaries.

Disrupting our imaginations

School and district educational leaders participate in multiple activities throughout a day. They perceive, develop, and utilize numerous practices through the lenses that often remain unexamined and taken for granted. Those lenses are the product of collective forces that shape leaders’ imaginations toward individuals they interact with and tools educators use to achieve desired ends. Research on teacher identity suggests that educators, special education service providers, school and district administrators come to understand their roles through

participation in multiple worlds, in and outside of their community of practice (Holland, 2001; Thorius, 2016; Kozleski, 2011). Further, Holland (2001) emphasized the existing cultural worlds are not alone in shaping individual identity. Individuals contribute to collective cultural worlds by sharing their values and social practices as well (Kozleski, 2011).

Thus, the reciprocal process of shaping collective and individual identities exists within the cultural worlds that educational leaders encounter. These cultural worlds encompass and reflect imagination – *subjectivities* – predominantly focused on behavioral claims toward human activity. The behavioralization of policy legitimizes collectively created subjectivities (Klein, 2017). Subjectivities linger, become encrypted in habits, and reproduced within practices that govern lives of educators and students in schools. Because these collective cultural worlds are created and maintained by local leaders who simultaneously are contributors to and recipients of the collective imaginations, educational policies designed from outside would continue to sink in a hegemonic culture build upon undisrupted local subjectivities.

To disrupt our imaginations requires targeting the “third space”, a collectively constructed discourse in schools, as well as ongoing inquiry into the cultural worlds of each participating agent (Klein, 2017; Kozleski, 2011). Leading through a critical lens means for leaders to situate themselves within the third space, “an imagined place where narratives and counter narratives converge in ways that make it possible to disrupt and change the transcendent narrative” (Kozleski, 2011, p. 251). Undoubtedly, such work present challenges as it involves (1) a critical consciousness to surface and unpack institutionalized subjectivities and (2) a dialogical practice among individuals and groups who might hold conflicting imaginations toward their positionalities, language used and ways in which reality is depicted in schools (Kozleski, 2011). Critical scholars remind us that when imaginations are targeted, the default assumption is that they are problematic and need to be deconstructed. Nevertheless, resistance is equally critical part in challenging relations of power and injustices (Klein, 2017; Kozleski, 2011).

Final thoughts

The only way forward is for special education and general education leaders to guide their peers on a path toward transformative change. All other routes, that is, all routes that are deficient in analyses of power, de-center marginalized perspectives and are unconcerned with emancipation, will, undoubtedly, return their travelers to the starting point: the static position in which historically marginalized groups persistently endure oppressive educational policies and practices. Given the lift needed to move the ecology of our educational system forward, we cannot afford leaders who lack a critical consciousness and the knowledge needed to engage their communities in deep learning and sweeping alteration of patterns of learning and development in schools. Given the systemic and institutional constraints within the fields of special and general education, achieving transformative change is no easy feat. The authors acknowledge that. However, we also recognize that such change within local contexts is possible and that much can be done to improve the schooling experiences and educational outcomes of students existing at the intersection of multiple socially constructed identities (e.g. race, dis/ability and gender). We are mindful of Audre Lorde who wrote,

... survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change (Lorde, 2007, p. 27).

Notes

1. Dis/ability is meant to convey the fractured meanings of the term in reference to its use in naming conditions and identities through policy and institutional practices that may result in othering and marginalization without reference to the voice, participation and preference of the person being labeled.
2. Cis-conforming is used to describe individuals who identify with the gender that corresponds to the sex they were assigned at birth (Mock, 2014).

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