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Using Disability Studies in Education (dse) and Professional Development Schools (pds) to Implement Inclusive Practices

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Abstract

This article highlights ways in which disability studies in education (DSE) and professional development school (PDS) partnerships can be used to provide students with disability labels more access to inclusive classrooms. The authors of this qualitative exploratory case study interviewed 16 teacher and administration PDS steering committee members to better understand how students with disability labels could be supported through the development and implementation of DSE-informed inclusive practices. The findings indicate that instituting proactive communication structures, providing ongoing DSE-informed professional development to teachers, administration, and staff, and teachers taking inclusive action increased the number of students with disability labels accessing general education classrooms. These findings, while a work in progress, show how members of one PDS steering committee took steps to resist deficit models of disability and questioned traditional segregated approaches to special education at their school.

Keywords

disability studies in education (DSE) – professional development schools (PDS) – inclusive education – special education – education reform – qualitative research

1 Introduction*

This article highlights ways in which disability studies in education (DSE) and professional development school (PDS) partnerships can be used to provide students with disability labels¹ more access to inclusive classrooms. In many schools across the United States, students with disability labels are far too often given a “separate and unequal education” (Erevelles 2000:5). To address issues related to disability and segregation, a primary school and public university in the Northeastern United States used their professional development school (PDS) partnership to systematically and proactively² create more equitable access to inclusive classrooms for students with disability labels. This access came in the form of instituting proactive communication structures, providing ongoing DSE-informed professional development to teachers, administration, and staff, and teachers taking inclusive action.

1.1 *Professional Development Schools (PDS)*

According to the National Association for Professional Development Schools (NAPDS 2008:1), “Unique and particularly intense school–university collaborations, PDSs were designed to accomplish a four-fold agenda: preparing future educators, providing current educators with ongoing professional development, encouraging joint school–university faculty investigation of education-related issues, and promoting the learning of P–12 students.” John Dewey (c. 1894) of the University of Chicago is credited as the developer of PDS, or

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- 1 The authors purposely use the phrase “students with disability labels” to acknowledge the social construction of disability, the subjective nature of disability, and how these labels are placed on people who do not conform to an imagined norm (Taylor, 2006).
- 2 By “systematically” the authors mean student placement and transition decisions were team-based and continuously monitored. By “proactively,” the authors refer to the careful planning and anticipation of school activities students with disability labels were engaged in, and proactively coordinating student supports to ensure success in inclusive settings.

lab schools. These sites offered both training for teachers and research spaces for school-university partnerships (Colburn 1993). Research shows that implementing a PDS model can increase student achievement in K-12 settings (Castle, Arends & Rockwood 2008; Marchant 2002), improve the quality of pre-service teacher education courses (Damore, Kapustka & McDevitt 2011), and produce teachers who are better prepared to teach (Neapolitan et al. 2008).

For the purposes of this article, “Inclusive education means everyone is included in their grade-level in their neighborhood school. Inclusion means students are given the help they need to be full members of their class. Inclusive education involves districts supporting schools as they include ALL [emphasis in original] the students who live in their communities” (“Why Inclusive Education?” 2019:1). According to Schwartz, Staub, Peck, & Gallucci (2006:35), “The strategy behind inclusion is to design supports—innovative approaches to learning, differentiated instruction, curricular adaptations—for every student in the classroom, to include the entire spectrum of learners.” This means that inclusive classrooms become spaces where students do not have to earn their membership (Kliwer 1998). Through this approach, students are anticipated and welcomed as they are, and student differences and similarities are openly discussed, celebrated, and accommodated. Inclusive teachers view disability as diversity, and it is framed as a natural part of the human experience (Connor & Gabel 2010). Inclusive education also means that schools provide multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) where all students have access to the general education curriculum and certain students are provided with additional supports based on identified needs (Sailor 2015; SWIFT MTSS Starter Kit Tiered Intervention Matrix 2017).

1.2 *PDS and Inclusive Education*

While the existing PDS literature is comprehensive, there remains a noticeable gap in the research about how to use PDS to develop DSE-informed inclusive education practices. The research that does exist on PDS and inclusive education show that PDS can improve the attitudes of pre-service teachers about inclusive education (Strieker, Gillis & Zong 2013), broaden the instructional knowledge of pre-service teachers about teaching students with disability labels (Walmsley, Bufkin, Rule & Lewis 2007), and encourage the professional development of special educators (Voltz 2001).

In this article, the authors address this gap in research on PDS and inclusive education by infusing a DSE perspective into PDS literature. Specifically, the authors highlight the actions of a PDS steering committee that systematically and proactively moved students with disability labels from segregated classroom settings, into inclusive ones. The steps taken by the PDS steering

committee highlighted in this article are not meant to be prescriptive, rather, they are meant to expressly delineate one inclusive process that one school took so that others interested in similar work may have a model for replication. In response to the gap in PDS literature, the following research questions informed this project:

1. How can members of a PDS committee successfully support more students with disability labels in inclusive classrooms?
2. What specific inclusive strategies and supports can a PDS steering committee develop and implement to successfully increase the number of students with disability labels accessing inclusive classrooms?
3. What can infusing DSE and inclusive education perspectives into PDS work look like?

1.3 *Positionality*

A critical aspect of this project is the authors' positionality and their acknowledgment of how that influences how they interpret PDS work. Elder is an assistant professor who taught for eight years in a public K-6 elementary school. He has also taught for ten years in higher education and, at the time of writing, was in his fifth year as a professor-in-residence (PIR)³ at a PDS. Givens is a fourth-year doctoral student who taught for 25 years in various P-12 school districts in three states as a music teacher, general education, and special education teacher, respectively. She is currently an adjunct professor at a public university. LoCastro is an elementary education certified teacher and has been working in this public school for 23 years. She has taught 4th and 6th grade inclusion classes, and is currently a basic skills instructor and PDS Teacher Liaison. Rencher is an elementary education and special education certified teacher and has been working in this public school for 16 years. She has taught 4th, 5th, and 6th grade inclusion classes and is currently a basic skills instructor and PDS Teacher Liaison.

2 Theoretical Frameworks

2.1 *Disability Studies*

Disability studies (DS) scholars conceptualize disability as a natural variation of the human condition (Baglieri, Valle, Connor & Gallagher 2011; Hehir 2002;

3 At this university, a PIR can be higher education administrators or professors, tenure-track faculty, PhD students, practicing teachers, or adjunct faculty working one full day a week in their respective PDSS.

Linton 2005; Shapiro 1999). Through this lens, disability is understood as a “social phenomenon” (Taylor 2006:xiii). Pushing back against the medical or deficit model of disability, which positions disability as abnormal and in need of a medical fix, a social model of disability does not locate disability within people with disability labels. Rather, the social model places disability within inaccessible political, social, and environmental spaces (Marks 1997; Oliver 1990). When seen through this lens, people with disability labels *become* disabled when they interact with such spaces (e.g., no captions on television, no curb cuts for wheelchair users, or crosswalks without audio signals).

2.2 *Disability Studies in Education (DSE)*

Disability studies in education, an offshoot of DS, focuses on issues related to disability in schools. Gabel (2005:17) states,

disability studies in education is concerned with issues and problems of education, broadly construed, that affect or are affected by disablement⁴ in educational contexts. Disability studies in education is primarily concerned with the view of issues and problems as defined by disabled people as they relate to social exclusion and oppression.

Disability studies in education scholars take a critical stance on traditional views of special education (Connor, Gabel, Gallagher & Morton 2008; Danforth & Gabel 2006; Gabel 2005). It is important to note that inclusive education and DSE are not synonymous. While inclusive education may be a set of educational practices aimed at integrating students with disability labels into classrooms alongside their non-disabled peers, DSE challenges the nature of disability and the educational practices developed around it. At this school, while there are evolving “inclusive practices” (i.e., happening in “inclusion classrooms”), the presence of inclusion classroom means there are also “exclusive” or segregated spaces (i.e., happening in “self-contained classrooms”) within this school. However, in this school, teachers, administrators, and staff are committed to developing more DSE-informed inclusive practices and dissolving segregated spaces over time. Infusing a DSE perspective into inclusive education means actively deconstructing these inclusive and exclusive school spaces, and reconstructing new inclusive practices that provide nuanced ways of understanding disability (Allan 2008; Graham & Slee 2008).

4 Disablement- “Disabling” economic, political, and cultural barriers that prevent people with impairments from participating in mainstream society (Oliver & Barnes, 2012:12).

3 Methods

3.1 *Exploratory Case Study*

The purpose of exploratory case studies is to provide the groundwork for future inquiry into a phenomenon by identifying questions that can lead to new approaches to research (Yin 1994). In this project, the authors used exploratory case study methodology to examine the actions teachers, administrators, and staff took at a particular school to develop DSE-informed inclusive practices. The authors do not intend to make causal statements about participant actions and inclusive education, rather, through this approach, they wish to illuminate the inclusive reform process this school was going through.

3.2 *Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR)*

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) engages participants in iterative reflection on research practices and emerging project results with the ultimate goal of actions benefiting local communities (Israel, Schulz, Parker & Becker 1998; Stanton 2014). The iterative cycles of research allowed for the authors to regularly interview participants and reflect on emerging DSE-informed inclusive practices. These approaches encouraged teachers to challenge traditional notions of special education, deconstruct previous notions of inclusive education, and think differently about disability in their school (Allan 2008; Connor et al. 2008; Danforth & Gabel 2006; Gabel 2005; Graham & Slee 2008).

3.3 *Site of Study*

This article highlights the first iteration of CBPR-informed case study research implemented at a public 4–6 elementary school in the Northeast region of the United States. This Title I “high needs” school has about 500 students, with almost half (44.2%) who live below the poverty line. There are 85 students with individualized education programs (IEPs), including 14 with IEPs for speech and language services. Eight students are labeled as having multiple disabilities (MD). The school has four segregated special education classrooms. Three of these segregated classrooms educate students with “learning disability” labels, with one classroom for students with labels of MD. There are six other special education classrooms which are co-taught by a general and special education teacher, and categorized as “inclusion classrooms” that integrate students with disability labels.

3.4 *Participants*

The 17 participants, including Elder, LoCastro, and Rencher, were members of PDS steering committee that met monthly during the 2017–18 school year

following institutional review board (IRB) and district school board approval. Participants included three administrators, three PDS leaders (Elder, LoCastro, and Rencher), six teachers on the special education sub-committee, and five teachers on the English-language arts (ELA) sub-committee. Although teacher participants were either on the special education or the ELA sub-committee, there was regular sub-committee collaboration during meetings and PDS activities. Members of this PDS steering committee attended monthly PDS committee meetings, collaborated to design DSE-informed professional development activities for teachers, administrators, and staff, and engaged in four rounds of CBPR-informed 1:1 semi-structured qualitative interviews. For more information on the PDS Steering Committee members, see Table 1.

3.5 *Data Sources*

This article presents only data collected during the first cycle of research initiated through November of the 2017–18 school year. Subsequent cycles of data collection and 1:1 aligned with the school's marking periods in January, April, and June. Due to the large amount of varied interview data, the results of later cycles of research are not represented in this article, which include some student and parent perspectives on this work. Elder, LoCastro, and Rencher collected data in the form of collaboratively written special education and ELA sub-committee PDS action plans, mid- and end-of-year PDS progress reports, and teacher and instructional assistant surveys. Action plans were regularly reviewed to monitor PDS steering committee progress. Elder wrote memos after every PDS event and audio-recorded semi-structured interviews. In November 2017, Elder conducted 16 1:1 interviews that lasted approximately 30-minutes each. While only Elder conducted interviews, Givens assisted in coding all data, having later joined the project following the acquisition of grant funding which allowed her to be hired as a research assistant. LoCastro and Rencher did not code data due to their other teaching responsibilities. However, their insider status within the schools and support of this project was an important factor to the success of this work.

3.6 *Data Analysis*

The constant comparison method coupled with the constructivist grounded theory approach was the basis for analyzing data (Charmaz & Mitchell 2001). Data were collected and evaluated at multiple levels (Blaikie & Priest 2009; Yin 2012), and this allowed Elder and Givens to complicate their understandings of what was emerging from the preliminary analysis (Charmaz 2005), and to gather preliminary data to present to members of the PDS steering committee. Transcriptions of interviews were analyzed according to the techniques of

TABLE 1 *PDS steering committee members*

Participant	pds Role	Grade(s) taught
Administration		
1. Administrator 1	Building assistant principal	N/A
2. Administrator 2	Building principal	N/A
3. Administrator 3	Chief academic officer	N/A
pds Leadership Roles		
4. PDS Teacher Liaison 1/ LoCastro	PDS teacher liaison, basic skills instruction (BSI) teacher	4–6
5. PDS Teacher Liaison 2/ Rencher	PDS teacher liaison, BSI teacher	4–6
6. Elder*	Professor-in-residence (PIR)	N/A
sped Sub-Committee		
7. Teacher 1	Self-contained classroom teacher	4–5
8. Teacher 2	Inclusion classroom teacher	4
9. Teacher 3	Inclusion classroom teacher	4
10. Teacher 4	MD classroom teacher	4
11. Teacher 5	Child study team, case manager, learning disabilities teacher consultant	4–6
12. Teacher 6	Inclusion classroom teacher	6
ela Sub-Committee		
13. Teacher 7	General education classroom ELA teacher	6
14. Teacher 8	18-year veteran teacher	4–6
15. Teacher 9	General education classroom teacher	5
16. Teacher 10	Inclusion classroom teacher	4
17. Teacher 11	General education classroom teacher	5

*ELDER WAS NOT INTERVIEWED

specific coding summarized by (Bogdan & Biklen 2007). Elder and Givens conducted three stages of coding, open, axial, and selective, to extract important themes and results (Creswell 2013).

Data analysis followed the protocol of a fixed coding matrix which secured inter-coder reliability (Patton 2002). However, Elder and Givens did not attempt to make causal statements or make analytic comparisons between emerging inclusive practices and educator actions (Yin 1994). Elder and Givens met weekly to examine data which was stored in Dedoose, the web-based

qualitative data analysis computer program (Lieber & Weisner 2021). Special attention was given to data that contributed to better comprehension of the best use of PDS to more effectively serve students with disability labels in inclusive classrooms, and ways in which teachers were taking up DSE perspectives when including students in their classrooms.

Following the open coding of interviews, Elder and Givens began the axial coding process. Elder and Givens used analytic features like the “Packed Code Cloud” and “Code Co-Occurrence” to identify the three most salient excerpts from the open coding process. Within these three themes, Elder and Givens selectively coded the participant quotes that spoke most forcefully to the research questions posed in this project, and conducted member checks to triangulate the findings and increase validity of emerging results (Lincoln & Guba 1985). Participants were given the opportunity to edit and approve their quotes highlighted in this article.

4 Findings

From Elder’s and Givens’ analysis, three thematic categories emerged as salient with respect to DSE-informed inclusive practices. They are: (a) communication, (b) the importance of professional development, and (c) teachers taking action. Each theme is discussed in detail below with supporting participant excerpts and connections to literature.

4.1 *Theme 1: Communication*

During interviews, most teacher participants emphasized the importance of efficient systems of communication as an important structural component for students with disability labels who are transitioning to more inclusive settings. Establishing proactive communication structures created spaces where traditional views on disability and special education could be questioned and reframed through a DSE lens (Connor et al. 2008; Danforth & Gabel 2006; Gabel 2005). Below, PDS Teacher Liaison 2 explains how communication improved through regularly planned action plan meetings.

ELDER: And when you talk about including more students, what do you think has helped make this happen?

PDS TEACHER LIAISON 2: I believe the action plan meetings possibly are what is helping this, including teachers. There’s now more information, like a database, where there are actual materials in place where teachers can come and find things that might benefit the students with disabilities

that are being put in their regular education classrooms. [Teachers] might not have had the material before, but we're trying to build that up for them. We're trying to communicate with them, give them support as needed within the classroom, especially if a teacher is new to [inclusive education] and maybe hasn't experienced it before.

Here, this teacher shares that action plan meetings were one communicative structure that effectively supported students with disability labels transitioning into inclusive classrooms. Action plan meetings are regularly scheduled meetings that include the student with a disability label, their parents, and other members of IEP team. Discussions are focused on what is going well, what needs more support in inclusive classrooms, and what educational structures need to be adjusted to meet evolving student needs (Elder, Rood, & Damiani 2018). The materials this teacher mentions include instructional materials as well as foundational DS/DSE literature (e.g., Taylor 2006; Connor et al. 2008; Baglieri et al. 2011; Ferguson and Nusbaum 2012). In the next excerpt, Teacher 8 highlights the importance of helping aides feel a sense of professional belonging by inviting them to meetings to promote communication and to learn their support needs.

TEACHER 8: You know, the regular open meetings for [the aides] is an opportunity where they can express concerns, and the issues that they see. They can see that they are respected and their concerns are kept confidential...Sometimes, when we share out with our peers we get different ideas or that support as well.

Here, Teacher 8 highlights the importance of creating school spaces where everyone at a school, including aides, have a chance to express their concerns and support needs. Creating such communicative structures is one way to facilitate an environment where DSE-informed inclusive education can become undergirding principles of practice that can build capacity for school professionals (Kozleski, Yu, Satter, Francis & Haines, 2015). This approach of including aides in inclusive school reform is what Shogren et al. (2015:184) would call creating a "fully integrated organizational structure."

In the final excerpt in Theme 1, PDS Teacher Liaison 1 echoes the sentiments of Teacher 8 above, but feels the schoolwide forum where PDS and inclusive education were discussed was an important factor in the successful development of schoolwide DSE-informed inclusive practices.

PDS TEACHER LIAISON 1: I think what's happening now is steps toward inclusive change. I think one of the best things PDS ever did was when we had that one meeting with the entire staff and [Dr. Elder] summarized where we had gone and where we were going with our project. [Dr. Elder] asked questions, [Dr. Elder] asked for feedback. That's really all everybody wants. They want to be involved and they want to be heard, and I think that's one of the best things PDS has done. It has allowed teachers to be heard, and PDS has been responsive to teacher needs.

In this excerpt, PDS Teacher Liaison 1 explains that regularly scheduled dialogues were necessary for a successful PDS project. This ensures that valuable information from those directly implementing inclusive practices is obtained (Kozleski et al. 2015), and assures that PDS work is actually creating a strong and positive inclusive school culture (Shogren et al. 2015).

4.2 *Theme 2: The Importance of Professional Development*

While most participants cited communication as a critical component of inclusive education during their interviews, another frequently mentioned aspect of the development of DSE-informed inclusive education practices was the importance of ongoing and teacher-driven professional development activities. In this first excerpt, Teacher 10 discusses how she felt the professional development activities supported students with disability labels in her school. She highlights that the provided professional development encouraged teachers to change school structures to fit student rather than making students conform to existing structures, which is a tenet of DSE (Baglieri et al. 2011; Connor et al. 2008; Taylor 2006).

ELDER: So, what's going well in terms of PDS and special education?

TEACHER 10: Well overall I think the professional development that we've been given, whatever we ask for, we're being provided tools for that. So, I love that. I think it's very positive not just for newbies, but you know the veteran teachers as well. Especially because our [student] population is getting more and more diverse. So, as their needs change, we're getting the professional development and that's been very beneficial...The autism population I feel like is on the rise and I had asked for PD on that. I feel like I have received some and I feel like I'm better equipped to support those children, versus when I first came into inclusion and had no knowledge and it was trial and error.

Here, Teacher 10 touches on a few important points. First, she acknowledges that PDS at her school is teacher-driven, and provides teachers, both new and experienced, with tools to better support diverse students (Yendol-Silva & Dana 2004). Not only does this align with best practices in PDS (Hoppey 2016; Walmsley et al. 2007; Zenkov, Shiveley & Clark 2016), but as Elder was designing these professional development sessions with the PDS steering committee, he used this as an opportunity to present a counter-narrative of students with disabilities, and push back against “intertwined hegemonic discourses of normalcy, deficiency, and efficiency operating in (special) education” (Connor et al. 2008:455), which was ultimately reflected in the professional development content. In the next excerpt, while Teacher 8 acknowledges the importance of including aides in inclusive professional development, she takes it a step further and says that inclusion is also about creating an integrated school culture that is inclusive of everyone (Kozleski et al. 2015; Shogren et al. 2015).

TEACHER 8: Including our aides in trainings, in meetings that matter, is paramount to the idea that they feel included in this community of educators. That to me has a lot to do with the culture of our school and when we are inclusive with kids, just like we spoke about, we have to also address how our support staff feels as well.

Here, this teacher advocates for thinking of aides as more than just support staff. She wants them to be thought of as educators in their own right. Valuing aides as critical sources of support in inclusive schools is a marker of best practice (Ghere & York-Barr 2007; Giangreco, Carter, Doyle & Suter 2010; Ruppap, Knight, McQueston & Jeglum 2018). Aides spend the most time with students with disability labels, and oftentimes have the most responsibility when it comes to supporting students with complex support needs, yet they receive the least amount of training (Giangreco et al. 2010; Ruppap et al. 2018). Including the aides in professional development also invited them to participate in critical discussions with teachers and administration that promoted strength-based perspectives of students with disability labels (Elder 2019; 2020), and the development of positive disability identities within the school (Connor et al. 2008). In the final excerpt of Theme 2, Teacher Liaison 1 discusses how DSE-informed inclusive strategies can be beneficial for all students at the school.

ELDER: So, you're saying in order for that to happen we have to have a unified vision. And what do you think that vision is? What are we developing as a vision?

PDS TEACHER LIAISON 1: Well in the sense of our special education population, we need to provide an inclusive, least restrictive, and academically sound environment for each individual child. And that's really the little microcosm of what this whole building should be providing. Every kid needs support the way they need it. We shouldn't be trying to push them all into one place. We don't need to label everybody and then just walk away saying, 'Oh well, you are what you are' and then walk away to do what we've always done. That needs to change. Everything needs to change.

In this excerpt, aside from helping to develop a unified and inclusive school vision, this teacher also takes on a DSE perspective as she rejects the traditional special education practice of labeling students, and recognizes that the organizational structure of this school needs to change in order to better support all students (Baglieri et al. 2011; Connor et al. 2008; Davis 1997; McDermott & Varenne 1995; Skrtic 1995; Taylor 2006).

4.3 *Theme 3: Teachers Taking Action*

In the previous sections, participants spoke about the importance of communication, and ongoing professional development to affect inclusive school change. While these components of developing DSE-informed inclusive practices are important, they are ineffective if teachers do not actually take action to deconstruct segregated practices at their schools. In this first excerpt, Teacher 6 describes how she pushes back against segregated schooling practices by advocating for an increase in the time students with disability labels spend in her class.

TEACHER 6: I guess we could look into seeing if we can add more students for shorter periods of time...I want to move [two students with disability labels] officially into regular ed language arts, but we could try other students in an even less formal way. They could come during, I don't know, let's say social studies, which is a much smaller class. It could give more kids glimpses into what the classroom should look like...I mean and I can talk to [the self-contained teacher] to see if there is someone else that could come for small periods of time. It would provide data for when we push for getting students included in homeroom...The more we can show success, the more [teachers] might be willing.

While the end goal of inclusive education is *not* temporary class membership, it is important to start somewhere. This teacher specifically mentions two

students with disability labels who are now permanent members of her class, and that she wants this number to increase. She wants to bring in more students with disability labels, record their successes, and use that as justification for more students to be included. She also acknowledges that students with disability labels should have an opportunity to access classrooms they would access in the absence of a disability. In other words, she does not feel students should have to earn their way into inclusive classrooms (Kliewer 1998). In the next excerpt, Teacher 5, the special education case manager, discusses the various types of mentoring relationships they have developed on their campus to support inclusive education.

ELDER: In terms of the supports that we've put in place what have we done since May that you think has been effective?

TEACHER 5: Like for instance, [a sixth-grade student] is a prime example. She has a mentor teacher that she checks in with...[This mentor teacher] checks in with the inclusion teacher and the self-contained teacher. I think that's a good supportive thing. Also, the fact that [Dr. Elder] comes in to check with the teachers to make sure things are going well, if they have any questions or problems or concerns, I think that's a good support. Also, the support that everyone has given to [the aide supporting this student], I think is good support.

Here, the case manager identifies the presence of various MTSS that have been put in place at this school (Sailor 2015; SWIFT MTSS Starter Kit Tiered Intervention Matrix 2017). First, she mentioned the importance of providing mentor teachers for students with disability labels. Teacher 5 also discussed the necessity of establishing a network of communication between teachers and the PIR, which Friend et al. (2010:16) call the "centrality of effective communication" when developing inclusive roles and professional relationships. While Teacher 5 identified emerging MTSS at her school, in the final excerpt, PDS Teacher Liaison 1 highlights that inclusive education is a schoolwide practice, not just something that occurs in certain "inclusion rooms" in schools (Kunc 1992; "Why Inclusive Education?" 2019).

ELDER: What about teachers that are not on board? How do we...?

PDS TEACHER LIAISON 1: Get them on board? We drag them on. Some people still have that traditional sense of segregated special education. And there are teachers who are new and afraid. There's a fear aspect of it too. Like, 'You're going to put this kid in my room, what am I going to do?'

In this excerpt, this PDS Teacher Liaison 1 highlights the reality that not everyone in this school is on board with inclusive education. However, she alludes to the fact that inclusive education is not a choice, it is a right for all students (Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Bull, Cosier, & Dempf-Aldrich 2011; Kliever 1998). While it is important to acknowledge teacher fears and needs for training in order to support students with disability labels inclusively, that is a structural barrier, and not the fault of students with disability labels (Connor et al. 2008). We must alter these educational structures to better fit the needs of students with disability labels (Baglieri et al. 2011). Teachers need to shift the conversation from, “*Can* we include all students,” to “*How* can we include all students?” This shift allows for the development and implementation of DSE-informed practices that can simultaneously change school structures to accommodate all students. As Elder, Damiani, and Oswago (2015) remind us,

Developing inclusive attitudes towards students with disabilities is not linear. In other words, attitudes are a critical factor that needs to shift; however, attitudes do not have to change before results can be observed in practice...attitudinal change could potentially be facilitated by a community of committed educators with a willingness to try inclusive strategies coupled with the understanding that diverse instructional approaches may reach a wider range of students. (P. 429)

5 Discussion

At this school, teachers and administrators were committed to increasing the number of students with disability labels in inclusive classrooms, despite facing significant barriers. The results presented in this article represent only the first of four cycles of CBPR participant interviews, but even from that first iteration of research, it was evident that teachers, administration, and staff were dedicated to taking observable actions to support more students with disability labels in inclusive classrooms. As noted in the *Results* section, not all inclusive practices enacted were ideal, and there is clearly room for improvement at this school (i.e., the existence of self-contained classrooms). However, the authors strongly believe that the development of DSE-informed inclusive practices have to start somewhere, and this article is an attempt to show how one school developed and implemented inclusive structures (e.g., communication systems, professional development activities) that provided spaces that encouraged teachers to take action and challenge traditional notions of special

education, which allowed them to deconstruct previous notions of inclusive education and think differently about disability in their school (Allan 2008; Connor et al. 2008; Danforth & Gabel 2006; Gabel 2005; Graham & Slee 2008). Additionally, these actions created opportunities and to infuse a DSE perspective into the project – a perspective that acknowledges barriers to inclusion are within inaccessible school spaces rather than within the students with disability labels (Gabel 2005). These DSE-informed professional development experiences eventually led teachers, administration, and staff to questions like, “What does this actually *look like* in my class?” and “*How* would this work with this specific student?” Addressing these foundational barriers eventually allowed the PDS steering committee to take concrete first steps to increase the number of students with disability labels in inclusive classrooms. The authors feel that highlighting and constructively critiquing these steps rather than not discussing them for their imperfections is an important and honest addition to DSE, inclusive education, and PDS literature.

6 Limitations

As with any research project, it is important to be transparent about the limitations of the work. First, this exploratory case study highlights the actions of only one PDS steering committee at one school and may not be generalizable to other regions in the United States and beyond (Yin 1994; 2012). Another limitation of this project is that at this school, there are “inclusion classrooms,” or classrooms where some, but not all, students belong. The mere existence of “inclusion classrooms” requires the presence of “exclusion classrooms,” where students with more complex support needs are educated until they can earn their “right” into more inclusive classrooms (Kliewer 1998). This means there is a significant need for more resources (e.g., trainings, teacher planning time, fiscal resources, adequately trained aides) to assist teachers, administration, and staff in proactively supporting the needs of *all* learners in inclusive classrooms. Finally, the teachers and administration only chose students who were considered “good candidates” for these inclusive transitions. This meant that students with more complex support needs (e.g., students labeled with significant behavioral support needs, students with multiple disability labels in “MD” classes) were not considered as initial candidates to transition into inclusive classrooms. At this school, supporting all students with disability labels in inclusive classrooms remains a future goal, however, at the time of writing, appropriate inclusive supports were not in place to systematically and proactively support all students in such placements.

7 Implications and Conclusions

The authors conclude this article by revisiting the research questions and discussing the implications and future of this research project.

1. How can members of a PDS committee successfully support more students with disability labels in inclusive classrooms?

The DSE-informed inclusive work done by the PDS steering committee related to communication, professional development, and teacher action led to the partial removal of structural barriers, resulting in more students with disability labels gaining more access to inclusive classrooms. As noted earlier, the end goal of this ongoing project is *not* temporary class membership. However, the authors strongly believe it is important to start somewhere. To move toward the goal of full inclusion for all, members of the PDS steering committee regularly met and reflected on how they were supporting students with disability labels. This iterative and sustained dialogue allowed the PDS steering committee to develop proactive supports that helped teachers and staff anticipate the needs of students with disability labels as they were transitioning from segregated classrooms and into inclusive classrooms. In order to further improve and develop DSE-informed inclusive supports at this school, members of the PDS steering committee remain committed to maintaining a culture of reflection during weekly teacher check-ins with the PIR (Elder) and monthly PDS steering committee meetings, by co-presenting this work at national conferences, and by co-authoring journal articles. At the time of writing, the district was preparing to become a professional development district (PDD). This means that the authors were preparing to expand these inclusive structures to all five schools in the district in order to create more equitable educational opportunities for students all with disability labels in these schools.

2. What specific inclusive strategies and supports can a PDS steering committee develop and implement to successfully increase the number of students with disability labels accessing inclusive classrooms?

One strategy the PDS steering committee uses to increase the number of students with disability labels in inclusive classrooms is through developing a common DSE-language through which to discuss inclusive school reform and disability. This language was developed from instituting communication structures and professional development opportunities where critical dialogue around inclusive education was encouraged. Foundational to this is promoting

the message presuming that all students can learn (Jorgensen 2005), and that it is their right to be educated with their non-disabled peers (Giangreco et al. 2010). By resisting deficit models of disability and questioning traditional segregated approaches to special education practices (Connor et al. 2008), this school increased the number of students with disability labels in general education classrooms, with the prospect of including more in the future.

3. What can infusing DSE and inclusive education perspectives into PDS work look like?

At this school, implementing DSE-informed inclusive education into PDS most often looked like members of the PDS steering committee sharing inclusive successes and challenges at monthly meetings, teachers brainstorming and problem solving during shared planning time, and teachers, administrators, and staff informally collaborating in the hallways. It looked like the PIR (Dr. Elder) making his rounds one morning a week to connect with teachers who are actively increasing the time that students with disability labels spend in their classrooms. During action meetings, it looked like parents sitting with their child in a room along with IEP team members and a PIR discussing what is going well and what needs more support with the student's inclusive education program. Oftentimes, this work is messy, and the teachers, administration, staff, and PIR made mistakes. When mistakes occurred, the PDS steering committee pulled together, reassessed student supports, and tried again. Inclusion is not a one-size-fits-all approach, and is dynamic and ever-changing. It works best when there is a community of educators and families committed to implementing inclusive strategies with the goal of developing diverse instructional approaches which may reach a wider range of students.

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