

The Complexities of Systems Change in Creating Equity for Students With Disabilities in Urban Schools

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This article explores the complexities of urban school improvement and systems change through the lens of educational equity policy initiatives. The authors situate urban schools within a critical context where contested identity politics, sociopolitical agendas, and economic stratification marginalize culturally and linguistically diverse students. The study uses the elements of a framework for systemic change and examines urban schools. Analyzing local educational change, the authors examine the interaction between structural reform, collective, community narratives about children, and their impacts on the urban schools. Along with lessons learned from school improvement and technical assistance activities, these perspectives look at how local-activity arenas respond to reform and how understanding the complexities of local practice could inform the next-generation policy initiatives. Without deep and shared understanding, the strategies employed to achieve short-term improvements will circumvent work on the changes required to shift students from the margins while simultaneously changing the mainstream conditions.

Keywords: *urban education; equity; special education; school reform; disabilities; inclusive education*

Based on data from the 2004-2005 school year, more than a third of all public school students in the United States attend school in urban environments (Garofano & Sable, 2008). The 100 largest public school systems are predominantly urban and, with specific exceptions, schools inside their boundaries continue to post large performance gaps between students who are African American, White, and Hispanic. As has been noted, the majority

populations in many of the largest cities are African American and Hispanic (Lewis, James, Hancock, & Hill-Jackson, 2008). However, these gaps seem to be closing somewhat in the elementary grades as reported by the Education Trust (Haycock, 2008). Education Trust data also show that secondary student performance remains unchanged, with large gaps between racial and ethnic groups on measures of student learning as well as measures of access to rich curriculum through advanced placement and gifted and talented classes. Graduation and dropout markers are similarly grim with the dropout rate for students from Hispanic backgrounds almost double that of their White counterparts. In the meantime, districts continue to identify, place, and discipline their Black students at much higher rates than their White counterparts (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005). These data are brief reminders of the equity issues that remain so troubling, particularly within urban schools and systems (Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2004, 2004). As Noguera (2003) pointed out, although impressive attempts to reform the nation's public schools have been engaged over the past 15 years, the impact on urban schools has been negligible.

Therefore, what do we mean when we say urban? Jean Anyon (1997) defined urban education as those schools and systems that provide schooling for students in inner-corridor, densely populated, communities in which vast disparities in commerce, population density, transportation, socioeconomic status, and sociocultural backgrounds characterize the lives of people who live there. This article is about these schools where children, families, teachers, and administrators reproduce the very social contexts that they simultaneously try to improve, escape, change, tolerate, and ignore (e.g., Willis, 1977). As they do this work, some families, students, and urban educators find themselves marginalized by dominant views of the public purposes of schooling and their reification of codes of conduct and goal orientations that represent particularly White and middle-class values and beliefs.

Any discussion of urban education and urban community must occur with clarity about the underlying assumptions that value some conditions and perspectives while marginalizing others. What urban reality is being observed, dissected, and improved? In the eyes of Jonathan Kozol (2005), it is the reality of structural and economic inequalities that conscribe some children to disadvantage while describing the same children as having

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richly developed powers of observation; a variety of intellectual, social, and artistic capacities; and a network of relationships that sustain them over time, despite the poverty of the institutional settings that are designed to educate them. Poverty, in particular, is linked to poor school outcomes and, as family circumstance improves, children's performance in school appears to improve as well (Berliner, 2006). And yet, children and families who live in a context of economic poverty have amazing sets of assets that are rarely recognized or built upon in the school curriculum (Lewis et al., 2008). Little consideration is given to the social networks and connections that exist within urban neighborhoods and communities (Harry, 2008).

These deficit views translate into observations of what children cannot do, rather than understandings of the assets they bring with them to school (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amati, 2005). Furthermore, the historical legacies of racism, the differential treatment of immigrants, and English-language learners (adults as well as children) intersect with poverty in complex ways that continue to confound public educational policies and practices. As Anthony (2008) demonstrated, risk and protective factors are nested within cultural histories, psychosocial development, families, and neighborhoods, producing very different outcomes for children who grow up in *similar* but not the *same* circumstances. Thus, urban educators, students, and families are confronted with disconcerting and competing realities that are inadequately explained by the dominant narratives of culture, child development, teaching, and learning (Rogoff, 2003).

Artiles (1998) challenged the binary debate that frames explanations for why students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are overrepresented in programs such as special education as either the result of the detrimental effects of certain sociodemographic and economic factors (e.g., poverty) or structural bias. Instead, Artiles and Dyson (2005) proposed a scaffold for exploring the intersections of structure, sociology, and economics within systems. They propose three dimensions within systems that require analysis: the *participant*, *cultural*, and *outcomes* dimensions. Because of the interplay between power differentials and regulative functions, community cultures fluctuate between friction and cohesion. Indeed, people use their agency to navigate situations and interactions by not only applying the regulative rules of their cultural communities but also improvising in response to other participants and the goals of the activity arenas in which they find themselves (Cole, 1996). This view of systems offers a multidimensional perspective in which activities are mediated through several continuously operating exchanges that transform policy in unanticipated ways. This perspective has particular merit as we examine

urban educational practices and policies. It offers new possibilities for embedding social justice initiatives within complex systems.

In the *Color of School Reform*, Henig, Hula, Orr, and Pedescleaux (1999) described urban education as a place where contested identity politics, socio-political agendas, and economic stratification conspire from within and outside school systems to prevent potential reforms from gaining traction and crush the hope of the people who have chosen to work within the system. As Dixon and Rousseau (2005) suggested, “We are still not saved.” The use of critical race theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) to explore the notion of cultural capital as a property right marked a watershed in the ways in which race, class, and culture were viewed by many researchers. Rather than viewing *race* as a variable within a research study or project, a critical view of race suggests that the current condition of schooling is connected to a historical legacy of exclusion and inclusion that is a logical progression of a normative view of contexts (Minow, 1990). The normative view necessitates a particular vantage point on which normalcy is constructed. When that normative view is what Glass (2008) called the “hyper consuming mainstream US population driven by a desire for comfort and security (p. 15),” what constitutes dis/ability and dis/advantage must be called into question.

In this article, we use a conceptual framework for examining the work of students, teachers, and schools to organize an analysis of reform efforts that the National Institute for Urban School Improvement (NIUSI) has engaged with partner districts. Central to this work has been our efforts to help schools reconceptualize their core work as learning for, in, and about practice that is designed for inclusivity (Artiles, Kozleski, Dorn, & Christensen, 2007; Hubbard, Mehan, & Stein, 2006). Through networks of urban schools within school systems, we have engaged school teams in (a) learning more about their own practice using participatory action research, (b) participating in a set of linked learning opportunities that explore both how teams work together and for what purposes, (c) designing and implementing change initiatives focused on issues that emerged from their own needs analyses, and (d) provided tools for them to change practice over time. We describe this work in some detail and provide case descriptions of local work, summarizing the results and interpreting them against a conceptual framework grounded in activity theory designed to support increasingly inclusive practices.

The NIUSI

Though comprehensive school reform initiatives flowered in the 1990s, few of those initiatives focused on bringing special education services into

the mix. And fewer still focused per se on urban schools. The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) funded a technical assistance center, called the NIUSI, designed to target assistance to urban school systems across the country to improve access to general education for students with disabilities. NIUSI's mission was to build the capacity of urban schools and systems to serve students in inclusive classrooms and schools. This was complicated because two separate, special education dialogues were being engaged: (a) disproportionality with its perspectives on the troubling numbers of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds being inappropriately placed in special education, and (b) inclusive education with its focus on social justice and pushing students with disabilities into the general education system (Artiles, 2003). An important question being raised was, "Inclusion into what?" because general education was also producing poor outcomes for students of color (Erikson, 1996).

As has been noted in other studies, despite growing consensus around definitions, inclusive education models and practices have little similarity from context to context beyond surface markers (Kozleski, Artiles, Fletcher, & Engelbrecht, 2007). This is shaped in part by the significant heterogeneity of the sociocultural contexts in which the idea of inclusive education is enacted (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007). Similar to the ways in which disproportionality seems to play out against regional differences, inclusive education has experienced different levels of engagement depending on state and local context. There has been little discourse about the impact of these local and regional differences on principles, policies, or practices of inclusive education. Furthermore, the impact of these universal mandates on how families and children from indigenous and minority cultures and experiences negotiated schooling remained unexamined.

In 1997, when NIUSI was initially funded, most urban school systems in the country served students with disabilities in clustered programs that pulled students with disabilities out of their home schools and bussed them to center programs for students with disabilities. Clustering of students meant that districts could provide on-site specialized services such as physical and occupational therapies, speech/language, mental health support, and other specialized therapies. This practice was widespread throughout the country despite relatively poor results for students in terms of meeting curriculum standards, social networking, and opportunities for participation in school activities. In New York City, for example, District 75 was designed to offer such services as a separate system and did so for about 22,000 students in the city.

In spite of data from the first National Longitudinal Transition Study (Wagner, Blackorby, Cameto, Hebbler, & Newman, 1993), small qualitative

Table 1
Number of States Reporting More Than 50% of Their
Students With Disabilities Served in General Education

	1996-1997 Academic Year	2006-2007 Academic Year
Learning disabilities	24 states	33 states
Mental retardation	2 states	1 state
Emotional disturbance	3 states	7 states

studies, and examples of inclusive education systems in a few parts of the country that demonstrated the widespread benefits of inclusive education, special education services were conceptualized and delivered apart (for the most part) for students with disabilities. Data from the 1997-1998 school year, reported by state to the U.S. Department of Education, show that about 48% of all students with disabilities ($N = 6$ million) were educated in general education classrooms. However, in urban school systems, this percentage was as low as 10% of the special education population.

In a comparison between the 1996-1997 and 2006-2007 academic years, in three disability categories used in federal statute to identify students with disabilities (learning disability, emotional disturbance, and mental retardation), the number of states that reported serving more than 50% of their students in general education for 80% or more of the time increased for students with learning disabilities (from 24 states to 33 states) and for students with emotional disabilities (from 3 states to 7 states; see Table 1). However, for students with mental retardation labels, only one state reported serving those students in general education more than 80% of the time as opposed to two states reporting serving students with MR (mental retardation) in general education classrooms in 1996-1997. This comparison is somewhat compromised by changes in the ways in which data are reported to the U.S. Department of Education. In the 1996-1997 academic year, states were reporting percentages of students served in special education classrooms less than 21% of the time, whereas in 2006-2007, states were reporting the percentage of students served in general education more than 80% of the time. However, it does suggest that some states are progressing in some categories, whereas the vast majority of states have remained relatively static in the ways in which they provide special education services.

The Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS), a study of more than 11,000 school-age students funded by the OSEP, suggests that continued concern about where a student with disabilities is educated is

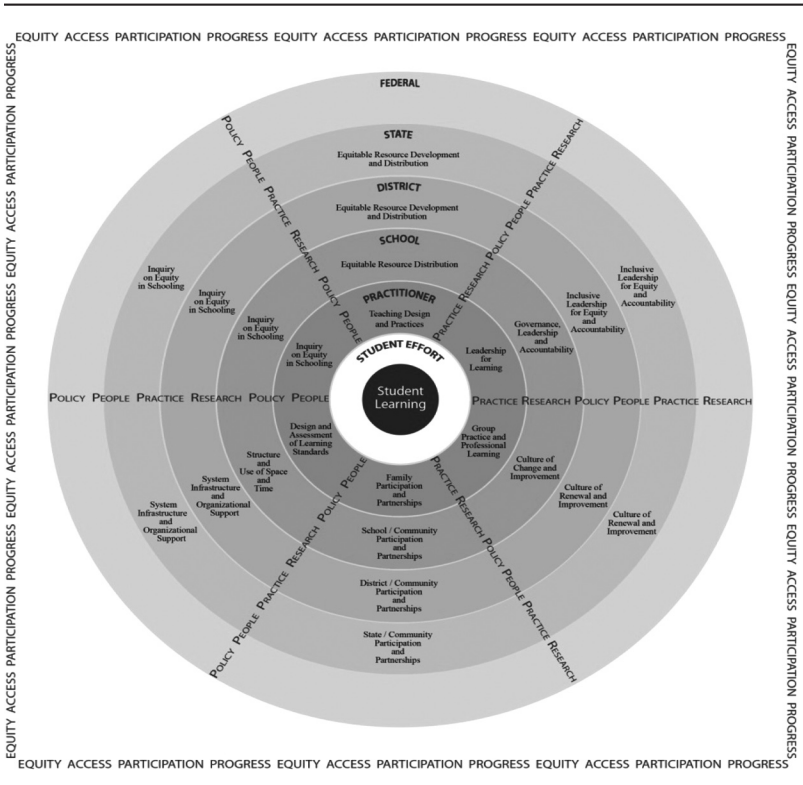
important. The SEELS data indicate that, overall, students with disabilities who spend more time in general education classrooms tend to be absent less, perform closer to grade level than their peers in pull-out settings, and have higher achievement test scores (Blackorby et al., 2005). This finding was corroborated by the second National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS-2) that found that secondary students with disabilities who take more general education classes have lower GPAs (grade point average) than their peers in pull-out academic settings but score closer to grade level than their peers in math and science even when disability classification is taken into consideration (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Levine, & Marder, 2003). In spite of these findings, as the OSEP study of State and Local Implementation and Impact of IDEA (SLIIDEA) indicates, progress toward more and more robust, effective instruction in the general education environment seems to be hampered by a lack of systemic, sustained programmatic attention to teacher education, professional learning, the use of data-driven decision making, and school capacity development (Schiller, O'Reilly, & Fiore, 2006). In a longitudinal evaluation of progress in seven school systems, Schiller et al. found that the majority of the systems they studied relied on the individual expertise of teachers rather than district-level policy tools related to issuing guidelines, allocating resources, and supporting professional development and training.

Class action suits on behalf of students with disabilities were settled in Chicago and Los Angeles requiring massive effort to redesign services for students with disabilities to ensure their access to general education classrooms and curriculum. More recently, several other class action suits have been settled for states (e.g., Pennsylvania and Connecticut) and other cities (e.g., San Francisco). Against this backdrop, NIUSI began its work by creating a conceptual framework to help school systems, administrators, practitioners, and families understand the complexity of change that was required to make principled, structural, and practice changes in large, urban bureaucracies.

NIUSI's Systemic Change Framework

The systemic change framework (Ferguson, Kozleski, & Smith, 2003; Shanklin et al., 2003) visually represents the varying levels of effort that combine to affect student achievement and learning in urban schools (see Figure 1). Because of our focus on inclusive education, the framework is designed to bring together the work of practitioners into a unified system of teaching and learning in which the learning contexts for students are

Figure 1
Systemic Change Framework



organized in ways that engage the students at the margins such as those with disabilities as well as those in mainstream. In doing this work, we seek to reduce the number of students inappropriately placed in special education and enhance general education curricular frameworks and assessments so that learning can be individualized within the context of classroom communities. NIUSI began with a unified framework to reduce the boundaries that are often observed between the work of special and general educators.

The systemic change framework provides a common language among school professionals whose specialization often creates barriers to common interests. Furthermore, because these elements describe the work of teaching for students with and without disabilities, schools can integrate inclusionary

practices with other reform goals to form a coherent approach to change and renew educational processes. Five levels of the framework are interconnected and represented by shared borders between levels. The systemic change framework was used to assess district and school needs for professional learning as well as a scaffold for guiding the planning of school improvement efforts. The systemic change framework owes much to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) nested ecological model. Students comprise the microsystem, bringing their cultural histories into classrooms and other school environments and participating in the construction of the dynamic cultures that are constructed within classrooms (Gallegos, Cole, & LCHC, 2001). Teachers and their professional worlds are actively engaged in shaping and organizing these cultural contexts through an amalgam of their individual and collective cultural histories that have been shaped by professional, personal, and community exchanges. Schools, where teachers and students create these worlds together form the mesosystems in which overlapping cultures collide; collaborate; and negotiate participation, values, and outcomes. Beyond schools lie the regulatory constraints imposed by school systems acting as intermediaries between local communities and state and federal policy.

Students. Most observers would agree that students are at the heart of schooling, conceptualized not by their individual set of psychological characteristics but by the interplay between those characteristics, the cultural histories that serve as lenses through which students view and interact with the world, and the participatory demands of the classroom itself (Cole, 1996). As Rogoff (2003) writes,

In the emerging sociocultural perspective, culture is not an entity that influences individuals. Instead, people contribute to the creation of cultural processes and cultural processes contribute to the creation of people. Thus, individual and cultural processes are *mutually* constituting rather than defined separately for each other. (p. 51)

Students expend effort as they seek to make meaning of schooling experiences. This effort recognizes the dynamic nature of learning as a cultural practice that is inhibited or accelerated by individual and institutional responses (Sternberg, 2007). Therefore, the inner circle of the systemic change framework represents student learning and student effort.

Practitioners. The next layer consists of professional elements that affect student effort and learning. How learning environments are established and

maintained rests on the technical and relational skills, intellectual creativity and curiosity, and cultural perspectives of teachers and other practitioners. These efforts were organized into five dimensions: (a) learning standards, (b) teaching design and practices, (c) family participation in teaching and learning, (d) group practice, and (e) learning assessment. Through everyday negotiation based on the interplay among students, families, and practitioners, these elements are reconfigured and shaped into idiosyncratic activity arenas called classrooms.

Schools. The next layer of the systemic change framework contains school-level elements. It is here that structures and processes are established to frame and support the work of educators and students. Six dimensions categorize activity at this level: (a) governance and leadership, (b) structure and use of time, (c) resource development and allocation, (d) school/community relations, (e) culture of change and improvement, and (f) physical environment and facilities. In all cases, schools are influenced by the activity arenas of the student and practitioner levels and by the mandates and structures of the districts in which they reside. Yet schools also influence these other arenas by the ways in which administrators connect practitioners; reach out to families; use and distribute resources; and structure time, meetings, and agendas.

School districts. The next level identifies the systemic elements at the district level. At this level, seven elements emerge, and each of these is conceived as important to the district's efforts for supporting what schools do: student services, inquiry on schools and schooling, organizational supports, resource development and allocation, systemic infrastructure, culture of renewal and improvement, and district/community partnerships. State law, regulation, and technical assistance shape the work of school systems as does the education policies of the U.S. Department of Education.

This nested view of schooling and the work of urban students and educators guided our practice during the 11 years that NIUSI was funded. In the systems that we partnered with, our work focused on bringing coherence to the district, school, and classroom levels of practice. In doing so, we developed a set of tools for shaping the structural, cultural, and learning work of school organizations. Here, we explore the results of that work to better understand how policy and systems changes influence and change fundamental assumptions about teaching and learning and the activity arenas we call classrooms.

Cases

Our Data

We have created brief descriptions here that summarize some of the data that we collected to understand more completely the ways in which systemic change occurs and does not as a result of technical assistance efforts such as the one in which NIUSI has been involved. These are not intended to be comprehensive case studies but samples of the ways in which district contexts differ vastly from one another because of state and local conditions. In the 10 districts that NIUSI worked with over the last 10 years, districts committed to working with project staff and spent between 3 and 5 years in collaborative work focused on assessing and/or changing processes at the district, school, and classroom level. In each district, a set of schools were identified for participation in our project work. Depending on the district, schools were asked to volunteer or were selected to participate. Commitment to the work varied based on this initial process. Schools that self-selected were led by school teams that included eager principals and interested school professionals. This was true in all districts, although in at least two districts school participation was mandated. In these situations, commitment to the work increased over time, as the building teams perceived that their participation produced change that they valued in their buildings.

For these cases, NIUSI staff collected weekly field notes from phone conversations, visits to the school system, and workshops. These field notes were organized into quarterly reports that highlighted features of the work that were being conducted at each of the systemic change framework levels. Quarterly case notes were the source for annual reports on each system. A set of interviews, classroom observations, and focus groups were conducted in 2007 that clarified and expanded our understanding of inclusive education reform in these districts and provided some of the data reported here. These interviews were independently coded and a set of themes was developed in collaboration with all the coders (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Interrater reliability was achieved by having more than one trained staff person code each of the interviews. These districts also supplied individual student record data coded to prevent identification of any student that were then used to develop Google maps of the school systems, highlighting placement and overrepresentation status at individual school levels. The resulting maps can be viewed at <http://nccrest.eddata.net/city1/index.php>. All of these data sources were used in cases below in which we

have changed the names of the districts and the people mentioned to protect their anonymity.

The kind of data available varies because districts provided very different kinds of data, depending on state data requirements and their individual information infrastructures. Our work produced cases of school systems in flux. Throughout our project, we resisted attaching student outcome data (measured by standardized state assessments) to the results of our work because so many initiatives, comprehensive school reform efforts, senior administrative staffing changes, and other variables operated simultaneously in the districts. The lessons learned here are from our qualitative lens.

A Southern Big City School District

This district served more than 120,000 students. The district city schools employed 16,500 people, including about 8,000 teachers. More than half the teachers were African American; another 48% were White. About 87% of the students were African American; another 9% were White. The remaining 4% were predominantly Hispanic. About 14% of the students in the district were identified for special education services. The risk for being identified for special education services was almost twice as great for African American students than all others. This case illustrates how fragmentation among district-level departments influences the degree to which school leaders have access to and are able to lead cultural change within their buildings. Furthermore, it helps to strengthen the importance of the interactive nature between district, school, and classroom activity arenas. Change at one level is likely to be ephemeral, unless congruent changes in practice and policy are made at all three levels of the school system. Finally, transformational strategies themselves must account for the ways in which communities and school systems interact.

For the most part, students with disabilities were served in separate classrooms and separate schools, although through NIUSI and the leadership of the previous superintendent, the system as a whole made a commitment to reorganizing its services to serve all students. Many of the administrators and teaching staff in this district had worked in this district for their entire professional careers. A large percentage of them were educated in the local universities. Social relationships were complex and many school personnel from all levels of the system had other, nonschool connections through churches, sororities and fraternities, family ties, and long-term friendships. Social standing in the community was conferred by cultural and historical legacies that are not apparent at first to outsiders.

Many agendas were paved through these social networks rather than through the official agendas of the school system. There was a sense that people looked out for one another to maintain employment and facilitated or blocked reform efforts through informal means.

The district identified 15 schools that worked closely with NIUSI to support their change efforts. The principals in particular provided leadership on moving their students into general education classrooms, although this was complicated by lack of professional knowledge and skills on the part of special and general educators in terms of curriculum adaptations and modifications as well as approaches to adults working in teams on behalf of students. A strong and focused superintendent provided leadership for principals to work on inclusive education.

The curriculum was observed to be highly prescriptive. The reading program contained a set of specific practices that were to be accomplished daily. In spite of this very prescriptive curriculum, teachers were observed leading a variety of activities in their reading blocks that may or may not have paralleled what other teachers in the same building were doing on the same day in the same block. The district intended that classroom activities were highly aligned, but teachers appeared to take a great deal of latitude in their teaching. The tone in classrooms varied widely from class to class. In some classrooms, teachers were actively engaged in small group and one-on-one conferences. In others, the teacher commanded center stage, with all of the students engaged in the same activity. Principals and coaches completed classroom observations weekly and commented on items that are observed on the classroom walls. Little discussion was afoot about the instructional process, although teachers voiced eagerness to comply with the program.

In one building, the principal took us to one classroom where the classroom teacher showed us a graph that had been developed by one student with disabilities who used icons to build each bar of his graph. For example, light bulb symbols showed the count of light bulbs in his house. The teacher was touched by this adaptation of her homework assignment. The student seemed proud of his accomplishment and the attention he received. Later, in a workshop, principals and practitioners alike wanted more information about how to develop sets of accommodations, but they worried about the time that it will take.

Workshops seemed to go well. Participants gave high ratings on post-workshop evaluations. Participants were engaged and eager to ask questions. But later visits to classrooms revealed that little, if any, of the material and tools shared were being used in classrooms. Central district administrators told us that this was typical and suggested that principals

did not provide the kind of scaffold needed to implement new practice. We wondered about the degree to which principals had deep understandings about how and why inclusive education is important. There was much talk about *what to do* and little talk about *why*.

Conversations with central administration leaders suggested that they were capable and able to organize workshops, meetings, action agendas, and had the planning skills to accomplish a great deal. What they were trying to accomplish and why was less clear. There was concern about what would be allowed, although who had the authority to change their plans was not clear. Meetings were observed in which some members with leadership titles spent much of the meeting talking about their work. Afterwards, other meeting participants informed us that not much was accomplished by that person. This pattern was observed during each of our visits over a 3-year period.

The inclusive education agenda and decreases in disproportionality moved slowly forward in this district with a few principal leaders accomplishing thoughtful work in their buildings. Data from the state showed that in this district more students with disabilities in this district had access to the general education classrooms than before NIUSI's involvement and that students with disabilities who had such access showed improved performance on standards-based assessments. These improvements in state reports are attributed to ongoing work with NIUSI.

However, the systems view is less positive. Without deep understanding at the district level for what they are trying to achieve and why, shifts in the bureaucracy that will maintain the change trajectory are unlikely. The buildings making change are likely to continue to improve as long as their principals stay. The community played a hidden but vital role in the culture of schools and schooling. The historical separations between general and special education were grounded in *charitable* views of children with disabilities who required care and specialized environments. The new, imported inclusive view that brought assumptions of accomplishment and engagement for students with disabilities was largely unexamined outside of the cadre of reformers and conflicted with long-held community views about disability. Thus, engagement with inclusive education was spearheaded by a few individuals who did not have the important but hidden consent of the community at large that was represented by school professionals as well as families.

A Western Big City School District

This district served about 280,000 students and employs about 32,000 people, including full-time, part-time, substitute, and temporary employees.

Of these, almost 19,000 were licensed personnel with another 12,000 individuals providing support as clerical, food service, bus drivers, para-educators, and school police. There were approximately 1,000 administrators in the system. The superintendent reported to an elected school board and led five regional service units, each with its own superintendent. Each region had a regional center that coordinated district resources such as special education, athletics, technology, and professional learning. During NIUSI's work with this system, it opened, on average, seven schools each year; partnered with a variety of other national organizations, including the Edison School System; implemented No Child Left Behind (NCLB); and partnered with the community to develop a foundation that supports inclusive education. Thirty-seven schools partnered specifically with NIUSI. Leadership retreats, school learning team workshops, site liaisons within the system who coached the 37 buildings, annual celebrations that brought national speakers to the district, and continuous monitoring of the district's data through NIUSI's data maps were some of the many activities that were implemented to support improvement of teaching practices. Unlike the Southern Big City case, this Western City had a fragmented social structure because of its rapid growth and the economic shifts that rapidly buffeted the city over the past 30 years. The school system was well positioned to make change because it had learned to operate in rapidly changing conditions, and, to some extent, the formal organization served as a social as well as professional nexus for the community.

Leadership at the most senior levels of the organization helped other administrators as well as practitioners understand their role in taking responsibility for students with disabilities. In doing so, they asked schools to design their improvement efforts around serving *all* students, including those who are assigned to special education and other federally mandated programs. As one district leader describes it,

The unwritten policy are [*sic*] the conversations you have with your colleagues that say: this is what the case is. I can't do this. I'm not a line officer. You're a line officer. This is what kids are not getting. So we need to sit and talk about what kids are not getting because you have to make some demands of the people who should be giving it to them. To say: Did you look at this? Did you look at that? Is there a way you can include this child in this activity and still make sure you are addressing the needs of this child. You tell me what it's going to take to educate this child who stepped over the doorstep because this child has different needs than other people do. So if you have different needs, what is it going to take for you to do this here? (2007, p. 2)

She explained that her job was to ensure that the resources were made available to serve students with disabilities in general education. Her counterpart, the chief academic officer, had the same mindset. Together, they created discourse patterns at the district and school level that pushed principals and teachers to understand that they would teach *all* children.

Interestingly, in this district, the special educators who for long had their own classrooms and curriculum were concerned about how to reframe their work so that they had parity in the classrooms that they supported, without being seen as para-educators. The learning tools that practitioners needed to make these adjustments were not readily available so practice lagged behind vision in this district. In spite of NIUSI's efforts to offer professional learning and create contexts for coaching within buildings, staff were stretched and often dealt with crisis situations rather than supporting practice change.

Discontinuities between deep understanding of the inclusive education agenda at central administration and leadership for learning and change at buildings were significant barriers to sustainable change in this district. This was a well-organized bureaucracy that figured out how to get resources into buildings and ensured that textbooks, technology, food services, transportation, and curriculum were well established and organized. But issues of equity were rampant within buildings, with high levels of disproportionality in many schools and highly segregated programs still proudly on display at buildings. The principals that we talked with did not know the change leaders at the district level. Goals and ambitions for their schools were crafted from their own experiences and beliefs, tempered to some degree by the principal networks they participated in. They knew the rhetoric of the district's mission, but they implemented it based on their own histories, not shared learning. With all these caveats, the district increased the number of students with disabilities who were served in general education more than 80% of their school day from a mean of about 43% in 1997 to a mean of about 53% reported in 2008.

The Western City case provides a view of systemic change that was pushed from the outer layer of the systemic change framework. Well-orchestrated and understood at the most senior levels of administration and articulated by middle-level central administration managers, the message was received and implemented sporadically by building principals who relied on their special education staff to begin the process. A few principals led the initiative on their campuses and in those cases were able to build strong alliances between general and special education faculty. Barriers to the transformation included limited understanding of the

initiative by principals and conflicts they experienced between the mandates of NCLB for AYP (annual yearly progress) and the ways in which students with disabilities needed to be supported in the general education classroom. Furthermore, at least some principals saw special education as a place for students with high needs because students who were African American and Hispanic were being placed in special education at 3 to 4 times the rate as students who were White.

A Small Urban District

Unlike some of our other work, the NIUSI team was invited to assess the quality of services being provided to all students in the district using the systemic change framework. We worked in schools to interview, observe, and collect information that would help us understand the kinds of education experiences that were available to students of color in particular and to all students with disabilities. This case illustrates the ways in which a district in the process of becoming increasingly diverse responded to its changing demographics to redesign its approach to learning. It helped us to understand how coherence at the district, school, and local level resulted in robust and sustainable change to benefit all students.

Some highly urban states have many small, separate school systems contiguous to one another and serving one densely populated, large city. Such was the case with this district. This small urban district on the East Coast served about 4,223 students in 2005-2006. Its population was multicultural, with almost half of its students identifying as African American (49.2%). More than a third of the district's student population was White, and almost 10% identified as Hispanic. Asian American and American Indian students comprised less than 5% of the total student body (4.6%). About a quarter of the student population qualified for free/reduced-price meals and less than 5% of the students spoke languages other than English at home. Special education comprised about 12% of the student body. The risk for African American students to be identified for special education service was 25% more likely than White students. That risk was elevated for Hispanic students as well at 40% more likely than White students. However, over a 3-year period of time, these data decreased from risk more than twice as likely for both African American and Hispanic students, compared to the results reported here.

About 90% of the district's staff were White and about 69% had master's degrees or above. Class sizes ranged from an average of 14.5 students per classroom in kindergarten to almost 20 students per classroom in high

school. With the exception of Grade 7, aggregated student performance in reading, writing, and math was below the state average. The gap varied from less than 1 percentage point in the lower grades to as much as 10 points on one of the exams in Grade 8. One middle school was identified as needing improvement based on AYP measures based on 2006 data.

With strong leadership in the district and the township as a whole, the district engaged the challenge of becoming multicultural not only demographically but also within the social and political patterns that shaped organizations and community politics. This context provided a backdrop for conscious practice on the part of teachers to address the needs of their students by shifting norms for behavior while maintaining academic standards. Because of a statewide, class action court mandate, school district personnel at the system level announced to school building principals and special education staff and teachers that students with disabilities were to be placed in the general education classroom and that special education services such as accommodations for reading and assessment were to be within the general education classroom. The district then offered a series of workshops to teach these skills.

The district's special education director commented, "We should be doing this anyway" (2007, p. 4). Thus, an external pressure created an opportunity for district leadership to install changes in the special education services that are more in line with their values and beliefs about inclusive education. It was apparent that staff, families, and community members were concerned and deeply involved in understanding how practice intersects with issues like disproportionality. One teacher talked about her experience:

And for the most part, I don't know why, but it seems that African American students, or students of color, have a harder time learning in classrooms with, well, just period, just learning in classrooms. The classroom setting itself seems to be harder and whether that's a cultural thing I don't know. I don't know. (2007, p. 3)

Another teacher selected a chapter from the autobiography of the U.S. comedian, Dick Gregory, who achieved some degree of public recognition during the civil rights movement in the 60s and 70s. In his autobiography, he traces the roots of his commitment to civil rights. One anecdote is devoted to his first conscious experience of racism, an encounter in elementary school. Students in the class we observed had read the excerpt, *Not Poor, Just Broke*, from Gregory's autobiography and engaged in small groups about the room and answered a set of questions on a handout the

teacher had prepared. The questions included the following: Why did Gregory interpret this experience as racism? What evidence is provided that might have led him to make that conclusion? What do you think the teacher's intent was in this situation? What in the text makes you think that? Have you ever experienced or witnessed a similar situation? What do you think that the group could have done in this situation?

Students in the small groups were closely reading the text, offering support from the text for their interpretation. Other students were note taking for discussion that would occur later. There was dialogue, contention, and resolution occurring. On close observation, there were some students in the room who were unable to locate their evidence. It seemed that they could not read the text. Their fellow students helped them out. The teacher was observed coaching the small groups to organize their evidence. Periodically, the teacher looked up from her small group discussions to check on the group as a whole. The students were engaged in the task. There was obvious intensity and focus. Our guide told us, as we left the classroom, which students in the classroom had identified disabilities. Observations like this, where students with various skill levels were engaged in the tasks and supporting one another, were made in several of the classrooms in that building, on that hallway.

Later, we interviewed the teacher about her feelings and judgment about the success of the inclusive mandate. She told us that she enjoyed having students with different learning abilities and skill levels in the room:

I actually teach an inclusion class so I have special ed children within my classroom but I don't even look at it that way. . . . They're all children and they all learn the way they learn and I have to try to reach every one of these children in the way that they're going to learn. I look at them all as learners and that I've just got to take them from one place to another and I think a lot of it has to do with expectations. (A004, p. 3)

In a focus group with the mayor, the director of the local chamber of commerce, two ministers of local churches, and the police chief, the participants revealed that all but two of them had graduated from the local high school. This generational connection between the school and local leaders created a powerful sense of ownership over the direction of the school district and a close scrutiny of the current superintendent of schools. Over a significant period of time, local residents remained and maintained their sense of concern and stewardship over the role of the public schools in their community.

The decreases in the district's disproportionality data were influenced most heavily by its attention to building a common understanding of cultural responsiveness that is bolstered by focused professional learning about instruction and learning materials. To do this well requires new choices in curriculum materials, new patterns of classroom management, and careful attention to student performance so that shifts in practice are made as teachers test out new routines and processes. Furthermore, intensive work with multidisciplinary teams of practitioners focused on preferential to special education that provides technical assistance to classroom teachers has shifted attention from student deficits to instructional improvement. There was much left to be done in the district and scores of classrooms in which traditional teaching continued to dominate. However, it was evident that changes in disproportionality could be attributed in part to becoming more culturally responsive as a district. This progress seemed to have occurred because leaders at multiple levels of the system involved themselves and others in *understanding* the ways in which their own values, beliefs, and practices contributed to the organization's cultures and habits. Through understanding, they became more conscious of their daily actions and changed practices as a result of that reflection. Unlike the Southern Big City case, district leaders consciously involved the community in making these shifts. And, unlike the Western City case, district, school, and classroom teachers worked together to develop shared understanding and implementation strategies. In opening up the dialogue about race, it allowed teachers to make culturally conscious decisions in their choice of materials and teaching strategies, something that was not engaged in the other two cases.

Discussion

Beginning in the early 1990s, reform focused on systemic change and getting to scale (Levin & Fullan, 2008). Getting to scale with multiple kinds of innovations requires a different kind of systemic reform—one that focuses on motivating innovation and flexibility to approach inclusive, equitable outcomes rather than replication (Skiba et al., 2008). However, getting to scale is only part of the problem. Sustaining continued improvement, innovation, and responsiveness requires a whole other mindset on the part of educators, the public, and policy makers. This mindset entails capacity building at all levels of the system; in other words, learning to think and act in ways that build systemic learning through *understanding* and *reflection*.

The reform efforts in San Diego² from 1998 to 2002 seem to reflect that perspective (Hubbard et al., 2006). Grounded in the organizational learning work of Senge (2006), systemic thinking suggests that critical examination of the ways that systems such as education operate along with exploring who is advantaged and disadvantaged within the system create the context for distributing equity and opportunity throughout the system. In a broad effort to improve professional practice, the San Diego system invested heavily in helping practitioners learn about their practice, in practice. Though work among teams of practitioners at the building level demonstrated commitment and improvement over time, systemic improvements to the system as a whole remained elusive. Hubbard et al. suggested that discontinuities in the bureaucracy at the central administration hampered coherence and, in the end, unraveled progress that was being made at the practice level. The three cases described in this article provide additional examples of the need to work at the practice level while creating systemic continuity.

Where the cultures of community and school are compatible, this kind of systems work is daunting but possible. When systems work flies in the face of realities on the ground, as it did in the Southern Big City system, systems reform sounds like code for imposing majority, deficit views on minority communities and their children. Systems work must have a value base itself that is grounded in equity, an understanding of the cultural work of education, and offer a way to inform policy through exemplary practice. Systemic reform requires understanding how structural components of a complex system perpetuate a given set of values that appear resistant to tinkering and occasional exhortations to change. Furthermore, systemic change involves making strategic choices about levels of change that have a high probability of improving the critical products or outcomes.

Systemic reform requires systemic thinking and systemic design, but it also needs processes that are designed to mitigate social reproduction, explore cultural historical perspectives, and encourage participant agency in activity systems such as classrooms and schools to produce equitable outcomes for students and families (Artiles & Dyson, 2005). As Michael Apple (1996) noted, understanding the challenges that exist within our public school systems is complex and multifaceted. Understanding is complicated by the epistemological and theoretical assumptions that undergird research efforts. Looking at relationships between student achievement and school governance, for instance, may blur distinctions about cultural politics, local economics, the relevance of school knowledge, and the value that teachers and their students place on the official curriculum. By focusing on action, reform cycles may have inadvertently placed too much value on *doing* at the

expense of understanding why change is necessary and whom it will benefit. Without profound and deep understanding about the daily lives of teachers and students and the ways in which what is taught overtly and covertly legitimizes some while marginalizing others, there is little to offer in authentic improvement in the experience of urban schooling (Lee, 2007).

Our experience illustrated by the three cases presented suggests that structural issues create contexts in which collective efforts toward understanding and reform have limited potential. Systemic reform is defined and used in various ways, but the general conception is that in order to produce the changes necessary for quality education for *every* student, cultural practices throughout multilayered systems of education will need to be influenced (Levin & Fullan, 2008).

Schlechty (2008) provided the perspective that distally imposed standards and performance criteria will fail to be implemented, unless educators and communities participate in meaningful ways in constructing and interpreting standards in ways that generate improvements. Without deep and shared understanding, the strategies and tactics that individuals or parts of a system employ to achieve short-term improvements will sabotage or circumvent work on the fundamental changes required to shift students from the margins while simultaneously changing the conditions of the mainstream. We agree that structural and systems issues plague school systems. But those issues are also ways in which the current social order is maintained and some groups of students are able to continue to benefit while others continue to be disadvantaged. At the heart of systemic change is the capacity of systems workers to understand the forces that buffet the system and that work in insidious ways to reproduce particular kinds of social order.

In the beginning, in the middle, and at the end, there are the children and their families living out their lives in complex environments that offer simultaneously a rich fabric of family and kinship, history, tradition, and community; bleak realities of poor schools; limited access to work and careers; and constant vigilance against violence and crime. This description, like many that summarize the urban experience, is constructed from a vantage point of conferred safety, a normative stance, and assumptions about what is to be valued (Smith, 2001). It provides a familiar vision that resonates with our collective narrative but, in doing so, marginalizes individuals whose lived experience is complex and highly varied. Deeply embedded in researchers' collective constructions of who urban children and families are, narrations of loss and desperation, and dis/abilities and dis/advantage. In our rush to reform, have we dampened the capacity of teachers to teach rather than blame the children or their circumstances (Lee, 2007)?

Note

1. For identification purposes only. This article was written in the author's private capacity; the opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the policy of the U.S. Department of Education and no official endorsement should be inferred.
2. Not the Western City case.

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