

ELEMENTARY INCLUSIVE PRESERVICE PROGRAM

DEPARTMENT OF CURRICULUM AND TEACHING
TEACHERS COLLEGE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

POSITION STATEMENT ON INCLUSIVE SCHOOLING AND TEACHER PREPARATION

People choose to enter the profession of teaching for many different reasons. Even conceptions of teaching vary widely from one educator to another. In like manner, no teacher education program engaged in preparing those who choose to teach is identical to any other. As faculty of the Elementary and Secondary Inclusive Education Preservice Program, we have prepared this position statement to communicate the conceptions and commitments, necessarily dialogic and dynamic, that we bring to our work. Aspiring to the realization of genuinely equitable and democratic schooling for all children and youth, we work to cultivate within our students-as-teachers a commitment to the growth and well-being of all children and youth. We have sought to make this vision central to the work of our program. We make this address in solidarity with students and their families who experience marginalization in various forms within school systems and with current and future educators. We enthusiastically welcome those who are new to our program, too, to these shared endeavors, as we labor in concert with many others beyond our local community.

Rather than understanding inclusive education to be focused solely on the integration of students with disabilities in classrooms alongside nondisabled peers, our understanding of inclusive education involves active and deliberate participation on the part of teachers in the process of transforming schooling as a whole. We thereby embrace and value human differences as constituting a richness in our societies to be reflected and celebrated in our classrooms. This also means affirming the right of every young person to equal opportunities for active participation in an education that addresses her or his capacities and needs in a community wherein respect for all is cultivated with intention and care. We recognize that many students occupy unequal positions within their everyday schooling experiences that interfere with their learning even if they do not receive official documentation of specialized need. Thus, we are committed to resisting the many ways in which students experience marginalization and exclusion in schools. We take seriously the responsibility to prepare teachers to be teachers of all children and youth in schools; to that end, we believe that inclusive education is not just about students with labeled disabilities, but rather is fundamentally about all students, and more significantly, about the cultural practices of schooling. Consequently, the full spectrum of challenges of contemporary schooling must be attended to, in order to generate transformative action. We, therefore, necessarily interrogate and work to actively challenge the many sociocultural, institutional, bureaucratic, and interpersonal ways in which children and their families experience marginalization and exclusion in schools (e.g., on the basis of race, ethnicity, social class, dis/ability, gender, nationality, sexuality, language, religious [non]affiliation, etc.). We

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simultaneously inquire into how such resistance can be translated into meaningful engagement with existing systems and schooling practices in order to effect change.

We critically analyze the dual systems of “general” and “special” education in the U.S. that currently serve to stigmatize, segregate, and deny equal access to academic education for students identified as disabled, as well as serving as a legally “legitimate” vehicle for the disproportionate exclusion and segregation of poor children and youth of color from mainstream academic education. Yet we know that the process of movement towards greater inclusivity requires creative, courageous, and strategic coalition building with those systems so that more humane and respectful practices can emerge whereby full and equal citizenship can be meaningfully experienced by all students.

We also seek to imagine creative alternatives to current schooling practices that frame marginalized children as benefitting from disciplinary practices based on behavioral control and techno-rational approaches that aim to sort students into educational categories. We believe all students deserve rich curricular engagement and exploration of the world. For this reason, we aim to support our preservice teachers to embrace the inherent ambiguities of teacher work, to fashion their inclusive pedagogies through their own commitments (as advocates for all children and youth) to curriculum inquiry, reflective practice, and the pursuit of social justice; and to conceptualize the work of inclusive educators as the complex intellectual, moral, theoretical, and political work that it is.

Clearly, work of this nature requires a good deal of imagination, innovation, agency, activism, ownership, intellectual and political engagement, and passionate commitment to working collaboratively with fellow students and educators, as well as children, youth and families. Additionally, it may not be in close alignment with traditional conceptualizations of classroom educators as acting autonomously or in relative isolation, as delivering primarily prescribed curriculum requirements, or as working with only selective subsets of children in public schools. However, such is the work to which we are committed and the vision we embrace. We invite others to come—dream, converse, inquire, work—with us, in hopeful and ever-renewing dialogue and engagement; and with their hearts and hands and minds join us in this immensely important and richly fulfilling endeavor.

—faculty of the Elementary Inclusive Education Preservice Program, Fall 2018