The Role of an Epistemology of Inclusivity on the Pursuit of Social Justice: A Case Study

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Social justice education emphasizes how schools can better serve traditionally marginalized students. This case study examines the pursuit of social justice education in an unlikely setting: a Catholic elementary school that both espouses inclusion of all children and effectively includes children with a wide range of disabilities. The article focuses on the way a school principal understands the concept of inclusivity and how this “epistemology of inclusivity” enacted by the leader impacts the pursuit of social justice in the school. The study illustrates that an epistemology of inclusivity can at once embolden and delimit the social justice practices.

Keywords: school leadership; social justice; epistemology

Many students are marginalized in schools, including students in poverty, of color, of linguistic minorities, or labeled with disabilities. In these increasingly pluralistic school communities, educational leaders who promote justice navigate across these multiple dimensions of diversity to promote equity and excellence. Equity and excellence for all students are complicated, elusive, audacious goals for school communities, and the field of social justice education examines how school communities pursue these goals. This article contributes to this field by reporting a case study that critically examines how the way inclusivity is conceptualized affects a school’s pursuit of social justice for traditionally marginalized students.

The core focus of this study is how educators think about who is included and who is excluded, or their “epistemology of inclusivity.” One’s epistemology, or the notion of how one comes to know what one knows, impacts behavior. I examine how the epistemology of inclusivity enacted by the school leader impacts the presence of traditionally marginalized students in the case of St. Caroline School. The case suggests how an epistemology of inclusivity both ameliorates and exacerbates marginalization in schools.

This study complicates social justice education research by critically examining a private sector school espousing social justice values. While all schools tend to marginalize some students, private schools do so by design (Alt and Peter 2002). Although some private schools temper elitist inclinations with more egalitarian...
admissions procedures and focus instead on developing distinctive academic and cultural milieus, all can and do deny access to students who they deem to be a poor fit. The case study presented here complicates this by describing an atypical private school that both espouses inclusion of all children and effectively includes children with a wide range of disabilities. I explore a paradox here: the way the principal defines inclusivity – her epistemology of inclusivity – emboldens her school community to effectively welcome a significant number of students who have been excluded elsewhere, particularly students with disabilities. At the same time, her epistemology of inclusivity impedes the school from welcoming other types of traditionally marginalized students, such as students of color and students who are English language learners. This points toward a richer understanding of how educational leaders who purportedly care about pursuing social justice can more authentically extend this commitment to all students.

**Literature review**

I situate this examination in two strands of literature: socially just educational leadership and disability studies. The field of socially just educational leadership has articulated theoretical frameworks shaping our understanding of the role of school leaders as well as practical applications of this work. Socially just educational leaders direct school improvement efforts to combat inequities in society that are specifically manifest in their school communities (Cambron-McCabe and McCarthy 2005; Larson and Murtadha 2002; Riehl 2000). As Dantley and Tillman (2006) state, “Leadership for social justice investigates and poses solutions for issues that generate and reproduce societal inequities” (17).

Scholarship examining the praxis of socially just educational leadership articulates strategies for pursuing equity and excellence for traditionally marginalized students. Strategies for identifying inequities and working to eliminate them frequently emphasize critically analyzing who is excluded within the school community (Capper and Frattura 2009; McKenzie and Scheurich 2004; Scheurich and Skrla 2003; Skrla 2001). Frattura and Capper (2007) detail how school leaders can reshape school communities so as to deliver services (e.g. bilingual, Title, special education) in comprehensive and integrated manners, and Skrla, Scheurich, and McKenzie (2009) describe how to conduct equity audits to identify and ameliorate barriers to equity in teaching and learning.

The interdisciplinary field of disability studies critically examines the construction of ability and disability in social institutions, contributing to broader discussions of social equity and inequity, discrimination, and individual and group identity (Longmore and Umansky 2001). The notion of inclusivity developed in disability studies goes beyond critiquing discriminatory practices by raising fundamental epistemological issues regarding how human life is perceived. Patterns of exclusion of students with disabilities in schools reflect organizational pathologies, but are frequently misattributed to individual pathologies (Davis 1997; Ware 2004). Disabilities are socially and culturally constructed. Thus, disability studies problematize the use of the measure of normalcy as the metric to determine whether or not to include people.

In a similar way to how the broader field of socially just educational leadership critiques inequitable practices against any group of students, disability studies articulates a narrower critique of the historical pattern of segregating (or rejecting
outright) students with distinctive learning characteristics. Though students with disabil-
ities often learn differently than peers without disabilities, the literature reflects
myriad strategies to effectively structure inclusive classrooms and schools to serve
these students in ways that benefit both the students with disabilities and their typi-
cally-developing peers (Capper and Frattura 2009; Capper, Frattura, and Keyes
2000; Scheurich and Skrla 2003). Evidence suggests that bigotry, prejudice, and
ignorance are often responsible for educators’ decisions to segregate and failures to
educate students with significant disabilities (Kliwer, Biklen, and Kasa-Hendrick-
son 2006). Though justifications and strategies for the inclusion of these children in
classrooms with their typically developing peers have profuse, longstanding legal,
philosophical, and empirical support (Alper and Ryndak 1992; Yell 1998), the atti-
tudes of educational leaders toward inclusion often inhibit the prevalence of inclu-
sive practices in a school (Praisner 2003).

Disability studies and socially just educational leadership come together on the
premise that inclusive classrooms and schools, ideally, model a more just society
(Ryan 2006; Sapon-Shevin 2003). These two strands of literature provide the foun-
dation for the epistemology of inclusivity construct I employ in this study. I bring
together the field of socially just educational leadership and disability studies to
craft a conceptual framework for describing how school leaders come to understand
who is included and who is excluded in schools.

Epistemology of inclusivity conceptual framework

Epistemologies scaffold practices (Danforth and Taff 2004; Stanfield 1993). Epis-
temologies impact behavior in obvious and subtle ways, and educational research-
ers have articulated a variety of methods and rationales for critical reflection upon
epistemological stances, particularly as these affect pursuing social justice (Capper
1998; Dillard 2000; Hurtado 2003; Scheurich and Young 1997). Literature in the
field of socially just educational leadership provides a useful illustration. Review-
ing how principals respond to diversity in their schools, Riehl (2000) notes:
“Epistemological understandings of practice suggest that persons come to knowl-
edge through their actions” (69). Marshall and Oliva (2006) refer to the impera-
tives of social justice as supporting “leaders’ impulses to transgress, to throw
aside the traditional bureaucratic rationality and the limiting conceptualizations of
leadership” (7–8, emphasis added). Some have theorized that epistemologies are
inherently racially biased when constructed with implicit norms of Whiteness,
which often goes unrecognized by educational researchers (Scheurich and Young
1997). Others argue for epistemological pluralism (Capper 2001), described as the
understanding that how one knows, learns, and leads can only be captured
through multiple perspectives.

The epistemology of inclusivity conceptual framework I employ in this article is
grounded in critical constructivism, seeing social relations as both constructed and
fraught with inequities (Anderson 1990). This framework blends the literature of
social justice school leadership and disability studies, conceptualizing diversity as
an asset and placing a preferential option on traditionally marginalized students. It
focuses on understandings of inclusivity framed by the formal school leaders,
primarily the principal, while recognizing that leadership is distributed to greater or
lesser degrees within school communities amongst teachers, staff, families, and
board members. Core tasks of such leadership include fostering new meanings
about diversity, promoting inclusive school cultures and instructional programs, and building relationships between schools and communities (Riehl 2000). Riehl describes schools as “constructed around the meanings that people hold about them” (60). The epistemology of inclusivity framework privileges these meanings. The emphasis is on the why behind the how. In other words, it considers the espoused reasons that members in school communities provide for pursuing inclusivity before considering the methods of this pursuit.

I apply this conceptual framework to examining a Catholic school. Schools in this sector are increasingly recognizing that barriers to recruiting and retaining students with special needs, including both diagnosed disabilities and other exceptionalities, run counter to the religious teachings of this faith tradition (Barton 2000; O’Shea and O’Shea 1998; Oosterhuis 2002; Owen 1997; Scanlan 2008, 2009). Barton (2000) asks, “[D]oes the idea of Catholic identity necessarily embody inclusion?” (329). While Barton was referencing students with special needs, I employ the epistemology of inclusivity conceptual framework to refer to multiple dimensions of diversity. My experience in Catholic schools – as a student, teacher, administrator, and now researcher – provides me with both advantages and limitations in examining schools in this sector. Familiarity with the Catholic school culture allowed me to more easily establish rapport with the research participants and understand the symbols and rituals. This same familiarity prejudiced my expectations. As a positioned subject, I am mindful that I influenced the data through my framing of the research questions and interactions with research participants (Conrad, Haworth, and Millar 2001; Freeman et al. 2007). As I employed this epistemology of inclusivity conceptual framework, I attempted to be critically reflective of this positionality.

Methods

The case study presented here is drawn from a broader research endeavor of five Catholic elementary schools with espoused commitment to social justice. These schools demonstrated this commitment by intentionally serving students marginalized by poverty, racism, disability, and language. As such, these schools reflected efforts to practice the social teachings of this religious tradition, which emphasize the dignity of each person, a commitment to the common good, and a preferential option for the marginalized (Scanlan 2008; Storz and Nestor 2007). Data for this original study were gathered in the 2004–2005 school year using qualitative methods to investigate social action, subjective experiences, and conditions influencing action and experiences, phenomena not lent to quantitative methods (Glesne 1999). Applying selection criteria and employing purposeful sampling (Bogdan and Biklen 1992), I identified 56 Catholic elementary schools in the Midwest where over half the students qualified for free or reduced price lunches, were people of color, were English language learners, or had identified special needs. After applying a screening protocol, I solicited the participation from principals in 12 schools, and ultimately settled on five locations. Though I sought sites in rural and suburban areas, three sites were located in one diocese, and two in another. While convenience in data collection was a consideration, my screening protocol guided me toward choosing schools that exhibited the most inclusion toward a wide range of types of traditionally marginalized students.

This article presents an analysis of one of these five schools, St. Caroline School (SCS). This school was unique in the original study as a school that both includes
students with a significant range of disabilities and espouses a more general commitment to serving traditionally marginalized students. I gathered data through observing SCS on five site visits, interviewing educators, and reviewing documents and artifacts. Sixteen research participants from administration, faculty, staff, school board, and the diocese were selected because they represented a range of perspectives, responsibilities and tenure in the community. I interviewed each participant at least once, typically for between 60 and 90 min. On five occasions, I conducted less formal follow-up interviews over the phone or through email. My interviews were focused in a semi-structured manner (Glesne 1999; Yin 2003) and held in private rooms at SCS, or in private offices off site. I transcribed all the interviews and made them available to research participants to identify any errors or discrepancies. Through these interviews and observations, I spent 35 hours of interaction with research participants. I also wrote descriptions, took digital photographs and audio-visual recordings of school events, and gathered archival documents related to the school’s enrollment trends, mission implementation, policies and procedures of recruitment and retention, and funding and governance structures.

I analyzed these data using constant comparative methodology (Bogdan and Biklen 1992; Glesne 1999). As I built my theory, I continued to sample theoretically, seeking to fully develop each category as well as establish the relationships amongst categories. With HyperRESEARCH software, I coded and analyzed these data from field notes and transcriptions in an iterative process of categorizing the data, contextualizing the relationships amongst these categories, and building theory (Maxwell 1998). In addition to using methodological rigor and protocols for interviews and observations, the trustworthiness of this is enhanced by including the perspectives of multiple research participants at each site. The triangulation of data sources, using documentation and observations as well as the interviews, further bolsters the trustworthiness of this research (Lincoln and Guba 2000).

Findings
The unique history of SCS sets it apart from the traditional mission and regular workings of other Catholic schools. During the last two decades of the twentieth century, a steady number of Catholic elementary schools were closed or consolidated in SCS’s diocese. Interviews with diocesan personnel and tracking data on Catholic schools in the region indicate that a disproportionate number of these schools were serving traditionally marginalized students. Accordingly, the opening of SCS as a new, urban school in the late 1990s was an anomaly. A confluence of events led to this. Shifting demographics and the gentrification of an urban neighborhood led to an increased population of children in the area where SCS would form. Local Catholic leaders, dismayed by the closing of two schools in their area over the previous eight years, started exploring the possibility of starting a new, regionally based Catholic school. In addition, a wealthy suburban Catholic parish donated profits from a real estate sale to jumpstart the revitalization of urban Catholic schooling. The most significant factor catalyzing the formation of SCS, however, was the emergence of a viable leader.

After searching for a year and a half without finding a capable leader to shepherd their school off the drawing board and onto the map, the nascent SCS board leapt at the opportunity to hire Sister Brenda. An experienced educator with a formidable resumé, including advanced degrees in education and administration and
decades of experience working in both schools and non-profit organizations focused on early childhood, she was the perfect fit. Sister Brenda described how the opportunity was right for her as well:

[I decided what] I’d really like to do is start an early childhood center that went from birth to age nine that would show the diversity of curriculum that can exist, the diversity of how we work with children, different teachers, different – use Montessori, use non-Montessori – put it all together and have places where people can go and see. (Transcript, p. 4)

She saw starting this school as an opportunity rich in possibility (“When I started there was no mission statement, no advertising, nothing”) and poor in resources (“The buildings were empty. We started with $500 and an open house!”). An essential component, however, was that it offered her tremendous independence.

**Independence and selective inclusivity**

Traditionally Catholic elementary schools are affiliated with a parish community. This ties them to an added level of administration (the parish priest), a default pool of students (from families attending the parish), and a relatively predictable funding stream (tuition support plus parish subsidy). SCS, by contrast, was affiliated with no parish, which left Sister Brenda greater flexibility in administration, enrollment, and finances. Administratively, she officially reported directly to the superintendent of the diocese, but practically speaking, was allowed to make her own decisions. Regarding enrollment, she was responsible for attracting students, but able to draw from a wide geographic area. Students come to SCS from 32 parishes and 28 zip codes. Financially, Sister Brenda was responsible for fundraising, but given latitude in budgeting.

This independence in administration, enrollment, and finances allowed Sister Brenda to shape the way SCS implemented its mission. The mission that the board crafted was general: “to provide a high quality Catholic educational environment for young children in a setting that supports their developmental needs.” Sister Brenda led the school community to apply this in a profoundly inclusive manner: “I believed that if it was going to be at a Catholic school it had to be inclusive.” This conviction grew from her religious convictions – Sister Brenda’s religious community holds the values of inclusivity and service as central – as well as by her own extensive experiences working with early childhood programs both nationally and internationally. She explained: “In my previous position I’d... do education of teachers for... every kind of ‘ism’... I had done a lot of this stuff and said if I’m going to be in a Catholic school, it has to be truly inclusive.” Official communications to parents and the public (e.g. print and web publications) express this broad commitment to inclusivity:

No child is turned away. We provide financial assistance for those who are unable to afford tuition and support the inclusion of children with disabilities... Our students are a very culturally and economically diverse group of children, and our educational programs serve to support the rich cultural, ethnic and economic diversity of our students and families.

While this independence allows Sister Brenda, and by extension, the SCS community, to ostensibly welcome anyone who wishes to attend, SCS’s success at
recruiting and retaining traditionally marginalized students is uneven. The most noteworthy feature of SCS regarding inclusivity is the number of students labeled with disabilities. One in five students in SCS has a disability, including nearly 10% with significant cognitive and developmental disabilities. Services are delivered to these students in a manner that does not segregate the students from their peers. They are not clustered in certain classes, with particular teachers, or in specific locations in the school, but instead proportional throughout. Their presence is embraced as an integral dimension to the school. However, the student body at SCS is relatively homogenous by other measures, such as race and ethnicity (25%), poverty (15%), and students with limited English proficiency (14%). Other Catholic schools, locally and nationally, serve significantly higher populations of students across these dimensions.

In sum, SCS is a relatively independent private school community with a general commitment to diversity and a distinctive track record serving students with disabilities. This context is key to understanding the epistemology of inclusivity that is at play in SCS. This epistemology of inclusivity is most evident in two realms: a philosophical commitment to include all children and a practical focus on building the capacity to operationalize this philosophy.

**Philosophical commitment: say yes and figure it out later**

At SCS, the epistemology of inclusivity is exhibited by an espoused commitment that “No child is turned away.” In practice, Sister Brenda pursues this by admitting children in spite of her uncertainties. She recounts an episode from the school’s second year: “A parent came with her darling little girl and said, ‘No one will take our child. Will you take her?’ I said, ‘Sure. Then I’ll figure out how I’m going to do this.’” Significantly, this family came to SCS not because they were looking for a Catholic school (and, in fact, they were not of the Catholic faith). They were simply looking for any early childhood program that would integrate their young child, who happened to have Down syndrome. Soon, the word spread and other families turned to SCS: “We kept finding was that there were other Catholic schools that didn’t want these kids. They would keep them in preschool, but by the time the kids got to kindergarten they couldn’t deal with them anymore.”

Sister Brenda’s philosophical commitment to welcoming all students is core to the way inclusivity is understood in this school community. This commitment drives her to not allow enrollment decisions to be predicated on known resources. She operates with a high level of tolerance for ambiguity, trusting that she will be able to figure out a way to resolve dilemmas. For instance, she described accepting a child with significant barriers in speech and language, as well as mobility:

> And I said [to his mother], “So what’s the problem?... Bring him here.” Philip doesn’t speak. He just learned to walk. And after I said that I thought, “What the hell am I gonna do? He doesn’t speak!” That same day another mother called up. She wanted me to take her child. Her child doesn’t speak either. They both use sign language. So I thought, “OK...” A couple days later the doorbell rang. There was a teacher with a master’s degree who did sign language looking for a job.

After talking the teacher into the significantly reduced salary that the school was willing to offer, Sister Brenda told Philip’s mother the good news. The mother
asked how this happened, and Sister replied: “I said, ‘I don’t know. I said yes and figured it out later.’ I didn’t know how we’d do this.” After committing to one student, then to another, a teacher emerged to serve both.

While this philosophy was most apparent in the narratives on serving students with disabilities, it also emerged in descriptions of including students in poverty. Sister Brenda smiled as she described her approach to families who request financial assistance: “I gave out $125,000 in tuition assistance this year. I don’t know where $125,000 is going to come from. I figure by the end of the year it will be fine.” Officially, scholarships come from “a tuition assistance fund to provide financial aid to families who otherwise could not afford this program” and is based in “the philosophy that all children need a high quality early childhood program.” Assistance is granted “based on need and family circumstance” and “if funds are available.” In practice, however, the process is much looser. Sister Brenda explained:

We have tuition assistance forms... [Families applying] have to turn in last year’s income tax and fill out this form. On the form on one of the questions we say, “X amount of dollars is what tuition would be. What amount of that money would you be able to pay?” I never look at any of the forms – I look at that item on the form, and that’s what they pay. I don’t look at anything else. They pay whatever they think they can pay. And usually they’re paying more than what I would ask them to pay.

Sister Brenda acknowledged that many of her principal colleagues in other Catholic elementary schools would not be comfortable admitting students before knowing how they were going to make it work: “That’s the way I operate – but most people don’t operate that way. They want to see the resources – they want all the resources in place.”

**Philosophy shared**

While articulated and espoused first by the school principal, faculty also expressed this philosophy to “say yes and then figure it out.” Bo, who has taught in SCS since it opened in 1997, explained that while practices of inclusion are sometimes tenuous, no other option exists:

Everyone is included... I don’t know how that works for everyone else here, but in terms of myself, [Sister Brenda] has placed children in [my] classroom that I wish would go someplace else. But I can’t say that. And I can’t say, “No thank you.” And she has every right to ask me. And neither one of us can say no. What we’re gonna do, what the program’s gonna be, will the kid make it, will I make it, will everybody else make it – I don’t know. But we don’t say no.

In other words, despite uncertainty, and at times reluctance, the philosophical commitment that Bo brings to her work compels her to strive to include all children. This frank acknowledgement of struggle (e.g. “[Sister Brenda] has placed children in [my] classroom that I wish would go someplace else”) is a particularly noteworthy indication of the power of this philosophy to impact practice. As this teacher sees it, saying “no” is not an option: “We don’t say no.”

The lexicon of the teachers in the school is rife with language that reflects this philosophical commitment. Erin, a resource teacher who works with students at all
age levels, summarized the philosophy of the school as: “To accept all children as they are and to treat everybody equally and to love and nurture the children.” Nina, the school secretary, used nearly the same words when asked to paraphrase the school’s mission in her own words: “I think just accepting every child for who they are.” Penelope, a classroom teacher, concurred: “[We try] to make sure every child is given the opportunity to become the best they can be regardless of what their abilities are or are not.” In the Parent Guide, the language referencing mission, philosophy, and goals is peppered with related terms: “age appropriate, inclusive early childhood learning environment... caring, supportive, nurture for the development of each child... moral, social, and academic development of each unique child.”

Finally, those who provide external supports to SCS reflect this same philosophy. For instance, Sally, a therapist who works with students in SCS as well as in public and private schools throughout the city, spoke of this philosophical commitment: “One of the things that I hear from our families is that they can’t go anywhere else – and that no one else will accept them.” She cited the “philosophy that children [with disabilities] deserve to be educated and can be educated amongst their typically developing peers in school” as a fundamental strength of SCS.

Ellen, a board member who happens to also have children who attended SCS, also reflected an understanding of this philosophy. Ellen described how the school exposed her to the breadth of diversity: “[SCS] showed me that there were children of all levels, family difficulties... The social support the school gives the child to get them back on par emotionally. Just watching that was amazing when I was so new to the school.” She brought into this discussion a number of layers of diversity (familial, learning styles, racial) and discussed the value of this in her own terms: “Finding out about the inclusion of children with [learning disabilities] – it was a window... once I saw how my children were responding it was another click on – this is right – otherwise there’s no way to expose them to that.” This is significant because the board members play a core role in helping to raise finances to support the school. Thus, their understanding of inclusivity impacts their appreciation of the school’s mission and the resources required to meet this mission.

**Philosophy limited**

This philosophy, emphasizing acceptance of diversity, is well articulated and pursued, but unevenly implemented. Despite providing financial support for families, SCS does not serve large numbers of students in poverty. One reason Sister Brenda cites for this is that the school is not located in an area where there are many families of low socioeconomic status, and that gentrification is affecting this. Sister Brenda speculated: “The projects that are 3 blocks down, their lease is up in 2006 – are they going to be existing down there?” While SCS reports 15% of its students in poverty, in fact, the socioeconomic status of these families is unknown, since they have merely requested and received financial assistance. The school does not participate in any federal assistance programs and does not keep records of the socioeconomic status of its students.

The philosophical commitment to include does not seem to extend to proactively seeking to recruit more students of color. The school is slightly less diverse in race ethnicity compared with other diocesan elementary schools (25% in SCS v. 30% in the diocese). Similarly, SCS does not attract many students for whom English is a second language, and it has not made reaching out to such students a high
priority. For instance, none of the official communications of the school in print or
on the web are offered in a language other than English, and no signage at the
school was in multiple languages. While SCS attracts students from a wide area of
the city, it does not effectively recruit students to increase the numbers of tradition-
ally marginalized students that it serves.

Even in the dimension of diversity where the philosophy is most apparent, SCS
encounters limitations. It is struggling to sort out tensions in its service to its high
numbers of students with disabilities. Some teachers are overwhelmed with the high
numbers of students with disabilities in their classrooms and criticize the lack of
opportunities to collaborate with one another and the lack of assistance to meet the
needs of these students. Alice, who teaches kindergarten and first grade, spoke can-
didly about this: “Sister Brenda has a loving heart – but [needs to] make sure [she
is] able to support that family and the teachers at the same time.” She described the
difficulty and stress involved in working with children of such wide-ranging needs,
and reported that the school is developing a reputation amongst some as “a ‘dumping
ground’ for people with special needs.” A colleague, Penelope, shared similar
concerns. She articulated more forcefully that she sees limits to the number of stu-
dents with disabilities that the school can serve:

Yes, we accept children with special needs – but we’re not a special needs school. I
think that’s important. Unfortunately we can’t accept everyone who walks in through
the door. We’re not a special needs school so we don’t have that kind of support. We
do accept special needs but there’s a limited amount of who we can accept. We’re see-
ing those limits pushed – keep being pushed – and it’s getting to a point when we can
no longer do this without extra staff on board… Physically, emotionally, mentally, we
can’t do it.

It’s not a special needs school, but an inclusion school. You don’t want all special needs
and that’s why most parents bring their children here, because there is inclusion. So that
does help the child – but you don’t want to also make it a special needs school.

These reflections highlight a key tension in the way inclusivity is understood and
practiced. By being open to accepting all children, SCS is now serving a dispro-
portionately high number of students with disabilities. Sister Brenda is pointedly criti-
cal of barriers imposed by other Catholic schools:

Parents [of our students] have been pushing in their parishes and nothing’s happened. So
now they come here and the parents say, “It’s worth driving an hour to an hour and a
half, each way. This is our option. This is the only Catholic community that will embrace
our child.” When parents with special needs kids come back they say no one else is will-
ing to embrace our child – not only accept our child, but embrace our child. To me,
that’s what Catholic schools are about – but it’s not the norm. It’s not the norm.

Molly, the assistant principal, spoke in similar terms. Distinguishing SCS from the
other Catholic schools where she has spent two decades as a teacher and adminis-
trator, she said:

There’s a different kind of intentionality from the… admissions standpoint – and
that’s more explicit here. Even though in other schools you might have kids with
special needs diagnosed or not – but there’s not an explicit “we’re serving these
children” and there’s not the same kind of resources for the teachers.
While the school officially states that it “provides inclusive environments with supportive services for a limited number of children with special needs,” according to interviews with research participants, this limit has never been met. Thus, the rejection from other Catholic elementary schools is, in effect, undermining the inclusivity in SCS.

In sum, a philosophical commitment to first welcome all children, then figure out how to educate them is central to the epistemology in inclusivity in SCS (see Table 1). This is best illustrated by the school’s approach to including students with disabilities, and to a lesser degree to families in poverty, and is reflected in the administration, faculty, and external support personnel. This philosophy bumps up against specific barriers from the lack of practical strategies to intentionally recruit a more diverse student body and the clustering of students with disabilities into this school. As will be shown in the following section, this broad, general commitment to inclusivity, bolstered by the principal’s willingness to take risks and explore new routes, shaped the school’s capacity.

**Leadership builds capacity**

The epistemology of inclusivity is evident in a practical focus on building the capacity to operationalize the philosophy of SCS, which promotes a particular understanding of inclusivity. This understanding shapes efforts to increase the capacity of the school to include. A wide spectrum of students can be admitted to this school precisely because of a web of supports. Three key strands to the web are: (a) curricular and classroom structures, (b) professional development, and (c) strategic hiring.

First, in striving to foster “a setting that supports [children’s] developmental needs” SCS has developed unique curricular and classroom structures. Montessori approaches emphasize multi-sensory and independent learning. Multi-age classrooms increase opportunities for a range of students to learn in a common setting. Teachers describe a child-directed and flexible culture. As one explained: “I don’t know how many [other] schools honestly say, ‘What do the children want to know?’ and then look for it.” Official communications to families describe the curriculum in each classroom as driven by an emphasis on “the moral, social, and academic development of each unique child in an increasingly diverse world.” Leslie, a teacher of the five and six-year-old students, described how the “warm, caring environment” supports students experiencing learning challenges:

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<th>Primary examples of philosophy</th>
<th>Limiting aspects of philosophy</th>
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<tr>
<td>Philosophical commitment to inclusion of students: “No child is turned away”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Administration, faculty, and external support personnel reflect philosophy</td>
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<tr>
<td>• The philosophy applies primarily to students with disabilities and to a lesser degree to students in poverty</td>
<td>Outreach efforts to achieve diversity limited to select areas of marginalization</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Practical strategies to recruit a more diverse student body are lacking</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• SCS serves a disproportionately high number of students with disabilities</td>
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One of the children in my room is not toilet trained and that’s very difficult. And in a bigger environment or another school, who would do that for him? But in a small environment here we’re able to help the child until he reaches that stage.

Other supports include strong, multifaceted communication with families. Teachers and parents exchange daily behavior journals for certain children. Informal interactions at the beginning and end of the school day and parental involvement in the classroom are common. An awareness of children’s broader context emerges here. As a teacher described, “I’ve come to realize that you have to take care of the whole family and the child, not just look at the child... because whatever the child is depends so much on what happens at home.”

Focused professional development in SCS is a second illustration of the capacity of the school to serve diverse students. The school’s claim to base decisions in “current research in child development” is corroborated by how the SCS educators discuss their professional growth. Molly, the assistant principal with 15 years of experience as an administrator in other Catholic elementary schools, described the emphasis on professional growth: “In a lot of [Catholic] schools the money isn’t there – so you can’t encourage [professional development] as much as you want... but Sister Brenda encourages everyone to go. It just enlivens you!” Sister Brenda confirmed that one of her fundraising priorities is for professional development and teacher training. Leslie, who has taught at the school for two years and has a background in special education, explained, “Sister Brenda is very good about encouraging us to go to whatever conferences are available.”

An innovative element to this professional development is the use of therapists as consultants. The Belvedere Center, a private agency committed to helping children with disabilities learn within their natural environment, provides key support to the faculty. A regionally based agency that “promotes the rights and expectations of all children to be fully included in the community,” Belvedere therapists provide, “outreach programming designed to guide community members in including children with disabilities as true participants in their programs.” Soon after opening, Sister Brenda developed a collaborative relationship with Belvedere, which was opening a new office in the vicinity of the school. She describes this relationship as helping provide her “the basis that I needed for my teachers to say, ‘Yes, we’re taking special needs children. They’ll be getting support through the Belvedere Center.’” She explained that she presented this to her teachers as a non-negotiable: “We’re just doing this. We’re doing the next right thing to do.”

Interviews with teachers revealed that integrating these therapists into their classroom impacted their own practices as well. For instance, Penelope described the importance of this support for her own skill development: “Whether it’s a child with Down’s, or with sensory issues, [the Belvedere therapists’] support helps a lot. They give us suggestions on what we can do in our classroom... how to reorganize ourselves... [and] present materials for that child.” Importantly, the delivery of therapy in the classroom raises the capacity of the community to support the diversity of students. Sister Brenda points out that through the provision of therapy in the classrooms, the students themselves become supports for one another:

All the therapy goes on in the classroom – and then the children learn how to do therapy too. One of our children, 6 years they tried to teach her to walk up and down the stairs. Finally, one of her friends was like, “Sarah is going to learn to walk up and
down the stairs”. Arianna said, “If my friend’s going to walk up and down the stairs with us I’ll show her how.” She watched therapists and then she did it.

In addition to raising skills, this emphasis on collaborative professional growth seems also to impact dispositions. Sally, the therapist who works with the Belvedere Center, described the “openness and willingness to collaborate and share ideas [with therapists from Belvedere]” as “a huge aspect” to SCS’s success at serving students with disabilities. Nina, the SCS secretary for four years, observed the effect of the skills the teachers bring: “[They are] more interested in how each child learns [and] more concerned on whether a child is able to learn better visually or with the writing or with everything on paper.” Nina conjectured that the diversity of learners in their classrooms impacts teachers’ dispositions and skills: “Whether it’s a child who needs some speech therapy, to a child with Down syndrome who needs OT and PT... Teachers learn a lot from having those children in their classrooms... identifying the relevant things in each child.”

Along with the curricular and classroom structures and professional development, strategic hiring is a third dimension increasing the capacity of the school community to support all children’s developmental needs. To ensure that her teachers are willing to adapt and change based on the differing needs of the individuals in their rooms, Sister Brenda asks teacher candidates: “Are you open to working with children with special needs? How do you feel about working with children with special needs?” Sister Brenda explained that her hiring was geared toward cultivating a community of professionals who would be collaborative and supportive of one another. “The important part is that your doors have to be open not only to anybody who comes, but to all these other people who are going to facilitate the child being able to be included.” Molly, the assistant principal, connected this to the school’s philosophy: “Sister Brenda is... clear on the expectation that all kids are welcome. So when the principal makes that clear, a teacher that would come here would know that that’s the philosophy of the school and would buy into it.” In other Catholic elementary schools, she explained, “The teacher’s attitude was more one of saying, ‘I’m not really trained for this. Why is this person in my class?’” By contrast, at SCS: “[Teachers] know that kids with special needs will come here, and they know that Sister Brenda is doing all she can to get people the things they need to make this work.”

As a Catholic school, the salaries and benefits SCS offers are relatively low, making this recruitment especially important. For instance, Bo was teaching in a Catholic grade school three blocks from where she lived when Sister Brenda approached her about coming to work at SCS, an hour’s commute away. “Brenda really had to push and pull me to get here.” Bo’s colleague, Leslie, was recruited with similar verve. Leslie, the teacher described earlier as knowing sign language, formerly worked as a private therapist, making significantly higher wages. A key strategy for Sister Brenda in recruitment is getting candidates to visit the school. “Just come and take a look,” she often beckons, knowing if she can get them in the door, often they are drawn to stay.

**Limits to the capacity**

While these three strands – curricular and classroom structures, professional development, and strategic hiring – strengthen the school’s capacity to serve a diverse
student body, other dimensions constrict it. Most central is the mindset of diversity as synonymous with disability. When asked general questions about the types of students the school could serve, nearly all research participants specifically referenced students with disabilities and ignored other dimensions of diversity. This limitation became apparent in the practices the faculty pursued. For instance, no professional development opportunities focused on raising the capacity of the school community to meet the needs of other traditionally marginalized students, despite the fact that such opportunities for professional growth were available in the diocese. For example, Sister Brenda did not take advantage of the intensive antiracism training offered by the diocese to interested schools who wanted to better serve people of color and combat racism at the personal and institutional level. While diocesan resources to raise the competencies of teachers to differentiate for English language learners were harder to locate, Sister Brenda did not place efforts on pursuing these from other venues. By way of contrast, Sister Brenda did not allow the dearth of resources and support from diocesan offices or colleagues in other schools to inhibit her efforts to provide professional development on serving students with disabilities. In other words, the professional growth opportunities that Sister Brenda fostered emphasized select dimensions of diversity.

Another limitation in the capacity is the lack of a professional community amongst the teachers. Leslie, who brings years of experience and training to working with students with disabilities, commented on this: “I think that a lot of the teachers who don’t have the same background that I do become very frustrated.” She explained, “If you don’t have an understanding of how special needs kids function and their communication needs, you can become overwhelmed by the whole thing.” Alice, another teacher, confirmed that “it’s very stressful” and improved collaboration amongst colleagues and between faculty and administration (more “person to person input”) would raise the teachers’ capacity to serve the diversity of students they have in their classrooms. Many research participants confirmed a sense of isolation from colleagues and the notion that individual classroom communities trump a larger integrated school community. As one teacher put it, “There isn’t much time for teachers to talk to one another... I wish there was more time for this communication.”

A third way the capacity building efforts of Sister Brenda were limited was with regard to the material resources pertinent to traditionally marginalized students. Again, these were focused primarily on meeting the needs of students with disabilities, and Sister Brenda did not tend to consider what types of resources would be needed to serve other types of traditionally marginalized children. For example, in keeping with the emphasis on using quality materials, the children eat their meals with non-disposable plates, silverware and glasses, and children bring in their lunches to eat together with their teachers. However, the school does not systematically offer free lunches to students for whom providing their own would be burdensome, nor does it participate in federal free and reduced price lunch programs. Sister Brenda did not work with central office personnel dedicated to helping schools find public and private resources to better serve families of low socioeconomic status, while other Catholic schools in the area do engage in such efforts. Though other Catholic elementary school principals collaborate with local institutes of higher education as well as private agencies to provide a variety of counseling and health care services to their students and families, this was not an agenda for Sister Brenda.
In sum, the school community’s capacity to serve a diversity of students reflects
the epistemology of inclusivity in the school (see Table 2). This capacity is
enhanced through the curricular and classroom structures, professional development,
and strategic hiring. This capacity and the undergirding philosophy demonstrate the
dimensions of how Sister Brenda and her colleagues at SCS come to understand
inclusivity. Though broad in many ways, this capacity was also limited in the
dimensions of diversity it addressed. As illustrated in Table 2, the leader’s philo-
sophy and capacity building efforts had both expansive and constrictive effects on the
SCS community, with direct implications on the practices of inclusivity and exclu-
sivity toward traditionally marginalized students.

Discussion and conclusions
The case of SCS illustrates that the ways a school understands the concept of inclu-
sivity scaffold practices within it. The epistemology of inclusivity in SCS shapes
how the school welcomes traditionally marginalized students. Advocating a philo-
sophical commitment rooted in a willingness to act in spite of uncertainty, Sister
Brenda orients SCS to accept all students. However, while this philosophy
addresses diversity comprehensively, it manifests most specifically in embracing
some traditionally marginalized students more than others. The capacity of the
school is focused on empowering the school community to fulfill this philosophy,
but again is focused primarily on students with disabilities. While emboldening the
school to reach certain traditionally marginalized students, the epistemology of
inclusivity also delimits the inclusive practices.

One dimension of the epistemology of inclusivity that this case illustrates is that
a school has a disciplining effect on which dimensions of marginalization educators
perceive, and which dimensions they ignore. Here, the dynamic leadership in a
school paradoxically broadens and narrows the way inclusivity is understood.
Crafted as a Catholic school with a unique mission to include all students, and
structured in a manner affording it more independence than other schools, SCS is
predisposed to embrace a diverse student body. As the communications of the
school boast, “No child is turned away.” Due in part to the unique situation of the
school’s inception and the considerable independence in administration, enrollment,
and finances, Sister Brenda has been able to pursue this vision relatively unfettered
by external institutional constraints. Through her leadership, Sister Brenda animates
the mission of SCS to embrace diversity: “If I’m going to be in a Catholic school,
it has to be truly inclusive.” Sister Brenda raised the capacity of the school to
implement this vision through curricular and classroom structures, professional
development foci, and hiring practices.

Table 2. Epistemology of inclusivity: capacity building to operationalize philosophy.

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<tr>
<th>Primary examples of capacity building</th>
<th>Limiting aspects of capacity building</th>
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<tr>
<td>Explicit support for meeting the</td>
<td>Professional growth focused primarily on</td>
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<tr>
<td>developmental needs of all students</td>
<td>students with disabilities</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Curriculum and classroom structures</td>
<td>- Limited staff collaboration and limited</td>
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<td>- Professional development</td>
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<td>- Strategic hiring</td>
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At the same time, Sister Brenda pursues other dimensions of diversity less vigorously. Consequently, the school is relatively homogenous by race ethnicity, class, and linguistic heritage. This illustrates the way an individual leader’s approach affects the conceptualization and pursuit of inclusivity in a school community. How inclusivity is understood – the epistemology of inclusivity – can at once stimulate and stunt a school. This paradox points toward a dimension needing further examination in the field of socially just educational leadership. If, as Ryan (2006) suggests, “the goal of inclusion is to see that everyone is included in the school processes” (6), how do school leaders critically reflect on which dimensions of diversity are emphasized and which are secondary? The way inclusivity is understood in the school can simultaneously broaden and narrow the scope of students served.

A second dimension of the epistemology of inclusivity that emerges in this analysis is that resources and leadership dynamically interact to shape the epistemology of inclusivity. In schools, funding typically determines the locus of control. In SCS, as Sister Brenda accesses resources, she is able to better serve the diversity of students who knock on the door. However, her decisions to accept students were not always contingent upon having the resources in hand. Instead, the process of making leadership decisions and accessing resources was a dynamic one: she made the commitment, confident that she would find the resources necessary to allow her to fulfill the commitment. The site-based independence of the school, coupled with the philosophy to “say yes and figure it out later” empowers Sister Brenda with a degree of freedom remarkably distinct from many of her colleagues in other schools. Identifying and accessing resources allows her to control which students the school can serve, and building the relationship with the Belvedere Center empowered her to tell her teachers that serving students with significant disabilities was a non-negotiable. Though colleagues in other schools could access these resources, they frequently do not. As Sister put it, “People come here and they say, ‘Gee, you’re really doing a great job. But I can’t do this. That’s the bottom line… I really can’t do this. I don’t have the resources, I don’t have whatever.’”

While she is responsible for raising the funds for operating expenses, the data show that Sister Brenda takes a unique approach from other Catholic schools: “We don’t say, ‘We’re a poor Catholic school, give us money.’ We don’t do that on purpose. We say this is who we are – this is the education that we provide.” Sister Brenda takes a pragmatic approach toward resources, and this impacts practices of inclusivity in the school. Some people give to the school because it is Catholic, and others despite the religious affiliation. In both situations, Sister Brenda is pursuing resources to allow the school to better serve the students – whether through professional development of staff, scholarships for students, or the funding for a new position in the school. Sister Brenda seeks resources to meet the needs the school is experiencing, and in turn these resources shape which types of students she sees the school as capable of serving.

The reverse is equally evident: which students come knocking on the door drive Sister Brenda to seek particular resources. The school has developed a reputation for welcoming students with disabilities because over the years, families of such children increasingly found in Sister Brenda and SCS a welcoming community. This has, in a sense, become the niche of SCS. Enacting the philosophy to “Say yes and then figure it out” depends on who is asking you to say yes. Certain
students (e.g. families in poverty or linguistic minorities) who do not ask are not admitted. Because the school is at capacity, Sister Brenda is not in a position where she needs to place large efforts in recruiting other students. Operating expenses being largely covered by tuition provides a disincentive to seek out students who would require resources in additional areas (such as scholarship funding or bilingual programming). Yet the operative epistemology of inclusivity is as much shaped by these resources as it is shaping them. Sister Brenda and, by extension, the SCS community seem to understand inclusivity in response to the particular types of traditionally marginalized students who have sought admission, and, had this played out differently, may have pursued different dimensions of diversity. The school leader’s interaction with resources shapes the operative epistemology of inclusivity.

The epistemology of inclusivity examined in this study suggests that theories of educating for social justice will benefit from more deeply examining the epistemological underpinnings to practices. How we understand inclusivity impacts how we pursue social justice. This builds on other literature examining epistemology and education (Capper 1998; Lopez, Gonzalez, and Fierro 2006; Scheurich and Young 1997). The data of this case study show that the epistemology of inclusivity of SCS is grounded in a philosophical commitment to welcoming all students that drives the school to expand its capacity to serve students with disabilities. Such an epistemology of inclusivity serves as “a social construction of inclusivity,” a novel contrast to the “social construction of disability” critiqued by disability studies. In other words, the explicit articulation that all students are welcome constructs the setting that promotes the capacity to achieve this goal. However, even in this context, the pursuit of social justice remains conceptually arrested and incompletely fulfilled. Even when social justice values are relatively clear, blind spots impede us. By examining epistemological underpinnings to social justice practices, this study illuminates some of the (oft ignored) paradoxes and complexities in this field.

Implications for practice bear highlighting as well. To foster critical agents of change, leaders need to critically examine how underlying epistemological features of schools impact the practices that are in place in the school. This builds on Capper’s (1998; Capper, Keyes, and Hafner 1999) work encouraging educational leaders to epistemological pluralism, and deepens the argument that leadership preparation should foster epistemological literacy. Epistemological literacy implies school leaders are able to critically analyze epistemological underpinnings to personal and institutional practices (Riehl 2000). My analysis suggests that resources and leadership dynamically interact to shape the epistemology of inclusivity, and that this is activated in the school through narratives and routines. Leaders in schools, both in preparation and in practice, will benefit from deepening their epistemological literacy.

In conclusion, this study illustrates that achieving inclusivity is not an equation to be solved, but a path to be walked. Educators’ understandings are ever imperfect, ever deepening, ever widening. The movement toward social justice in SCS is nuanced, and the data indicate that the educators’ understandings of inclusivity are imperfect, fractional, and deficient. Despite strong intentions and deliberate structures promoting inclusivity, including extraordinarily focused leadership, schools can (unwittingly) retain exclusionary dimensions (Kumashiro 2001, 2002). Epistemologies of inclusivity direct us to critically reflect on both who is and who is not served by current practices and policies. Attending to this may help school leaders in particular, and educators in general, more effectively construct new understandings of social justice and inclusivity within their schools.
Notes on contributor

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References


