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Scot Danforth

Chapman University, danforth@chapman.edu

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Social justice and technocracy: Tracing the narratives of inclusive education in the United States

Scot Danforth*

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College of Educational Studies, Chapman University, California, United States

DRAFT

* Email: danforth@chapman.edu

Social justice and technocracy: Tracing the narratives of inclusive education in the United States

Over the past two decades, the percentage of American students with disabilities educated in general classrooms with their nondisabled peers has risen by approximately fifty percent. This gradual but steady policy shift has been driven by two distinct narratives of organisational change. The social justice narrative espouses principles of equality and caring across human differences. The narrative of technocracy creates top-down, administrative pressure through hierarchical systems based on quantitative performance data. This article examines these two primary policy narratives of inclusive education in the United States, exploring the conceptual features of each and initiating an analysis of their application in the public schools.

Key words: Inclusive education, US, technocracy

Two narratives of inclusive education

In *From Good Will to Civil Rights*, Richard Scotch carefully documents the history of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the first national law in the United States prohibiting discrimination against persons with disabilities. He captures a historical moment when the way that policymakers thought about disability and the life experiences of people with disabilities began to change. The policymakers left behind a traditional framework of charity and pity in order to embrace a more politicised understanding of people with disabilities as a marginalised class seeking basic civil rights and liberties. Rather than viewing disabled persons as tragic individuals, as what Erving Goffman (1963) called ‘failed normals’, this political view recasts them as part of a disrespected and devalue minority group seeking full participation in education, employment, and the social life of the community.

Beginning with the Regular Education Initiative of the 1980s (Osgood, 2005), the driving narrative of inclusive education in the United States immersed this political concept of disability within a morally compelling story of an excluded, misunderstood class of children and their parents pursuing inclusion as social justice (for example, Artiles, Harris-Murri, & Rosenberg, 2006; Lipsky & Gartner, 1996; Sapon-Shevin, 1999). This rhetoric expressed the goal of inclusion as a specific version of the broader American civil rights narrative whereby African-Americans, women, gays and lesbians, and other political minority groups have sought legal and civil equality. The story of African-Americans, for example, achieving the right to access public restrooms, lunch counters, and ultimately public schools and universities is greatly mirrored in the narratives of disabled Americans fighting for the accessibility of those same valued social spaces (Fleischer & Zames, 2011; Pelka, 1997; Shapiro, 1994; Stroman, 2003).

Mara Sapon-Shevin (2003, p. 26) has expressed the social justice narrative as a mode of moral persuasion that asks educators deep questions about the ultimate purposes of education and the kind of world we hope to live in.

(I)nclusion is not about disability, nor is it only about schools. Inclusion is about social justice. What kind of world do we want to create and how should we educate children for that world? What kinds of skills and commitments do people need to thrive in a diverse society?

At the heart of the social justice story is a moral case, a call to teachers and school leaders to scrutinise beliefs and values in order to better align the practices of schooling with the ethical commitments of a liberal, multicultural society. In this sense, the social justice narrative of inclusion is about becoming better persons and raising the ethical standards of American society.

Since the implementation of federal accountability reforms in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the social justice narrative of inclusive education in America has been augmented and perhaps superseded by a new policy story that, while it does not explicitly seek inclusion, has profound implications for the education of students with disabilities. It is a technocratic tale of public school accountability and academic improvement. This development reflects the resurgence of technocratic government practices in the United States and England (Clarence, 2002). Numerous scholars in the field of educational leadership have noted the utilisation of technocratic approaches to school management during the era of neo-liberal accountability reform (Bolton, 2011; Crow, 2012; Fink, 2005; McCulloch, 2002; Smyth, 2005).

Federal education policies, including revisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the 2001 No Child Left Behind, have re-narrated inclusion as a social by-product of a complex set of administrative efficiencies and technical achievements that systematically produce higher test scores among children. Government agencies interact with other government agencies in a hierarchy of administrative pressure, the higher levels compelling the lower levels, on a playing field of public school test score data. The goal is to produce efficiencies of human action, in school organisation, classroom instruction, and student learning, as evidenced in continuous rises in standardised reading and mathematics test scores (Ravitch, 2010).

The new technocratic story does not overtly value or seek the integration of students with disabilities in general education settings. It offers no grand moral vision of friendships among diverse citizens or a community united by acceptance for human differences. It envisions human society not as a space of interactions and relationships defined by moral pursuits but as a grand accounting ledger with behaviour consequences, a data

administration system where increased test scores are synonymous with improved teaching and learning. It promises to, in the words of educational historian Diane Ravitch (2010, p.11), ‘fix education by applying the principles of business, organization, management, law, and marketing and by developing a good data-collection system that provides the information necessary to incentivize the workforce – principals, teachers, and students – with appropriate rewards and sanctions’.

My investigation of this narrative aims to augment and provide specificity to the critique of the accountability reform movement in the United State that describes No Child Left Behind as the historical pinnacle of a longstanding effort (for example, Spring, 1972) to corporatise the American public schools. Based in a neo-liberal ideology, this law effectively remakes public education to the service to the political interests of wealthy elites and the profit goals of large corporations. Students are viewed not as young citizens in a democracy but as future workers undergoing occupational preparation on the public dime. The system of curriculum and testing is controlled by corporations who greatly control the academic content and methods of teaching while banking the revenue from the massive sales of standards-based curricular and assessment materials. In this critique, technocratic management is simply the latest and perhaps the fiercest practical enactment of insurgent capitalism colonising the public schools (Apple, 2004; Picciano & Spring, 2012; Saltman & Gabbard, 2010; Taubman, 2009; Watkins, 2011).

Policy as narrative

My reasoning relies on the work of scholars who have found that a narrative policy analysis framework is a useful approach to examining the development and implementation of educational policies. Narrative policy analysis involves the close, critical investigation of

the purposes, strategies, and desired outcomes of policies within an overarching framework of story. The standard features of narrative, including plot, characters, and metaphors, provide a rich, illustrative rhetoric that facilitates the in-depth inspection of multiple dimensions of policy creation and enactment; including rationale, problem definition, desired social goals, characterisation of social sub-groups, and strategy of creating social change. Narrative offers a complex language for the articulation the social values and theories undergirding a policy while also presenting in practical terms what the policy would hope to achieve. Through the analysis of public policies as narratives, as cultural-situated stories imbued with ethical and political thought and enacted through the strategic actions of implementation, researchers are able to provide a practical, insightful understanding of how theories and values drive human action through policy initiatives (McBeth, Shanahan, & Hathaway, 2007; Roe, 1994; Yanow, 2000).

In this inquiry, I am particularly interested in the broad narratives of educational policy that provide semantic, political, and practical meaning to educational leaders. Scholars have used terms such as ‘metanarrative’ (Hampton, 2011, p. 347), ‘culture tales’ (Howard, 1991, p. 187), and ‘sacred stories’ (Crites, 1971, p. 295) to describe communal, historical narratives that are expansive enough to explain a variety of human events across time and place. These large-scale cultural tales infuse situational specific activity sequences with social meaning while supplying useful theories of individual identity, moral action, and community life. My interest in this inquiry focuses on these broad-shouldered stories of public schooling as cultural and historical activity, specifically examining issues of disability and inclusion/exclusion in educational policy.

The purpose of this analysis is twofold. First, I want to illuminate the primary policy narratives informing and guiding school-based practice in relation to inclusive

education in the United States. While inclusion concerns far more than questions about where students with disabilities are placed, whether they are educated with their nondisabled peers or in segregated, disability-only schools and classrooms, at the broad level of federal educational policy the most answerable question is one of classroom placement. Between 1992 and 2011, the percentage of disabled American students educated in general classrooms increased by over 53% (Data Accountability Center, 2010; United States Department of Education, 2004). The public schools in America have gradually but steadily educated a larger portion of the disabled student population in general classrooms. My first goal is to shed light on the primary policy narratives that have influenced American educators as inclusive schooling has gained greater acceptance and utilisation.

My second goal is to briefly begin to examine how these influential policy narratives inform the thoughts and actions of public school administrators, what actually happens in school placement decisions of disabled students in the public schools. How do these policy narratives play out through district-level and school-level decisions concerning education of students with disabilities? As national educational policies are interpreted, adopted, and carried out in local schools, in what ways do the primary policy narratives of inclusion guide the thoughts and actions of school leaders? In order to examine these questions of policy interpretation and implementation at the local level, I interviewed seven public school administrators in Southern California about the current state of inclusive education in their schools.

Conceptual features of social justice narrative

Themes of social justice in the inclusive education literature grew from the larger critique that public schools designed to provide equal opportunities to students of varied economic

and social statuses frequently contribute to and reify political inequality and asymmetrical distribution of wealth. Drawing from critical research traditions (for example, Freire, 1970; 1972; McLaren, 1998) educators who view inclusion as social justice interpret special education ideologies and systems of practice as contributing to the segregation and marginalisation of disabled students (Brantlinger, 1997, 2005; Lipsky & Gartner, 1996) as well as students of colour, boys, and lower income students (Brantlinger, 1994, 2001; Harry & Anderson, 1994; Harry, Klingner, Sturges, & Moore, 2002; Losen & Orfield, 2002; Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Gallini, Simmons, & Feggins-Azziz, 2006).

Founded in this broad and resounding critique, inclusion is articulated as the intentional development of social and instructional communities that greatly remedy the inequities and ethical problems of traditional special education while forwarding the values and goals of liberal democracy (Artiles et al., 2006).

The notion of public education embracing and enacting an ethos of social justice may be understood as consisting of three conceptual features. The first two are common themes of liberal democracy articulated by John Dewey, his *vision of a democratic community* and his concept of *moral equality*. These two concepts outline an ethic of egalitarian living as central to an American democracy and the goals and practices of education. The third and most recent feature is the *social model of disability*. Drawn from the field of Disability Studies, an interdisciplinary tradition of social analysis looking at the experiences of disabled persons in many cultural contexts, the social model illustrates how political inequality based on concepts of ability and disability is created and maintained. It frames disabled persons as part of a cultural minority group seeking equity and justice through a history of civil rights struggle.

Dewey's *vision of democratic community* involves an understanding of the mutual relationship between the individual and the community. The well-being of the community and the full development of individuals operate in reciprocal tandem. The goal of the democratic society is to create communities of equality and social support so that the free expression and full development of the individuality of each citizen is a paramount concern. The task of the individual person in the democracy is to contribute his or her unique talents and effort to the daily interactions and activities that support the community of freedom and equality (Martin, 2002; Ryan, 1997; Westbrook, 1993).

An example of Dewey's concept of democratic community means at the level of interpersonal interactions and relationships is provided by Doug Biklen and Jamie Burke's (2006, p. 166) notion of 'presuming competence'. To presume competence in interaction with a disabled person is to avoid ascribing deficit ideas to the humanity of the person. Instead, one interprets a body or actions that may seem unusual, that may perform in surprising ways, as completely reasonable, as ordinary and making good sense within the experience of the disabled person. Appreciating the humanity of the person with a disability is a way of accepting the unique contribution that person makes to the complexity and richness of a diverse society.

Dewey's (1976a, p. 299) *moral equality* concept presents a democratic way of thinking about how humans differ from one another. The fact that all persons are unlike, that they differ in a million different ways – physical size, appearance, interests, personality, needs, strengths, weaknesses – is obvious. But what shall we make of these differences? Dewey encourages us not to think about differences in terms of hierarchies of superior and inferior, higher and lower, better and worse. He invites us to view human differences through a lens of incomparability (Dewey 1976a, 1976b).

‘Moral equality means incommensurability, the inapplicability of common and quantitative standards’ (Dewey, 1976a, p. 299). We should avoid concocting a grand standard or overarching concept that we should use to compare students to one another. Acting on the basis of moral equality begins with rejecting the misguided goal of comparing one student to the rest of the class or to a statistical average. Roger Slee (2011, p. 14) has written, ‘Inclusive education ... offers an audacious challenge to the attachment of ascending and descending values to different people’. In democratic eyes, all students are of equal value.

The *social model of disability*, unlike most theoretical and practical formulations of disability in the educational literature, grew out of the concrete experiences of disabled persons. In 1975, a group of disabled persons in England calling themselves The Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) built a new idea with profound consequences.

In our view, it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments, by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society. Disabled people are therefore an oppressed group in society ... For us as disabled people it is absolutely vital that we get this question of the cause of disability quite straight, because on the answer depends the crucial matter of where we direct our main energies in the struggle for change (Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation, 1975, pp. 3–4).

This revolutionary statement is the basis for the *social model of disability* that has been further developed by an interdisciplinary field of academic scholarship called Disability Studies (for example, Albrecht, Seelman, & Bury, 2001; Barnes, Oliver, & Barton, 2002; Davis, 1997, 2002; Gabel, 2005; Linton, 1998; Oliver, 1990). What began as a new concept of physical disability has been extended over the years into our thinking

about all disabilities, including intellectual disabilities (Bogdan & Taylor, 1994; Kliewer, 1998), autism (Savarese & Savarese, 2010), and learning disabilities (Connor & Ferri, 2010).

The social model defines disability as the series of systemic and pervasive barriers to inclusion, participation, success, and happiness that isolate and oppress persons whose bodies and minds do not conform to social conventions of appearance and functioning. Society attaches stigma to many physical and psychological variations of humanity, thereby rendering those persons as lesser citizens. The politics of disability are harsh and widespread, including exclusion from meaningful participation in employment, education, recreation, housing, and social relationships.

In the social model, people with disabilities are understood as a cultural minority group seeking their civil rights, attempting to be included in all avenues of community life. The social model of disability views human differences as a legitimate and disability as a valued cultural identity. Through actively resisting the social and political forces of exclusion and oppression, disability can become a source of identity and pride (Gabel & Peters, 2004; Fleischer & Zames, 2011; Pelka, 1997; Shapiro, 1994; Stroman, 2003).

A series of specific federal policy developments have propelled the technocratic narrative of national educational policy in the United States over the past decade. In the next section, I examine how changes in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act combined with No Child Left Behind to constitute the ‘technocratic approach to school reform’ (Ravitch, 2010, p. 29) that has altered the landscape of inclusive education in the public schools. First, I detail the specific policies that have contributed to the growth of technocracy in public school administration. From there, I then explore the conceptual

features of technocratic management that give the narrative its political and practical character.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Prior to the 1997 reauthorisation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the federal policy on the education of students with disabilities emphasised access to public schooling without placing a high priority on the quality of educational provision. The main victory of the 1975 Education for Handicapped Children Act (EHA) was the federal mandate that all states provide a public education for students with disabilities without an exclusion option. Public school systems across the land were required to educate all disabled students. The federal policy focused more on getting students with disabilities into schools and classrooms than on achieving positive academic outcomes (Hardman & Dawson, 2008; Hehir, 2005; Kleinert, Kearns, & Kennedy, 1997).

Prior to the passage of IDEA 1997, students with disabilities were routinely left out of state systems of standardised academic assessment. There was little expectation at the level of federal policy that students receiving special education services make significant academic gains or that school districts pay close attention to their educational progress. In 1991, most states did not know how many or if their students with disabilities were taking state-mandated tests. 54% of states did not keep track of participation rates for students with disabilities on state assessments (Ysseldyke, Dennison, & Nelson, 2004). Kleinert, Kearns, and Kennedy (1997) estimated that only 50% and 60% of all students with disabilities in the United States were participating in mandatory systems of state educational assessment before the policy changes adopted by the 1997 IDEA.

In the minds of many educational leaders, operating in a climate of minimal accountability for academic achievement, the special education system was a powerful purveyor of low expectations for student learning. Kleinert, Kearns, and Kennedy (1997, p. 195) noted, 'Unfortunately, one effect of excluding specific groups of students from state and district educational performance measures can be a decreased concern for what those students are learning'. Former federal director of special education Thomas Hehir (2005, p. 111) observed, 'The education of students with disabilities has been plagued by low expectations, which is why many in the disability community have sought to have students included in state and national accountability systems. The hope is that by including students in statewide assessments, more attention will be paid to assuring that these students receive quality programs'. Hehir (2005, p. 111) gives the specific example of a disabled eight year old boy receiving training in fine motor development but no science instruction. '(L)ike that of too many children with disabilities, this boy's educational program concentrates inordinately on the characteristics of his disability at the expense to the curriculum'.

The authors of the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA attempted to address a pair of related concerns. First, there was an impression that expectations for the academic learning of students with disabilities must be raised. Second, the problem of low expectations was viewed as intimately linked to the fact that students with disabilities often did not take the states' standardised achievement tests. States did not test students with disabilities because they expected little from them. But this logic also worked in reverse. The failure to track the academic performance of disabled students in districts and schools allowed educators to undervalue the achievement of those students (Hardman & Dawson, 2008; Hehir, 2005).

The 1997 IDEA pushed states to include students with disabilities in all state academic assessments. States were required to develop suitable adaptations and

modifications of tests to meet the performance needs of these students. Also, for students for whom the adaptations did not provide reasonable access to the standard examinations, states were required to develop and utilise alternative assessments. IEP teams were entrusted with the decision of selecting the most reasonable testing accommodations or assessment alternatives for individual students. Further, the federal government mandated that states report the performance of students with disabilities on all state assessments (Ysseldyke et al., 2004; Kleinert et al., 1997). This sent ‘a clear message to everyone – teachers, administrators, and, perhaps most important, families and students themselves – that the learning of all children fundamentally matters’ (Kleinert et al., 1997, p. 207).

The 1997 reauthorisation initiated a dramatic policy shift toward greater accountability for teachers, schools, and school districts for the academic achievement of students with disabilities. This shift was fortified seven years later by the 2004 IDEA (Hardman & Dawson, 2008; Hehir, 2005; Ysseldyke et al., 2004). The 2004 reauthorisation linked explicitly with the 2001 No Child Left Behind legislation to hold schools accountable for the measured progress of students with disabilities on standardised tests of reading and math. It ensured disabled students’ access to and progress on the general curriculum.

Federal policy evolved into implementation of the view that the only way students with disabilities can be viewed as successful as their peers without disabilities is to ensure that they have an opportunity to learn the same instructional content. To ensure compliance with this provision, federal policy required that a student’s individualized education program (IEP) have a statement of measurable annual goals that enable the child to access, participate in, and progress in the general curriculum. Further, the school district must ensure that the IEP team reviews each child’s IEP periodically to address any lack of expected progress in the general curriculum (Hardman & Dawson, 2008, p. 7).

Although the revised versions of IDEA did not create a specific mandate for students with disabilities to be included in general education classrooms, they made it increasingly difficult for school districts to adhere to the law through practices of segregation. Historically, and practically, the location of the general curriculum in American schools was the general classroom.

No child left behind

The 2001 reauthorisation of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, often called No Child Left Behind, is the centrepiece of the federal educational reform. The legislation mandated that all states develop a complex regime of standardised tests in reading and mathematics to be utilised in an aggressive system of top-down accountability. States were required to create their own standardised tests with three levels of performance, often termed *basic*, *proficient*, and *advanced*. Each state is allowed to define a proficient level of academic performance. Public schools must test all students in mathematics and reading in grades three through eight and once during the high school years. Based on each state's definitions of proficient mathematics and reading skill levels for each of the assessed grades, the federal government required that all students perform at proficiency level by 2014.

States, districts, and schools were ordered to disaggregate achievement data by race, ethnicity, low income status, disability, and English learners. In order to ensure that all of these sub-groups were progressing steadily toward the goal of full proficiency, states were required to create timelines detailing the standards of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Each sub-group must gradually rise toward 100% proficiency during the years leading up to 2014.

Districts and schools who fail to meet the performance standards are subject to punishments. For example, schools not reaching AYP for every subgroup are designated as School In Need of Improvement (SINI) and face a progressive series of administrative sanctions. Each successive year of failure turns up the scope and power of the administrative intervention.

Five years failure to meet AYP for any sub-group prompts the most dramatic action. Schools are forced to completely restructure, essentially wiping out the ineffective school and starting over from scratch. The five restructuring options including becoming a charter school, replacing principal and staff, handing control over to a private educational management company, and falling under state control. The final option is ‘any other major restructuring of the school’s governance’ (Ravitch, 2010, p. 98), an ambiguous reform option chosen by most schools and districts (Elledge, Le Floch, Taylor, & Anderson, 2009; Nagle, Yunker & Malmgren, 2006; Ravitch, 2010; Wong, 2008).

Conceptual features of technocracy

Technocracy is ‘a system of governance in which technically trained experts rule by virtue of their specialized knowledge and position in dominant political and economic institutions’ (Fischer, 1990, p. 17). The valued expertise in the work of policy development and implementation is technical and scientific (Meynaud, 1969). More broadly, technocracy may be understood as ‘a theory of governmental decision making designed to promote technical solutions to political problems’ (Fischer, 1990, p. 18). The models and practices of engineering, honed and refined in the manipulation of the material world, are promised as the tools to produce progress and harmony in the social world (Akin, 1977; Segal, 1985).

The governance of the American public schools in the accountability movement era includes four specific features of technocracy as philosophy and practice of educational management. First, it involves the intensive *rationalisation of human activity*, the actions of educators and students in the schools. Second, it embraces a *top-down approach* to educational management and governance. Third, it proceeds from a rigid, deterministic brand of *positivist epistemology*. Finally, it seeks improvements in schools and society through practices of *social engineering*.

Through the *rationalisation of human activity*, government administrators interpret behaviour, emotion, thought, and interaction with what Bell (1973, p. 349) describes as ‘technocratic mind-view’. Common understandings of social meaning derived from experience or cultural practices are replaced by mathematical algorithms.

In its emphasis on the logical, practical, problem-solving, instrumental, orderly, and disciplined approach to objectives, in its reliance on a calculus, on precision and measurement and a concept of a system, it is a world-view quite opposed to the traditional and customary religious, esthetic, and intuitive modes (Bell, 1973, p. 350).

The technocratic mindset translates ‘the vital to the rational’ (Bell, 1973, p. 350), distilling the complexities, vagaries, and inconsistencies of everyday life into fields of metric regularity and schemes of statistical determination.

Similarly, Fischer (1990, p. 41) describes a ‘technocratic consciousness’ that strips lived experience of its aesthetic and ethical features, thereby rendering a clearly calculated picture of ‘how the world works, a conception of how it should work, and a set of tactics for changing it’ (p. 41). In this view, technocracy is a mental state, a way of thinking about, organising, and interpreting the world that yields mechanised symmetry, predictability, and efficiency.

The *top-down approach* to the management of schools is a central feature of what Apple (2004, p. 23) calls ‘the increasing power of the “evaluative state,”’ an authoritarian mode of governance focused on intensified regulation of the behaviour of educational professionals.

It rests on an assertion that the greatest knowledge – technical expertise – resides at the top of a bureaucratic hierarchy. Dictates are issued down the ladder, seeking compliance at each level; from federal government to state departments of education to local districts and, finally, to schools and teachers. Local perspectives on problems and solutions are ignored in favor of statistical models held at upper administrative levels. Administrators at the upper ladder rungs employ a variety of rewards and punishments – ‘the carrot and the stick’ (Fischer, 1990, p. 191) – to achieve compliance down through the multiple levels of the management system.

The assumption that the scientifically-based managers at the top of the system know best creates a bureaucratic system where communication flows in one direction and genuine dialogue among a range of perspectives is simply a waste of time.

Inherent in this strategy is a subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, form of authoritarianism. Once the idea that we can empirically calculate and administratively design ‘the right way’ to accomplish our goals is accepted, there is little reason to engage in exploration of other views (Fischer, 1990, p. 43).

Meynaud (1969) further explains that the government agencies and officials wielding power are often concealed behind a shroud of secrecy. The top levels of hierarchy are isolated from meaningful engagement with the local administrators who are trying to apply and live with the policy requirements.

The adherence to a *positivist epistemology* reflects the attempt to apply the philosophy and methods of physical science to human social activities. Positivism may be defined as an orientation toward knowledge that seeks precision through the measurement of observable phenomena. Descriptions of teaching and learning are valued only when articulated as measurement and mathematics (Phillips, 1983; Phillips & Burbules, 2000).

Technocracy begins with the assumption that society is a machine comprised of working parts and interactive processes that are best understood through quantitative measurement and practices of statistical analysis. ‘Technocracy makes one basic postulate: that the phenomena involved in the functional operation of the social mechanism are metrical’ (Scott, 1933, p. 39). The discourse of educational management prioritises mathematical representations of human behaviour in schools, the charts, graphs, and trends lines of measured activities.

As a practical matter, this epistemological stance supports the firm belief that the administrators at the federal and state level undoubtedly have the best knowledge about what to do and how to do it. Scientific activity is envisioned as doubt-free, lacking the typical controversies and disagreements that many would contend are central to the scientific process (Clarence, 2002). The stance of mathematical certainty validates the technocrats’ position at the top of the management mountain, lending scientific credibility to the authoritarian approach. If there is one best way to seek the proper education of young people, then it should be issued forcefully and without compromise to local educational officials, regardless of their opinion of the merits of the policy.

The overall policy development and implementation strategy attempts to improve public school, and by logical extension American society, through practices of *social engineering*. Technocracy in the United States sprouted first as an organised movement of

engineers during the Great Depression who championed the application of their technical expertise to the problems of economic and social disorder. Drawing heavily from the writings of sociologist Thorstein Veblen (1921), well-known engineers such as Howard Scott and Walter Rautenstrauch, Chair of the Columbia University Department of Industrial Engineering, led the development of a set of utopian social engineering prescriptions for American society. They believed that great hope of healing the economic and social woes of the times resided in the application of scientific thinking to the organisation of society (Akin, 1977; Segal, 1985).

The educational policies of NCLB and IDEA assumed that government can improve society through the application of engineering knowledge and practices to social communities called schools. The regularity, order, and rationality of machines can be injected into the otherwise disorderly and intemperate public schools through technocratic governance. Appealing to ‘the commonly held fiction that education is non-political’ (Cremin, 1961, p. 13), technocratic management supply the steady hand of rationality to the public schools. The subjectivities of interest group politics and inconsistencies of teaching and learning are removed by administrative intervention, through what Daniel Bell (1973, p. 350) called the ‘perfection of administration’.

Narrating policy implementation

The federal accountability movement, from the revisions of IDEA in 1997 and 2004, to the implementation of NCLB beginning in 2002, has profoundly impacted American public schools for over a decade. In the experiences of public school administrators who work at the school and district level, how have these policy changes influenced inclusive education? How do the two primary policy narratives of inclusion guide the thoughts and actions of

school leaders? In order to begin to examine these questions of policy interpretation and implementation at the local level, I interviewed (40 to 60 minutes) seven public school administrators in Southern California about the current state of inclusive education in their schools. The school administrators held the following professional positions: four elementary school principals (EP), two high school principals (HP), and a school district special education director (SE).

I started each interview with the same conversational prompt, ‘Since 1992, the percentage of disabled American students educated in general classrooms has increased by 53%. Have you witnessed a similar increase in inclusion? How do explain what you have seen in your district/school?’ In every instance, this prompt easily provoked an extended conversation about the topic. Themes were derived with reference to the two primary narratives of inclusive education policy, exploring how these narratives were animated, enacted, combined, and resisted in the actions and words of the interview participants.

First, all participants agreed that the inclusion movement has gained new energy and inclusive practice has gained greater implementation due to increase in top-down mandate. IDEA and NCLB accountability policies at the federal level have prompted the State Department of Education and District Superintendents to push schools toward more inclusion.

- ‘In 2004, the changes to IDEA created a legal mandate that IEP teams consider general education first. That had to be the first option’. (SE)
- ‘Now every district and every school has to show (academic achievement) progress not just for the whole school but for all the sub-groups, including kids with

disabilities ... We need for the kids with disabilities to have access to the general education content'. (HP)

- 'IDEA pushed us. It pushed the whole country. It changed how we do the IEP process. When you go through the IEP process, you look at all of the present levels of functioning. Before you even get into a possible placement, you have to look at how the student can succeed and be served in general education'. (SE)

An administrator in a school district that is under 'program improvement', close monitoring and guidance by the State Department of Education due to low standardised test scores commented,

- 'The State gave us a target for inclusion. For kids spending over 80% of time integrated into general classes, we are supposed to have over 76%. Right now, we are only at 48%'. The State also told the district to fully embrace the Response to Intervention model as the best approach to reaching that target. (SE)

A school principal explained that the top-down strategy in her district involved bringing in a well-known inclusion expert to conduct an evaluation of the district's special education programs. The consultant team examined special education system for the whole district and created a series of recommendations. Among the list of problems found by the consultants were a lack of an implemented Response to Intervention (RTI) model (IDEA 2004) and an overabundance of students with disabilities in separate, special education classes. Recommendations included the development of an RTI model of early intervention in the general classrooms, placing special education service identification as a last resort, and the development of more inclusive classrooms. Both recommendations placed greater

responsibility for the education of students with disabilities in the hands of general educators and building principals who often viewed these students as the purview of special educators. Not surprisingly, the district used the consultant's recommendation to promote an inclusive education agenda.

- 'The (district's) special education department was already moving toward more inclusion. The consultant's report gave inclusion more teeth, moved things along faster'. (EP)
- 'Our district central office told everyone, 'Someday we will have ALL the kids in regular education'. (EP)

Even an administrator who opposed the move toward greater inclusion acknowledged the district's tactics in contracting a noted inclusive educator to conduct the analysis.

- 'They brought in a well-known guy, paid him a lot, and they are doing his philosophy. But he had his mind made up before he even arrived. Such baloney. Are you kidding me?' (EP)

Second, the six participants who interpreted the inclusion movement as a generally positive development in American public schools *described the top-down, technocratic mandate as supporting and furthering the social justice narrative of inclusive education.* Although an educational or political theorist (for example, Fischer, 1990) would quickly identify the technocratic elements of NCLB and IDEA as conceptually incompatible with the liberal democratic themes of the social justice narrative, these school leaders did not find the two narratives to be incommensurable in practice. In fact, they experienced the

policy pressure from the federal and state level as putting more wind into the sails of the old social justice goals of inclusion.

- ‘A number of different factors have influenced inclusion over the years. Certainly, NCLB – the emphasis on testing, accountability, and highly qualified teachers, made a big difference. The steep rise in inclusion came in about 2005 or 2006. We started to say to ourselves, “Are we putting these kids where they need to be?”’ (HP)
- ‘There has been a philosophical change that has occurred over time. We now realize that special education should not be something separate. Students with disabilities have gaps in their learning. But every student has gaps in his learning. We need to provide the right supports for every student’. (HP)
- ‘There is a belief that all kids should be taught in the general classroom, that all kids should ... you know, with NCLB, have “highly qualified teachers” ... and that means general ed’. (SE)

Technocratic policy developments in the United States had, from this view, supplied the older social justice narrative with an invigorating tonic that propelled the inclusive education agenda forward.

Third, despite speaking in strong support of inclusive education, two of the administrators warned that *inclusion is not for all disabled students*. There are limits to what schools and teachers can accomplish. Some students, most notably those described as having ‘severe disabilities’, will probably not be educated in general education classrooms.

- ‘We had to send him to a special school. His behavior was just too out of control. We can include everyone’. (EP)
- ‘We still have to offer a full continuum of services. Full inclusion, you know, throwing everybody in, doesn’t address all the needs of the kids. Many of them need functional skills’. (EP)

Means and ends

The work of school administrators undoubtedly occurs at the busy intersection of many streams of cultural and political activity. Numerous policy directives, pedagogical trends, technological systems, and cultural influences collide in the curriculum and teaching of the public schools. Educational practitioners are accustomed to working on professional programs and activities that mingle ingredients supplied by different ideological positions. Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson (2006) have noted how teachers working in schools pulled by conflicting policy agendas often find a way to mix opposing policy directives in daily practice. What seems like oil and water to the theorist can commingle with little hesitation in the practices of the public schools.

If we accept the casual pragmatism of the educational administrators interviewed in this article, we would believe that the two narratives of inclusion blend fairly easily. Perhaps they even complement one another. The social justice narrative supplies the moral argument. The technocratic narrative provides the political pressure. Together, in alliance, they propel inclusive education reforms in the public schools.

But we should dig deeper. The apparent marriage of the two narratives of inclusive education in the United States is held together by tenuous and temporary bonds. The problem lies in the difference between ends and means. The social justice narrative

proposes that educating students of diverse abilities and bodily configurations in a shared community is a valuable goal within a democratic society. Creating a diverse community of learning, acceptance, and friendship within the public school is part of living in a democratic way. As Dewey might tell us, the ends and the means are inseparable as schools embrace and enact a cultural valuing of human equality.

The technocratic narrative only holds inclusion as a means to an end, as a helpful vehicle in service to the larger technical goal, as an instructionally useful way to raise standardised test scores for disabled students. Technocratic educational administration has no commitment to the fulfillment of democratic principles. In fact, technocracy lacks any political or moral affiliations, taking pride in detachment from the purposes and goals of political life (Centeno, 1993; Fischer, 1990; Putnam, 1977).

The divide between means and ends raises two bothersome questions about the technocratic narrative. First, are there specific student populations that do not benefit from the narrative? Armstrong, Armstrong and Spandagou (2009) warn that the adoption of policies that support inclusive education often lead to a political recalibration of the lines of division, an ironic and unfortunate re-exclusion of culturally devalued groups that fail to meet the new requirements for normality and acceptance. Perhaps inclusive education within the accountability reform movement becomes a useful means to raising test scores for some groups of disabled students and not others. Notably, two of the seven interview respondents spoke of the limitations of inclusion, of how inclusion was not appropriate for students with 'severe' disabilities. Their comments are supported by the relatively low level of inclusion nationally of students with intellectual disabilities. Despite the shift toward inclusive education in the United States, students with intellectual disabilities are primarily

schooled in segregated classrooms and schools. The inclusion movement has passed them by (Smith, 2007, 2010).

The second problematic question about the technocracy narrative also draws our attention to circumstances in which educational leaders find inclusion to be an unsatisfactory means to the true end of test score increases. What happens if the standardised test scores of students with or without disabilities educated in inclusive classrooms do not go up? What happens if the scores decrease?

Teaching successfully in inclusive classrooms is often challenging, requiring the development of advanced forms of pedagogical knowledge and skill. Most teachers in the United States who work in inclusive classrooms are poorly prepared, lacking the necessary conceptual understandings and practical skills to be effective with diverse populations of students. Both pre-service teacher preparation and in-service professional development tend to fall short of providing teachers with the required inclusive education knowledge and skills (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000; Burke & Sutherland, 2004; Kamens, Loprete, & Slostad, 2000; Stanovich & Jordan, 2002).

Inclusive education is no more immune to poor implementation than any other educational practice. If carried out by underprepared educators, it becomes a failed means to the technocratic end. Centeno (1993) observes that technocracies in democratic countries typically operate under tremendous pressure 'to perform consistently on a consistent basis' (p. 328). The expectation, both within government and in the population, is for efficient and effective achievement of the desired ends. The risk under the technocratic policy narrative is that inclusive education might be tossed aside as a failed instructional program, an inefficient technique, by impatient school leaders seeking rising trend lines of academic achievement data. Professional activities failing to lead to test data increases are subject to

technocratic interpretation as unnecessary, requiring replacement with educational practices more conducive to data enhancement.

Stripped of moral, cultural, and political value, cast in a narrative of social engineering and technical adjustment, inclusion may end up on the dust-heap of inefficient pedagogies. If that happens, then the technocracy of educational accountability reform will no longer provide a policy narrative in support of inclusion. Educators will be left with what they had before accountability reforms entered the scene in the late 1990s, a single narrative of inclusive education, a strong social justice argument for inclusive school communities based in democratic ideals.

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