Discussion Paper

Inclusive Education: Beyond Popular Discourses

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The popular discourse of democratic education is home to numerous myths surrounding our conceptions of what inclusion means in today’s schools. Certain beliefs like the idea that offering equal opportunities for participation to all students regardless of individual need, which conflates equality and equity, or that democracy in classrooms involves nothing more than limitless inclusion are upheld as go-to solutions for the inevitable dilemmas for educators committed to inclusion. This paper argues that philosophical clarification of the concept of inclusion is urgently required by teachers, policy makers, and theorists of education committed to both democracy in education and democratic education. Our most urgent concern is related to the inherent attitude toward deficit implied by different understandings of inclusion. This is not necessarily due to the unclarities and ambiguities associated with the concept itself, but rather reflect the calculated and anticipatory way educators tend to approach classroom practice. We argue that with careful philosophical clarification, along with an entirely new stance on the part of teachers regarding their pedagogical practice and a reconceptualized notion of student ‘needs’, the concept of inclusion can continue to remain not only useful but essential to creating a robust democratic community in the classroom.

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