A Duoethnographic Journey of Inclusion to Access

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We are two accomplices working in companionship toward access in higher education. Our journey, as told through a *currere*-informed, duoethnographic pedagogical act, culminates as a beginning toward greater access for disabled students in higher education.

In this piece, our aim is to each provide our voice as an instructor and as a student through the process of duoethnography. More, our purpose is to dive in to shared dialogue (Norris & Sawyer, 2017) to be reflective, critical, and present in order to re-envision our stories in juxtaposition with one another. We've employed William Pinar's (1975) concept of *currere*, a "foundational tenet" of duoethnography (Norris & Sawyer, 2017, p. 2), to engage together through "complicated conversations" (Pinar, 2004) of our individual and shared experiences in education spaces.

Pinar's (1975) *currere* offers us a reflective methodology to engage in past regressions as a means to speculate into the future, while engaging in a meaningful examination in the nooks and crannies of our lived education experiences with a north star of synthesizing the pieces to understand the comprehensive meaning. Duoethnography offers, through an additional element that juxtaposes ourselves with one another as two individuals with very different lived stories, the hope of seeing ourselves differently (Levinas, 1984). Our aim is to co-construct critical storytelling as a form of curriculum theorizing. Our hope is to gain deeper insights to disrupt, expound, and re-define our positionality and identity, both personally and in our roles in higher education.

Our methodology emerged through an interlacing of Pinar's (1975) four pedagogical acts of the method of *currere* where our lives actualize curriculum and of Norris and Sawyer's (2012) tenets of the duoethnographic process. Norris and Sawyer's (2012) first tenet encourages duoethnographers to engage "within our personal curriculum" through *currere* (Pinar, 1975). Here, we work through questions to center regressive, progressive, analytical, synthetical movement through our dialogue around the underlying question "what has been and what is now the nature of [our] educational experience?" (p. 20, Pinar, 1994). We further engage in Norris and Sawyer's (2012) second tenet, where each of our voices are made clear, third tenet, where we attempt to disrupt the grand, metanarrative, and lastly, sixth tenet, where we engage in a critical "reconceptualization" as a "form of praxis where theory and practice converse" (p. 24).

Our collective voices through our *currere* journey as budding duoethnographers have sparked a deep conversation and reflection (Norris & Sawyer, 2017; Pinar, 1975) to tell our stories, individual and shared, of ableism and hopes for access and justice through our differences, corroboration, and accompliceship.

We, Courtney and Ashley, met during the summer of 2015. If you asked us how we knew each other then, we'd have shared our teacher/student relationship through our coursework in our Inclusive University Program at our midwestern university. Our conversations have taken place over food in comfortable seats in Panera during a semester that the two of us co-taught an introductory disability studies course with undergraduate students.

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Ashley's Positionality Statement

I am a white, middle-class, cisgender, non-disabled female who taught special education for four years, served as the director of a residential agriculture program for adults with autism for four years, and currently teach as a clinical faculty member in inclusive special education and disability studies programs at a midwestern university. My positionality presents both insights and limitations. My insights as a teacher in public schools and as faculty member in higher education offer the perspective of a privileged professional working in disability advocacy, navigating authentic allyship and accompliceship as it is granted to me. My limitations are grounded in my epistemological understandings that are limited to a White, middle-class, non-disabled, cisgender perspective. I cannot offer counternarratives myself but can try to offer stories from my experiences in education spaces in an attempt to corroborate the lived experiences of disabled students and find it pressing in my privileged role in higher education to give voice to disabled students to speak their narratives and stories.

Courtney's Positionality Statement

I am a white, middle-class, disabled, Christian woman. I don't normally claim disability, but I feel that, since I'm writing about my identities, I should. I want to share my experiences, that disability is not a bad thing, to share my faith, and to help others with a disability/disabled people to advocate for themselves and be able to share their stories.

Regressive

In our experiences, have schools had a role in promoting social justice for disabled students?

Courtney: In middle school, I started attending my IEP meetings. I feel like in middle and high school was when I learned to tell teachers what accommodations I needed. For example, it would take me a long time to write out my work and answers if we had a math packet for homework. So, I would only do the even or odd problems. If we were taking notes in class, it was hard for me to keep up, so I needed the notes ahead of time. Sometimes, I would have to remind teachers of this. Telling teachers what I needed helped me learn how to speak up for myself.

In school, I took classes with my classmates and learned the same thing the other students did, and there were some other kids on IEPs like me. I remember that we went over a test for a book we were reading, and I and the other students who were on IEPs went to a separate room to have the questions read aloud to us. Also, I would go with other students on IEPs when we would go over the study guide for the math tests (that was junior year). When we were going to go over the study guide, sometimes the math teacher would tell the class that if you are on an IEP you can go with Ms. M., the special education teacher. This was an invasion of privacy, and classmates aren't supposed to know if a student is on an IEP.

Sometimes my assignments weren't modified at all. The first time was in eighth grade. The class was doing a project, and each person had their own assignment. The project was supposed to be on a poster board, and so we had to cut and glue stuff on the poster board. I am not a neat cutter, and this project was graded on neatness. So, I explained this to the teacher and the teacher said, "just have your case manager cut it for you." I was thinking that I didn't want to because then I felt like my teacher would be doing the project for me. So, I had some help, but for the most part, I did it myself. I

felt and still feel it is unfair to grade someone on neatness when they are not good at cutting because of their disability. I remember I was upset about this.

When I was a Junior in high school, I experienced ableism. I was walking to a restaurant by my family's house to meet with my job developer from school to help with my resume and help me find jobs. I had stepped out, so I was not in the room at the time, but my job developer told me that the manager approached her and asked how old I was. She told her I was 16. Then, the manager asked, "How old is she mentally?" I didn't know this until my job developer told me; she was really upset about it. I was surprised by it and also found it ridiculous that someone, especially the manager, would say something like this.

Ashley: This question triggers a vivid memory from my first year of teaching middle school. I arrived early to my students' first choir concert. It was a fall evening in 2005. As a first year teacher, I sat proudly front and center in the auditorium as parents and guests filed in around me. I was 23, spritely, determined to change the world, a self-proclaimed champion of inclusion for my students with disabilities. I was resolved and naïve. As the lights dimmed, I exchanged excited, proud looks with my students' parents. My persistence with the resistant choir teacher and head of the teachers' union, Mrs. P, was going to pay off tonight. Carolyn projected her voice from the risers with the confidence of Taylor Swift, and Kenzie danced to her own beat as the four rows of middle school students dressed in white shirts stood stoic and compliant, possibly just in contrast to my natural entertainers. Lacey was a ball of nerves and was clearly lip-syncing. In this moment, I was beaming. What they were singing wasn't memorable, or maybe I blocked out the song from my memory. Immediately after the last word of the first song, Mrs. P gave my girls a signal, something rehearsed, to leave the stage. My three disabled students were overtly removed for the remainder of the performance from their fifty peers remaining on the risers. Furious and horrified, I quietly cried through the remaining songs, unable to make eye contact with my girls' livid parents. Mrs. P told me the next morning that my students were bringing down the collective voice of the group but clearly felt very proud of the opportunity she had given them anyway.

Every August, I knocked on our guidance counselor's door. His smiling invitation into his office hid an internal sigh. Our annual meeting was to play tug-of-war with my students' schedules and teachers. Teachers in my middle school didn't want my students in their classes. Our experience at the choir concert was a manifestation of what often happened off the stage and in our classrooms. My students might have been given the "opportunity" to be present in classes with their peers, but they were rarely included and were never given equal access. Physically sharing a space often didn't equate to being accepted as a valued and active community member of the classroom or curriculum.

Love. Anger. Mrs. P intensified my love for my students with anger. I fought for them, I defended them. I advocated *for* them. I thought that I failed as a teacher because I wasn't successful in including them in the school community.

I now see that I failed my students for not teaching *them* how to challenge the status quo in our school, in our community. I fought, and lost, the battle with Mrs. P *for* them, not *with* them. Why didn't I think to include them in my meeting with Mrs. P and the administrators? I used to think of social justice for my students as something I could facilitate for them. I probably would have grabbed the scissors and glue myself for Courtney's poster project.

Social justice in schools happens when students with disabilities have a voice and are empowered to speak up for themselves to challenge ableism, discrimination, and segregation. Social justice for disabled students isn't about what happens to them, for them—it's what happens *because* of them.

In our experiences, what is inclusion in public schools?

Courtney: Inclusion is feeling like you are a part of a group, hanging out with friends, people making sure you feel welcome. In high school, I feel like I had trouble figuring out how to hang out with friends. I feel like I was focused more on school work than what to do outside of school.

I was included in my school. In elementary school, I was included in field day, and in the middle school, I was in the school play.

I think I viewed inclusion as getting to hang out with other people who have a disability. I feel like I didn't really know how to feel a part of the group at school and how to be involved in social activities. I didn't really learn how to be involved in social activities until I became independent and started being in groups like Best Buddies, Young Life Capernaum, and Speak Up. I feel like being in Best Buddies helped me learn how to talk to friends more, how to hang out with friends more, inviting friends over, and how to be involved in the community. I just did not know how to pursue social activities.

During middle school and high school, I felt like I was in the middle or not disabled enough. I wasn't "normal," and sometimes I felt I had to speak up more to get the supports my peers with disabilities were getting.

Ashley: My students were not given access to our school curriculum, nor were they given status as equal members of our school community. What message did our school send to my students, to other students? We were sending a message that "segregation is the norm—then disability must be a bad thing" As Courtney illuminates in her sense of "not being disabled enough," special education is still widely regarded as a *place* that, as a consequence, continually perpetuates the message of disability as a bad thing.

Progressive

Why is inclusion important?

Courtney: In special education, when you have people with disabilities separated from other people with disabilities, you can cause ableism for disabled people. One disabled person could think, "At least I'm not like this person; this person is not included in education, and I am."

When people with disabilities experience this ableism, they don't expect themselves and others with disabilities to achieve much. This is why I believe having people included is so important, so they don't have negative thoughts about themselves or others.

Ashley: I graduated from college with a belief that inclusion was the right thing to do. During my career teaching in a public middle school, my schema of inclusion centered my time around creating opportunities for my students to spend time with their non-disabled peers. Diving into academia and critical theory, however, deepened my view of inclusion as a civil right. For years, I have centered my curriculum for teacher candidates in David Connor's (Connor & Valle, 2010) work, grounded in the principle of inclusion as a civil right. A letter board in my office reads, "If David

Connor can do it...” Why is inclusion important? It is important because all students have the right, and should be given the choice, to be educated with their same-age peers in the school they are zoned to attend and to be provided with work that they can do.

I am challenged by my role as a teacher in a public university with a national trend where students with disabilities are accessing higher education at disproportionately lower rates than their non-disabled peers. So, in this progressive space in my mind, I am questioning if inclusion works? Is inclusion the north star? As I contemplate what could be, I think about the disproportionate gap of disabled teachers and the lack of representation of disabled scholars in academia. Yes, inclusion is a civil right, but establishing a civil right should be just the beginning in a fight for access.

What are the consequences of non-inclusive schooling experiences?

Courtney: Teachers don’t think about or realize the consequences of segregation of disabled people.

Ashley: What is that a case of?

Courtney: Ableism

Ashley: Yes!

Courtney: Teachers need to have inclusive classrooms and electives. Social consequences of keeping people with or without disabilities separate is that people without disabilities don’t know how to treat people with disabilities. They could be uncomfortable around people with disabilities, not knowing how to react to them. Another social consequence is it can cause ableism or the non-disabled person thinking, “At least I’m better off than they are.”

What does ableism look like?

Courtney: I experienced ableism when I was around 16 or 17 years old. I had been working on becoming more independent and was walking down to a store by where my family lived. My step-mom suggested I do this; she followed me in her car to make sure I was safe. So, after we had done this a good amount of times, I began to go by myself. One time, I was walking down to the store and this lady got out of her car and asked, “Are you okay?” I told her that I was okay, but then, she just kept on following me! It was really freaking me out that she kept on following me, so I called the police on her! I was able to get to the store safely, and I got what I wanted. Sometimes, people would call the police on me, and the police even took me home one time. At the time, I just thought it was weird that people were calling the police on me. Thinking about it recently, I feel this was ableism. If Isaac or Abbie (my step-brother and step-sister) had walked to the store by where we lived when they were 16 or 17, they would not have the police called on them.

What are the possibilities of an accessible curriculum?

Courtney: My college curriculum in Disability Studies helped me see my disability as part of myself and a part of my identity. Before learning about Disability Studies, I viewed my disability as something I needed to overcome or as a burden. I think I viewed it this way because I only looked at my disability medically. I didn’t see that there were/are ways that society can hold us back more than our disability can.

For example, if a building is inaccessible, is that the disabled person's fault for not being able to get into the building? Or it is society's fault for not making the building accessible in the first place? I learned about being an ally and being an activist. It made me want to speak about my experiences and my disability.

During the Inclusive University Program and during the Intro to Disability Studies class I took this past year, I got to do action projects. In the summer, a group of other students and I went around our community and took pictures of signs, parking meters, crosswalks, and sidewalks that needed to be fixed or that were inaccessible. Then, we made a PowerPoint to share suggestions on how to make our community better. We got to present this presentation to the mayor of our town at a leadership conference. During the Intro to Disability Studies class, I worked with my classmates to make an academic building more accessible. So, we took pictures of signs and doorways and wrote descriptions of bathrooms that are inaccessible; then, we made a PowerPoint and got to present that to an associate dean of the college of education. This was important to me because this makes the community accessible for all, not just for individuals with disabilities. Also, doing these action projects helped me realize I wanted to share my experiences and help with activism.

In the Intro to Disability Studies class, I learned about the social models of disability, how people view the social models and disability, the history of disabled people, how people with disabilities are represented in media, universal design, and how people view intelligence. In my high school, if we had a class discussion about what we read, I participated. I always would raise my hand to answer or ask questions. If we had a group project, I would work with the group to get it done. I feel like my classmates treated me like everyone else. The same is true for my college experience. One main difference was that, in my college experiences, I talk about my disability openly. In my Junior year of high school, I wanted to talk about how I went to meetings for students with disabilities and learned job and interviewing skills, since we were doing a speech on job interviewing in my speech class. But when I brought up the fact that I have a disability, I said it really quietly, almost as if I was afraid to say it, afraid people would see me differently. But through learning about Disability Studies in the summer program and during spring semester, I learned how to talk about my disability openly, that I didn't have to be ashamed of it, because it is part of what makes me, me. I view my disability as part of myself now, because I learned that the problem is not my disability, but the way society treats people with disabilities. Disability Studies helped me understand this. In my college classes, I got to know some classmates really well and became friends. For example, in my college class my group was working on a project together, and then one person from the group had dinner with me after the project was done.

Analytical, Disruption of Metanarrative

What is my current, critical definition of inclusion?

Courtney: My definition of inclusion now is getting to be friends/hang out with both people with/without disabilities. Also, it means getting to know all kinds of different people no matter who they are.

Inclusion also means making sure everyone can get into a place (like a basketball game or dance) and that there are no barriers for people to get in—barriers like stairs, lighting, or no quiet place if the dance room or game is too noisy. Inclusion means access.

When teachers are informed about inclusion and disability studies, it can lead to more inclusive education and being aware of ableism. For example, my friend

is teaching special education in middle school, and they were learning about Helen Keller, and the class was talking about people with disabilities as inspirational. She talked to them about how using people with disabilities as inspiration can be hurtful. They have disabilities themselves and yet they bought into the stereotype that, if you do something and you have a disability, then you are inspirational.

Ashley: As I consider deeply the significance of my experiences as a teacher in the social and political construct in which they surface, I've been wrong in my work with students with disabilities and with teacher candidates. I've been ableist. I created presentations for my students to share in their 7th grade social studies classes so they could be included with their non-disabled peers. Truly, I likely would have cut and glued Courtney's poster project for her.

Inclusion for students with disabilities has been a goal in public education for many years. My current, critical definition of inclusion is now mixed up in my head in an analytical *currere* stew.

Courtney's initial definition of inclusion is grounded in being able to participate in social experiences. Yes. Courtney further expands her definition to "Inclusion means access." Yes. Yes! Access. Inclusion as a civil right is the premise where the work toward access should begin, not define inclusion as the end goal. In their work around biopolitics and disability, scholars David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder (2015) challenge current notions of inclusion and frame "inclusionism" as the greatest manifestation of "disability tolerance." As an educator working toward a goal of inclusion for years, I realize I have, even with the best intentions, further perpetuated an ableist metanarrative where disabled students are "tolerated" in education spaces. David Morstad (2018) concisely illustrates Mitchell and Snyder's (2015) argument: "The implication is clear: This is our group, but we'll let you in" (p. 1).

Synthetical, Reconceptualization

So now what?

Ashley and Courtney: Synthesizing our thinking through these experiences deeply reframes our thinking toward possibilities of "reconceptualization" (Norris & Sawyer, 2012) toward more just teaching practices.

As teachers, as activists, we should work toward disruption of the metanarrative (Norris & Sawyer, 2012) created by the non-disabled majority by reconceptualizing (Norris & Sawyer, 2012) education of disabled students by activism through "political companionship" (Staughton, 2012) to disability communities leading efforts towards access in schools. Here, we share two "reconceptualizations" (Norris & Sawyer, 2012) sparked by our reflections and dialogue.

Access

Access commands the creation of classroom spaces for students, disabled and non-disabled, that is theirs as much as it is ours. To revisit Courtney's analogy and experiences, inclusion is an invitation for students with disabilities to attend a dance party, to be included in the school field day and the school play. Access, then, as Courtney describes, includes breaking down barriers. To expound upon this further, access is a party planning committee where disabled and non-disabled students make collaborative decisions together about the dance or where disabled students lead a community-based activism project with their peers, like Courtney's work with our undergraduate students to make our academic halls more accessible.

In his work in disability theory, Tobin Siebers (2008) centers embodiment, or

the lived perspective, as critical to knowledge of disability. Siebers (2008) states that critical theorists

> have long argued that all knowledge is situated, that it adheres in social locations, that it is embodied, with the consequence that they have been able to claim that people in marginal social positions enjoy an epistemological privilege that allows them to theorize society differently from those in dominant social locations. Knowledge is situated, first of all, because it is based on perspective. (p. 22)

Sieber's (2008) work centering "curricular cripistemologies" corroborates Mitchell and Snyder's (2015) sentiments of inclusion where a lack of access can lead to "inclusionism as a neoliberal gloss on diversity initiatives that get some disabled students in the door while leaving the vast majority of crip/queer students behind" (Sieber, 2008, p. 80).

Our synthesis, our reconceptualization, then, is that *where inclusion is grounded in disability rights, access is grounded in disability justice*.

Accompliceship and Political Companionship

Accompliceship challenges the assumptions, the metanarrative, that education for disabled students has been built upon and calls for teachers to act as "political companions" (Staughton, 2012) *with* their students and *with* the disabled community. Accompliceship is an intolerance to unfounded barriers to access where we can intentionally disrupt normative-based schooling practices as companions under the leadership of minoritized communities (Coomer & Cartell Johnson, 2018).

Ashley: I want to be a better teacher. This process of synthesis and reconceptualization leaves me with the question, "How can I reconfigure my education spaces to be a place of shared power?" (Coomer & Cartell Johnson, 2018).

Courtney: I want to become a teacher so I can share my experiences and help other people with a disability to advocate for themselves.

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Notes on Language Use: We considered many perspectives and preferences in the carefully chosen language used in this piece. We use *disabled people* intentionally to speak to a large diverse pod of people, as well as to acknowledge that some people identify as being *disabled* by society and/or claim *disabled* as an identity. The term, *disabled students,* speaks to the act of the disabling of students with diagnoses and/or impairments in schooling practices. We use *students with a disability* to reflect the preference of person-first language.