

Synopsis of
“What Does Inclusion Look Like, and Who Gets to Decide?”
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Thesis: Individuals and organizations are operating on different definitions of inclusion and forming those definitions by influence from a range of sources. In order to ensure quality of inclusion and consistency in the weight and meaning of that word, our field needs to come to some collective understanding of what it means to pursue inclusion. In addition, it is critical to know who is given decision-making power if we are to truly pursue equity and justice.

While at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, I have been exploring the question, “what does inclusion look like, and who gets to decide?”

Goals:

By exploring this question, I hope to:

1. Contribute to a collective understanding of what pursuing inclusion entails
 - a. Collective understanding can better enable us for collective action
2. Promote intentionality and challenge complacency
 - a. It is great that many more folks want to pursue DEI-related work, however there is also the risk of falling into the trap of using language such as inclusion that has become such a buzz word and trendy in a way that is not entirely intentional. Furthermore, inclusion is not a box we can check off, it is an ongoing ever evolving process. I hope the questions and information I share will prompt folks to challenge complacency and continue their journey
3. Emphasize the power in decision-making and centering student and community voices
 - a. Decision-making is a huge position of power we should not take lightly. Staying true to the disability community's coined phrase “nothing about us, without us” it is crucial we center the voices of students and community members with disabilities in our work. I hope the information and questions presented motivated folks to further center those voices

Research:

1. Survey questions: This survey was sent to program managers, educators, leaders, and/or designers working in arts education. All answers are anonymous. Respondents answered the following questions:
 - a. How do you personally define inclusion of students with disabilities participating in arts education programs?
 - b. Whose perspectives or what influences inform how you define inclusion?

- c. In the context of students with disabilities participating in arts education programs, please define how inclusion is operationalized in your work
 - d. Who decides, or whose perspectives inform, how inclusion is operationalized in your work?
 - e. (Optional) Do you identify as being disabled or having a disability? This question is asked because it is important to know how voices of the disability community are or are not represented in this work. This question is entirely optional.
2. Survey findings:
- a. The tension between how respondents personally, aspirationally define inclusion and how inclusion is operationalized or actualized in their work quickly became clear:
 - i. While most aspirational definitions saw themes of students having a sense of belonging, students with and without disabilities meaningfully participating together or engaging with each other, and the space they are in providing all needed support, the operational definitions became quite specific and tangible. One respondent shared specific class sizes and what percentage of students have disabilities or don't, others mentioned sub separate spaces for students with disabilities, and others described their program offerings at their organizations. This also demonstrated the role of social versus physical inclusion.
 - b. Influences on definitions:
 - i. The most common response of what determines how inclusion is operationalized in work included:
 1. Partner schools
 2. Administration
 3. Staff
 4. Budget
 5. People with disabilities
 - ii. This list calls out that people with disabilities are not an assumed decision maker when operationalizing inclusion, and often these other influences take priority when it comes to creating programming.
 - iii. The influences on aspirational definitions of inclusion overwhelmingly stated people with disabilities and students. Two exceptions include one respondent naming a particular mentor and another naming the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

- iv. This wide variety of influences draws attention to the varied ways definitions of inclusion are formed, and how individualized understanding is.
 - v. A question I pose is: is it possible to have standards for inclusion, that shared understanding, while remaining responsive to each community and individual needs?
3. Compelling examples of practice:
- a. In addition to the survey, I looked at how various arts organizations conduct their work based on interviews, my own experiences, and observations. I found three compelling ways organizations center student and community voice in their decision making:
 - i. The first is an advisor model. This allows organizations to form a team, or multiple teams of advisors for particular programs and projects. The flexibility of the members, time period, and involvement makes this approach well-poised to be responsive to ever-evolving scenarios.
 - ii. The second method is maintaining student feedback loops. This strategy is dependent on organizations having access to students or parents, but when maintained well can be effective.
 - iii. Finally, I see community partnerships as a valued mechanism. Community partnerships are helpful for programming in terms of resources, but when the partnership includes folks with different perspectives, in this case people with disabilities, it can add a valued layer to the partnership.

Results of Research:

My research leaves me with new questions. I embrace this because questions are the path to learning more and doing better. Questions encourage our curiosity and lead us to more possibilities. These questions are:

1. How can student voices be centered more in decision making?
2. Are people with disabilities given decision-making power?
3. Are student choices restricted because of their disabilities in a way that is unnecessary?
4. How can our personal definitions of inclusion be realized in how we operationalize inclusion?

Moving Forward:

To move forward, I invited you to take 2 actions steps:

1. Keep asking questions. You are invited to use the questions I pose here, as well as to create and ask your own questions. Ask these questions to your peer

teachers, administration, mentors, and anyone and everyone you are pursuing inclusion and equity with.

2. Consider how you can immediately center the voices of students and the disability community in your work. No step is too small to start taking, it only matters that we begin taking steps.