Trickster's Way

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The Dark Side of Trickster: Collaboration or Collusion?

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Trickster is semiosis; she is the archetype, the patterned schema of signs that seeks order from chaos only to disrupt that order revealing the boundaries of our cultural concepts and contexts. As Spinks (1991) reminds us, "Wherever the culture has drawn a line of demarcation, Trickster is there to probe the line and test the limits" (p. 2). She is a challenger of boundaries created by us and for us within the whole process of semiosis. For Trickster participates in all aspects of semiosis. Whether we become complacent in our notions of teaching and learning or challenge our present assumptions, Trickster plays into each decision we make, each action we initiate, each sign that we attend to or ignore. She is no stranger to the current school reform movement in special education as she shapes, reshapes, erases and marks the boundaries between *inclusive* and *special*education.

Inclusive practice refers to educating students with disabilities in general education classrooms. Over the past 10 years, educators have generally agreed that inclusion is a positive intervention for students with and without disabilities especially when viewed ideologically, as a "belief system rather than a set of actions" . Falvey, Givner, & Kimm (1995) define inclusion as "a way of life, a way of living together, based on a belief that each individual is valued and does belong" . Such statements become wonderful slogans and appear innocuously simple to enact. For who would deny a child an education in the United States and who would devalue or remove children from the world of school? With the civil rights movement and legislation that guarantees those with disabilities a right to a free and appropriate education, there can be no argument that inclusion is a right. Yet, it is semiosis personified in Trickster that reveals the way in which we sometimes deceive or perhaps artificially camouflage the cultural boundaries of disability. It is the dark side of Trickster that we saw in the violence of the 60's and 70's who helped bring about the new order of free and appropriate education for those with disabilities and now she plays in the shadows pretending to be the heroine who embraces all children as she diverts our attention away from the true nature of what it means to "belong" and to have "value" in a classroom.

The Blue Ribbon School

As a former special education teacher in the public schools and a university professor in teacher education, I was anxious to enter into, what eventually became a three-year research project to describe the inner workings of a Blue Ribbon inclusive school. It was an opportunity for me to learn how cultural boundaries of disability could be blurred or collapsed within a small self-contained public school.

Marvel Elementary School (pseudonym) was for all purposes an icon of inclusive practice. Nationally recognized for its excellence in teaching and situated in a school district known for its mission to create Professional Development Schools, Marvel school utilized every available resource. The school worked collaboratively with University faculty, interns, parents and professionals within the larger community. This was the place to see just how an exemplary inclusion school actualized the philosophy of inclusion; where everyone is valued and belongs. And Trickster was there, from the beginning of the project until its end.

As my colleague and I began to observe and videotape the interactions of teachers and students, we were struck by the variety of teaching strategies used in all classrooms. Rather than simply lecturing to students, teachers designed learning centers for exploration, peer tutoring, cooperative group projects, computer assisted learning and large group instruction. Teachers readily talked about their deliberate decisions to form mixed ability groups that supported the large variety of teaching strategies. All children seemed involved in the classroom and teachers talked about the importance of participation. In fact, "active participation" was a key element in the school-wide definition of inclusion. As one teacher explained,

> I think in a lot of places inclusion and the old folk mainstream are somewhat confused and meshed together, where people think that they're working on inclusion, where what they're doing is the old traditional mainstreaming. The child is there but not necessarily an active participant in the group. They go to science, I mean they go to PE, they go to lunch, they go to recess, so they're being mainstreamed or they're being included, but, I think being more of an active participant in the subjects is more what inclusion means.

Faculty in the graduate studies program at the local university articulated these same ideas and practice. There was a synchronicity between what was taught in academic coursework and what teachers strived to apply in the elementary classrooms. It seemed that there was finally a fit between theory and practice. After observing, interviewing and analyzing the data during that first year, we believed the partnership had worked. We were on the way to what the Holmes group referred to as "simultaneous renewal." Yet, there was a feeling, a sense of unrest as we sifted through the data, talking and revisiting our observations and fieldnotes. It was Trickster whispering to us, that sense of tacit knowing, of "firstness" that lured us back to the school for a closer look at what was occurring within those celebrated student collaborative groups. We entered our second year of the project with a participatory focus on students and teachers who worked with collaborative teaching

routines that included large group instruction, peer tutoring, and group projects. It wasn't until I sat in these groups with students, ate lunch with them, played outside with them, and became involved in the selection of "students of the week" that Trickster raised her head and turned everything upside down.

Roles and Functions

Whether teachers used a cooperative group project or peer tutoring to structure a lesson, they often reminded students to make sure that each member of the group had a turn or a responsibility. At the beginning of the year, the assigning of roles was a highly structured process. For example, the teacher identified and assigned roles that included a recorder, a facilitator, a timekeeper, and several research assistants. Over time, this formal role assignment deteriorated into an informal process and the group became responsible for "making sure that everyone participates." The more advanced students often emerged as group leaders and children with minimal academic skills almost always took the role of what we informally termed, *the gopher* ("go [ask the teacher] for the markers, Jimmy"). In large group activities, children with disabilities became scorekeepers or helped to distribute or collect materials for the teacher. When asked how she included students with moderate learning disabilities in the general education classroom, one teacher explained:

> I can give an example. We were working on long division and one student was keeping score for the two teams but he was right up at the board as the process of the division was going on so he could see each step by step going on and he (pause), it made him maintain focus throughout the entire activity and game that the children were doing, whereas if he had been sitting back at his seat supposedly working the division problems, he wouldn't have been working 'em but he was focusing more on those problems standing a the board keeping score and watching the two people who were competing on the board than he would have if he were doing the problems at his seat. So including to the greatest extent possible that you can in the classroom where you're giving him the maximum amount out of the activity.

Some students with moderate disabilities helped the teacher by serving as instructional aids or models, that is, they became **objects for teaching** as illustrated in this example:

> In a kindergarten class, David (who has Down syndrome and is identified as having a moderate disability) was selected by the teacher to help demonstrate how the earth revolved around the sun. David was the sun and each of the other students was to represent the earth. During the demonstration, the teacher put her hands on David's

shoulders and slowly turned him around and around. She instructed the other students walk around David one at a time. The following discussion ensued:

David is the sun and you [the other children] are the planet earth. You move around the sun and that's called "revolving." The earth revolves around the sun and that's what makes day and night. When you are looking at David, it's daytime and when you are not it's [pauses] David? (She stops turning David and waits for him to answer). David mumbles something smiling at the other children who are looking at him.

The teacher looks out over David's head towards the other children who are still standing in a circle around David. She rephrases her question. "David, what time of day is it when it's dark?" "Scary" replies David. [The other children giggle and David smiles]. "No, David what time is it when it's dark?" David looks at the other children. He is smiling and pretends to shiver…saying…"scarrrry." The teacher continues looking at the group of children and calls on Kyra to answer the question. Kyra says, "night-time." and the teacher responds, "Yes, Kyra it's night." The teacher gently walks David to a place in the circle with the other children, keeping her hands on his shoulders).

Teachers believed that involving students in activities meant that each was learning. The key was to identify what role and function the individual student could successfully fulfill. Marvel School faculty and staff consistently promoted the idea that every student had a talent to offer and that these talents should be recognized and valued. As one teacher commented, "all kids can learn, its just a matter of making some adaptations for them." One administrator said, "In this school we all look for ways to recognize the progress of every student." Having a job or responsibility in the group was believed to be the best way to increase students' self-esteem and to build tolerance for others. When asked what she wanted most to accomplish with her students a fourth grade teacher said, "I guess basically I want my students to come out of my room with good self concepts, not only have them learn the skills that they require to learn during fourth grade but have them care about themselves and feel good about themselves. I think that's so important." If students with disabilities participated in an activity, regardless of that role, the teachers believed this lead to high self-esteem and non-disabled students would more likely accept the students with disabilities. However, students with disabilities tended to take on roles that serviced the learning of other students. The following excerpt from our fieldnotes illustrates this phenomenon.

Tim was in first grade and identified as having a moderate disability. We never left the school without at least three hugs a piece from Tim. With a smile that was contagious, Tim would call out "have a nice

day" as he helped us gather up our things whenever we left the room. It didn't seem to matter if we were just going to use the restroom or get a drink of water, one move toward that classroom door set off a call to duty for Tim. He rushed to help us pack up our notebooks, purses, and video equipment. But this ritualized and royal escorting behavior was not limited to just our visits. Tim rushed to help the classroom teacher find her belongings, coats and lunch boxes of fellow students, itinerant teachers, and visiting students. We soon learned to steer clear of the door unless we really wanted to leave.

In some instances, the student's overgeneralization of this servicing behavior interfered with the teacher's attempts to engage him in more academic tasks as indicated by this teachers attempt to redirect a first grader named, Frank.

[The teacher is standing by the chalkboard getting ready to review the names of the months. She assigns some students to collect the work they just finished and directs everyone else to come and sit on the floor in front of her]

Teacher: Who would like to help me pick up your journals? OK, anybody else if you name is complete. Leave your pencils on your journals because someone is going to pick them up. OK, everybody else come into a circle.

[The children all come forward except for Frank who starts picking up books and pencils on the other student's desks].

Teacher: Frank, you should not be picking up.

Female Student: Frank…he's still picking up.

Teacher: Frank, thank you for your help but there are two people already supposed to pick them up. Everybody onto the floor except for Zane, Jenna and Carl who are picking up journals and pencils. Frank, come here.

[Frank slowly walks to the circle sits down but continues to watch Zane picking up the journals.

Teacher [to the group]: Now we've had a long weekend since we've been at school on Friday so you'll be really rested and ready to begin our calendar lesson today. Are you ready? I want to hear you sing [the names of the months].

[Frank continues to watch the three other students. He points to a journal on another desk in an attempt to get Zane to collect that

journal. Frank watches Zane, Jenna and Carl as they finish collecting the items and placing them on the teacher's desk. He smiles at them until they come and sit down with the other students.]

When we interviewed non-disabled students, they often commented on how some students weren't "very good" at academics but that they were very "good helpers." And non-disabled students frequently talked about how "helping others" was a very important and positive thing to do. When we asked students to tell us about students they knew who had learning problems, they frequently commented on the helping role. As one fifth grader explained,

> Fifth Grader: Well, I know one kid that has mental retardation and he can't read or anything but everybody helps him and that's OK.
>
> Interviewer: How does everybody help him?
>
> Fifth Grader: Well, sometimes if we're all reading out loud, then the teacher will help him read it.
>
> Interviewer: Can you give me an example of how she helps him read it?
>
> Fifth Grader: Yea, like if he can't read…um…the words or says, th th th the cap-i-tals [sic]. Then she will just read it for him.
>
> Interviewer: I see, well can you tell me anything about this kid's friends?

Fifth Grader: Well, he doesn't really have friends, just people who help him out.

In an effort to demonstrate and recognize the strengths of all students, teachers deliberately searched for positive attributes of each child in their classroom. They publicly recognized these positive traits by nominating particular students and posting their names on cards in the main hallway. The school secretary explained, "Each week the teachers chose one student from the class to be on the wall. They read off the names on the intercom and the students come down and get their picture taken." We watched week after week, documenting the names and comments displayed on the wall. It was interesting to note that while many students were publicly recognized for their academic work, (i.e. "Tommy won third place in the spelling bee" or "Samantha got an A on her math test"), we saw a pattern of public recognition emerge for children that had disabilities. These public comments consistently recognized improvement in the social rather than academic domains. For example, "Tommy had a great day on Friday. He worked hard in following classroom and school rules. He was extra good while in the hall. Good job Tommy!!!" or "Jack Diamond for adjusting so well to having a wheelchair. He has a great attitude," and "Tonya always works hard in speech class. Her hard work shows

in her terrific speech. I also appreciate her being a great helper." Over time, it was apparent that the essential focus of learning for some children (particularly those with disabilities) was in the development of social rather than academic skills. This is not to say that these students did not have academic goals, but we did not observe the actualization of these goals in the general classroom teaching routines.

Benevolent Collusion

But Trickster was more than just gopher. She played in and around teachers and those students who struggled with the standard curriculum. Trickster silently spun a web of interactional signs that bound these students and teachers in a quiet game of benevolent collusion; a tacit form of communicative interaction that was negotiated between educators and academically challenged students to create a context of superficial social inclusion. These teachers unconsciously agreed to respond in ways that allowed students with academic challenges to gain only marginal entrance into the larger community. While they worked diligently to remove boundaries of physical exclusion, another was established between these students and their access to culturally valued knowledge.

At the same time the students with academic deficits tacitly agreed to take a passive role in collaborative groups and to service the needs of higher ability students in order to be a part of the group. Because the students with disabilities generally appeared happy and content with their assignments and according to teachers' anecdotal reports, "got along well with others", inclusion appeared to be successful. The focus for educators was to mark and publicly promote the social contributions of the academically challenged students. The focus for students with disabilities was to practice working in servitude and to demonstrate social appreciation for those who demonstrated tolerance towards them.

One strategy used by the students with disabilities was to reduce the visibility of their academic limitations. While teachers looked for signals to indicate that all students were on task, students with disabilities learned clever ways to "duck and cover." We saw students who seemed to know just the right moment to turn a page and run their finger through the text when the teacher asked for an example. While it appeared that the student was actively engaged, searching the text, the videotape revealed that the student was in the wrong part of the book. When these students went to the listening centers, they often went to the center without a text in hand or failed to attend to the written text when listening. In large group settings, like the one presented earlier, teachers instructed students to solve a problem on paper first and then they did it together using the overhead. It was not uncommon for older students with mild disabilities to write the problem, and then pretend to write the answer. These students knew to write the answer ever so discreetly *after* the teacher solved the problem on the board. When the teacher said, "Thumbs up if you got that one right," these students immediately raised their hand. We also observed students

with disabilities who repeatedly chose to complete less complex activities when given a choice of tasks. They downloaded pictures from Internet sites for reports rather than summarizing information or writing reports. They drew illustrations for book reports, they listened to books on tapes and retold stories, delivered or gathered supplies, greeted and hosted visitors, listened to stories read to them by peers, and relied on peers to help them complete academic tasks.

On the other hand, when students with disabilities attempted to let teachers know that they did not understand the material, teachers often tried to divert the students' attention from the issue by encouraging the student to "not worry about it." Rather than provide direct instruction, teachers sometimes focused on trying to discount the student's difficulty or reassure the student that learning would take time.

It certainly wasn't that Marvel School teachers failed to notice that children were frustrated. Rather it was because they had invested so much time and energy building a protective social context that they believed fit the prototype of inclusion. Unfortunately this protective context inadvertently devalued some students by restricting their access to high status cultural knowledge. Students with disabilities had gained entrance to the social group but it was a tenuous position.

The dominant culture in the United States emphasizes and rewards those who are highly literate, disciplined and capable of thinking critically and creatively. To be considered an integral part of society one has to have enough power to challenge, change, or sustain the social structures that currently exist. One must be able to actively engage in discussion about new discoveries and choices. But active engagement means more than watching others or servicing those in power. Individuals must acquire a certain level of literacy and mastery of disciplines in order to establish a position that is within the dominant culture rather than on the edge of it. Yet, the problem is a complex one. When Marvel School teachers attempted to provide children with disabilities equal access to valued cultural knowledge, they focused on changes in classroom routines and emphasized the social rather than cognitive domains. They believed that creating a context of social support would allow students with disabilities to gain a more centralized position within the cultural world of public school. However, the marking of social rather than academic signs tended to place these students in marginal roles. Without an emphasis on intensive and individualized instruction, students with disabilities and teachers unknowingly created a system that kept students from gaining the skills they needed to empower them.

We went into this research project with a focus, a set of expectations and a vague image of what inclusion should or could look like. We formed our expectations, moving through what Pierce calls, firstness (i.e. what might be), secondness (i.e. what is), and thirdness (i.e. what it could become), relying on the contextual features or situations we entered and from our experiential memory. We sensed, felt, anticipated and predicted that things should move in a certain direction, and in a certain way. When it did not, it was trickster juxtaposing what we expected with the

unexpected.

Yet a fundamental principle of semiosis is our ability to deny, to lie to ourselves, to unconsciously attend to those signs that embody pleasure, contentment, safety and lure us into complacency. It is this complacency that restrains and resists the natural flow of change and it is the firstness of cultural growth. As an agent of individuation, Trickster encourages us to join together as we mark those patterns of behavior that bring us pleasure and shield us from pain. As we seek to mark those signs of unity, eventually we can not help but illuminate the Other.

In this paper I hoped to show how trickster evokes a process of growth, complacency and re-growth. In education, we strive to correct social errors by incorporating changes that while making a difference, sometimes tend to obfuscate ways in which our culture resists fundamental change to maintain order. It is only when we, as educators feel safe enough to ask, not just what is it we see? But, what is it that we do not see? Only then can we understand the dark side of trickster. For just when we thought we had it right, Trickster reminded us, that we hadn't.

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