Losing hope for change: socially just and disability studies in education educators’ choice to leave public schools

Carrie E. Rood & Christine Ashby

To cite this article: Carrie E. Rood & Christine Ashby (2018): Losing hope for change: socially just and disability studies in education educators’ choice to leave public schools, International Journal of Inclusive Education

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1452054

Published online: 10 Apr 2018.
Losing hope for change: socially just and disability studies in education educators’ choice to leave public schools

Carrie E. Rood and Christine Ashby

ABSTRACT
This paper highlights one key finding from a larger study where researchers utilised in-depth phenomenological interviews to explore the experiences and perspectives of public school teachers who espouse a disability studies in education (DSE) and social justice teaching identity. It specifically describes the relationship found between a lack of support for DSE teaching identities and educators’ choice to leave public school teaching. It highlights how the lack of consistent and authentic administrative and institutional support for teachers underlying beliefs led the majority of the participants to feel increasingly isolated from their schools, and in their work as teachers. Thus, the paper describes the specific emotions and seclusion participants experienced in attempting to enact their commitments to DSE, which in turn exacerbated participants’ understanding of their place in their particular school systems and in schooling more broadly. Finally, it describes participants’ desires to leave public schooling and plans for continued DSE practice.

Introduction

Every year thousands of teachers leave the field of education (Tyler, Montrosse, and Smith 2012). This fact has been thoroughly documented in research and continues to be a tangible obstacle faced in the field of education (Billingsley 2004, 2005; Tyler, Montrosse, and Smith 2012). Although the majority of teachers who choose to leave the profession do so within their first five years, the heightened demands of the standards and accountability movement have been correlated with a noticeable spike in the number of both rookie and veteran teachers who have elected to leave (Ravich 2013; Sapon-Shevin and Schniedewind 2012). The choice to leave the profession of teaching has become even more salient for teachers who choose to resist, question, and speak out against the utilisation of state-authorised and district-adopted programmes (Achinstein and Ogawa 2006). In many instances, individuals who choose to challenge these policies are perceived by their administration and colleagues as unprofessional, leading to social, emotional, and physical exclusions from the school and community (Montaño and Burstein 2006). Even if they are not perceived this way, their relationship to systems and policies that go against their own
professional beliefs may result in the feelings of isolation, frustration, and hopelessness (Buchanan 2015; Parkison 2008). This paper highlights this phenomenon. It describes 11 public school teachers’ feelings and desires to leave the profession of teaching. It focuses on these teachers’ challenges in enacting their prescribed disability studies in education (DSE) identities within their respective schools and districts. Specifically, the paper highlights how school- and district-level responses to the heightened demands of accountability and standardisation were not consistent with, and further conflicted participants’ ability to practise their underlying beliefs and commitments to DSE, which led the majority to question their continuing vitality as public school teachers. We begin by describing and reviewing what a DSE is in relation to relevant literature on teacher education and identity, since much of their desires to leave were tied to their espoused identities as DSE.

**Literature and participants’ framework for understanding**

This study utilises teacher identity theories and a DSE framework to examine the inter-relationship between participants’ experiences with the current systems of schooling and their commitments to enacting a DSE perspective. DSE engages with the underlying oppressive tendencies that exist and have become known as special education, particularly intersecting with the work individuals practise within schools (Mutua and Smith 2008; Taylor 2008). DSE seeks to and includes research, policy, and action, which:

- Contextualise[s] disability within political and social sphere;
- Privilege[s] the interest, agendas, and voices of people labelled with disability/disabled people;
- Promote[s] social justice, equitable and inclusive educational opportunities, and full and meaningful access to all aspects of society for people labelled with disability/disabled people;
- Assume[s] competence and reject deficit models of disability (‘Disability Studies SIG’ 2015).

In this manner, DSE provides a foundation for social justice and challenging common sense assumptions about disability, special education, and ‘difference’. In particular, teacher education programmes that are framed by a DSE perspective ask teachers to ‘share a commitment to education as a site from which to work toward greater equity, more pluralism, and less oppression’ (Oyler 2011, 204). Individuals who have graduated from teacher education programmes that are pedagogically grounded in DSE are provided with theoretical tools to question what has become perceived as normative within schooling and with pedagogical tools to question and disrupt damaging discourses that position some students as deficient (Ashby 2012; Oyler 2011). Programmes that provide teacher education grounded in DSE challenge the narrow and prescriptive approaches inherent to special education and schooling more broadly (Routel 2012).

Inherent to DSE is a reconceptualisation of disability within the socio-cultural model (Rice 2008; Routel 2012). DSE challenges socially legitimised notions of the perceived common sense nature of disability as an entity that is located within an individual and situates disability within a social constructivist viewpoint. Furthermore, DSE considers
and makes visible culturally constructed perceptions of intelligence and independence (Rice 2008; Slee 2009). By understanding disability within a social constructivist lens, teachers who operate from a DSE identity no longer perceive disability as an individual problem intrinsic to the child but as an attitudinal or structural barrier that has been constructed by the society (Mutua and Smith 2008; Routel 2012). Thus, within schools, exclusion of individual or groups of particular students based on disability speaks to the socially constructed nature of belonging (Grenier 2010). Exclusion, therefore, becomes unjustifiable and synonymous with the maintenance of systems that oppress, while inclusion becomes an ideological commitment and an implementation of best practices (Ferguson and Nusbaum 2012). Teacher education programmes grounded within a DSE frame inclusion as essential to DSE’s continuing mission towards social justice and equity (Ashby 2012; Oyler 2011; Routel 2012).

Within DSE, inclusion is not a place or a service, but a philosophy, in which the practice of teaching demands innovative thinking to unpack and disrupt culturally normative practices, to support all students’ meaningful access to, and belonging within schools and communities (Ashby 2012; Oyler 2011). This goes beyond the notion of inclusion as simply providing access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities but towards classroom and school spaces ‘where equity pedagogy is the norm, where human differences are expected, and where the curriculum assumes diversity and pluralism as starting points’ for all students, not just students with disabilities’ (Oyler 2011 202). Through a DSE lens, inclusion becomes more than just finding ways for a student to fit into prescribed notions of what schooling is (Young and Mintz 2008). It moves toward an understanding of difference as part of natural, human variation and positions teachers to infuse an interdisciplinary understanding of disability and difference into their practice. Since teacher identity is so intimately connected with teaching practice, for teachers who have internalised DSE, they may actively find ways to resist and subvert systems of schooling in order to maintain a positive sense of themselves and their identity (Achinstein and Ogawa 2006; Bushnell 2003).

Since DSE offers an alternative framework to special education, individuals who commit to these types of pedagogical beliefs often butt up against current schooling contexts rooted in reductionist, deficit-based perspectives on disability and performance (Broderick et al. 2012; Broderick, Kim Reid, and Valle 2008). Within the ever-increasing systemisation of schooling through accountability and standardisation, teachers are being asked to adapt to and adopt pedagogical stances that diminish not only their autonomy but also their opportunities to practise and assert their teaching identity (Connell 2009; Smyth 2001). For teachers who believe in DSE, the accountability and reform movement has led to a plethora of consequences (intentional or not) that challenge the central commitments of their identities, including the increased segregation and isolation of individuals with disabilities within public education (Bejoian and Reid 2005; Curcic et al. 2011). This reality, that the majority of school systems do not align with DSE, compounded by narrow performance indicators and standards, often further position individuals who practise and espouse a DSE identity in opposition to their schools and districts. Positioning practice counter to dominant systems of control, and manipulating these practices toward particular pedagogical locations and belief systems, can be challenging. For teachers, advocating for students and promoting change ‘requires taking tremendous risks, including the charge of being “out-of-compliance” with school regulations and
decisions’ (Levin 1998, 164). Thus, in many instances, operating from a DSE framework within schools is in itself a resistant activity; individuals who take up a DSE identity make a clear commitment to talking back to and reframing special education and disability. For example, individuals who practise DSE, may choose to centre and/or infuse disability, difference, and diversity into the curriculum (Montaño and Burstein 2006; Peters, Klein, and Shadwick 1998; Rice 2008), perform advocacy on behalf of students and families (Bushnell 2003; Kasa-Hendrickson 2000), and speak out, against, and reframe discursive practices (Broderick et al. 2012; Musanti and Pence 2010; Peters and Reid 2008). Nonetheless, although these types of resistances by individual teachers are starting points, they are often not sufficient to sustain individuals or their resistance efforts within the already constrained systems (Achinstein and Ogawa 2006; Bushnell 2003; Montaño and Burstein 2006).

Methods and data sources

Context of the study and research questions

This study was part of a larger investigation that explored the experiences and perspectives of public school teachers who espouse a DSE teaching identity. The overarching study explored the resistant, and often, transgressive work that participants used to enact their DSE and social justice-oriented identities in schools within the current contexts of reform. For the purposes of this manuscript, we explored the following two questions: (1) How do teachers understand their DSE identities within school cultures driven by standards and accountability pressures? (2) What mechanisms of support do teachers describe and utilise to sustain themselves within today’s public schools?

Participant selection and criteria

As this project focuses on teachers who identify with a DSE and social justice orientation, participants were selected utilising both purposeful sampling, where participants are intentionally chosen because of the specificity inherent to research questions underlying the study, and snowball sampling, where individuals already part of the study recommend additional relevant individuals (Bogdan and Biklen 2007; Flick 2007). First, individuals were considered who attended institutions of higher education who met the criteria outlined for academic programmes in disability studies by the Center for Human Policy at Syracuse University (Center on Human Policy, 2014). In addition, we considered participants who graduated from a university or college whose teacher education programme was specifically grounded within a disability studies pedagogical orientation and/or whose purposes include a critical analysis of and engagement with current special education programming through a critical disability studies lens. Specifically, we considered programmes where (1) socio-cultural foundations of education and disability embedded directly within coursework and accessible through online course descriptions and/or programme overview; (2) at least two dedicated disability studies faculty; (3) stated disability studies centre or programme; (4) specified as inclusive teacher education training/programming and/or leads to dual certification; and/or (5) employed a social justice perspective that positions educators as agents of change. The information outlined above had to be
readily available and situated within programme overview and objectives or be embedded directly within coursework. In addition, the selected individuals also (1) held a current teaching licensure, (2) were employed and taught within the last year in a public school, and (3) self-identified with DSE tenets. Through this process, we identified 11 final participants (participant information in Table 1).

**Data collection**

In order to understand the meanings that participants conferred to their identities, we utilised repeated in-depth phenomenological interviews (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009). Like most phenomenological inquiries, interviews were semi-structured, which allowed ‘considerable latitude to pursue a range of topics and offer the subject a chance to shape the content of the interview’ (Bogdan and Biklen 2007, 104). We interviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Current position</th>
<th>Total years teaching</th>
<th>DSE courses taken</th>
<th>Self-identified identities</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Erika</td>
<td>Self-contained Preschool (Suburban)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>PhD Disability Studies</td>
<td>White/Female</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molly</td>
<td>Self-contained Elementary (Rural)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>White/Female</td>
<td>Graduate Assistant – Center on Disability Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>Inclusive Co-taught Elementary (Rural)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>White/Female</td>
<td>Graduate Assistant – Center on Disability Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ava</td>
<td>Inclusive Co-teacher &amp; Self-contained Secondary (Urban)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Latino/White/Female/History of Anxiety/Depression</td>
<td>Own K-12 experiences inclusive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyra</td>
<td>Self-contained Elementary (Urban)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>White/Female</td>
<td>Brother identified with Autism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>Resource room Elementary (Suburban)</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>PhD Disability Studies</td>
<td>White/Female</td>
<td>Inclusive experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norman</td>
<td>School Administrator Secondary (previously self-contained teacher) (Suburban)</td>
<td>11 years teaching 3.5 months administrator</td>
<td>PhD Disability Studies</td>
<td>White/Male</td>
<td>Adjunct instructor local college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amelia</td>
<td>General Educator Secondary (Suburban)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>White/Female/Physical Disability</td>
<td>Co-founded a disability committee and advocacy group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>School Administrator Elementary (previously inclusive co-teacher) (Suburban)</td>
<td>7 years teaching 1.5 years administrator</td>
<td>PhD Disability Studies</td>
<td>White/Female</td>
<td>Adjunct instructor local college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>General Educator Secondary (Suburban)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>DSE-focused dissertation</td>
<td>White/Male/Auditory Processing Disability and ADHD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yvonne</td>
<td>Co-teacher Elementary</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>DSE-focused dissertation</td>
<td>Bi-racial/Black/Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
each participant two times during the course of the research, each interview lasting between one and two hours. Areas of focus included participants’ perspectives and experiences of their role as teachers; how they came to know and understand DSE; how they translate their DSE identity within their classroom, school sites, and in the community; and the ways they negotiate their identities with the increased focus on standardisation and accountability. After conducting the first interview, the first author transcribed and conducted an initial analysis of data. Then both authors met to review initial codes and develop further lines of inquiry. Subsequent interview questions were developed inductively from this initial analysis of interviewees’ responses. For example, within the majority of first interviews, we noticed that many participants discussed the increased difficulties that they had enacting their commitments to DSE and social justice within their classroom because of the increased demands of standardisation and accountability. In order to more fully understand what they perceived as difficult, we developed more specific questions about when, how, and with whom these difficulties manifested, as well as how they worked around these perceived instances of infidelity.

During the second round of interviews, we focused on the particular ways that participants understood disability studies in relation to their experience as teachers. These interviews led us to understand participants’ experiences within school that led many to describe the impact that current schooling contexts had on their ability to maintain fidelity to their underlying beliefs and to ask more in-depth and follow-up questions remaining from the first interview.

**Data analysis**

We conducted ongoing analysis throughout data collection. Transcripts and supporting documents were uploaded onto Dedoose (Dedoose 2015), where they were interpreted after both rounds of data collection and, finally, after data collection was complete. Analysis followed the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis process (IPA). The IPA method provided a framework to analyse data inductively and across sources where we attempted to elicit the key experiential themes in the participant’s talk (Bogdan and Biklen 2007). Analysis took on four interconnected aspects: (1) movement from what is unique to a participant to what is shared among the participants, (2) description of the experience which moves to an interpretation of the experience, (3) commitment to understanding the participant’s point of view, and (4) psychological focus on personal meaning-making within a particular context (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009).

With this process in mind, we began by first listening to interviews. After listening, we then uploaded, read, and reread each participant’s transcript on Dedoose (Dedoose 2015). Analytically, we let the data from preliminary interviews and documents guide our frame of reference and help construct analysis. The process included associations and initial connections that we were making across transcripts (both within each case and across participants). We then reread each transcript and began to add more detailed descriptive, exploratory, and conceptual comments and questions to begin to unearth how each participant was experiencing her or his identity in her or his individual contexts. These notes or ‘free associations’ provided us with an opportunity to immerse ourselves ‘in the participant’s lifeworld and engage in deep data analysis’ (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009, 84). This included the language they utilised to confer that identity to other individuals and to
themselves. It also exposed the context or how that identity was experienced at that moment in time.

After completing second interviews, we reread preliminary notes and the textual data against each other in order to begin to make sense of and map the interrelationships, connections, and patterns within and between each of the interviews. After developing an overarching coding framework from the mind mapping process, we reread and reanalysed transcripts on Dedoose using the methods of abstraction (pulling out and identifying patterns), polarisation (focusing on where stories diverged), and numeration (frequency) to more fully and clearly understand the overall patterns and connections between participants’ experiences (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009, 98). Coding categories were single words or phrases that represented overall topics and patterns (Bogdan and Biklen 2007). Although these data were part of a larger study, for the purposes of this paper, we identified two key themes that represented participants’ desires to leave the field of education in response to the further limitations that accountability and standardisation had on their DSE identities. These are (a) lack of institutional support and (b) finding a new path for resistance.

Findings

Lack of institutional support for their identities

Support played a role in how participants traversed their individual schooling contexts. The internal struggle to remain true to themselves in systems that were not supportive of their underlying values and beliefs led many to reconsider the viability of their own tenancy as public school teachers. Many participants discussed leaving the field in light of the ongoing demands of education that restrained their abilities to enact their pedagogical commitments to inclusion and DSE, rather than a fundamental deficit to be fixed. Generally, for our participants, this included increased pressure from colleagues and their district to teach strictly towards the test or using modules (ignoring Universal Design for Learning/differentiation) and providing services to students with disabilities in more restrictive placements. Experiences with their respective schools and districts left many doubting their capacity to make any real or sustained change; essentially, they expressed losing hope of maintaining fidelity to their identities. Although it was not a straight or perfect cadence, their perceptions of support led the majority of participants to question their longevity and retention within the system as socially just DSE educators. The system, and individuals working to maintain it (intentionally or not), led many participants to believe that they were better suited to work outside of it; 8 out of the 11 participants described desires to leave their job as teachers.

Participants attributed many of these feelings to the lack of professional support they were experiencing. For example, lack of support from administrators left participants feeling that their identities were insignificant and/or not contributing to overall systems of schooling. Molly described her administrator’s lack of responsiveness or acknowledgement of her inclusive belief system:

… my new administrator this year, I went to him about a month after school started and said, ‘I’ve been having a lot of frustration. I think that my frustrations are coming from the fact that I don’t feel like what I’m doing is true to what I feel like these kids should or
could be doing. I am not sure how to get them out in the classroom more. I don’t know how to make that happen, and I don’t know how to bridge that gap.’ He was very understanding and he listened well, but again, he doesn’t have any background in special education. He said, ‘you know as much as we can, we get them out there … You know they participate in lunch, recess, specials, and maybe if I can get them up there for science lessons sometimes. Other than that, they’re your kids, you take care of them. You’re a classroom teacher, you’re not a support service.’ It’s a different mindset, I think special education should be a support rather than a place.

Like other participants, Molly perceived the role of administrator support as vital to her continuing DSE identity work. However, she received very little support from her administrator towards inclusion, a central aspect of her identity. Molly had previously worked at a school with an administration that was supportive of her inclusive beliefs. But within her current school, she felt that her own professional goals and values were being pushed aside as inconsequential. This left Molly feeling like she had no viable solutions to professionally move forward.

On a personal level … I just don’t know how much longer I can do this job especially in the school that I’m in. If I had stayed in the school that I was part of before, I could have probably done it for a long time but where I’m at now I just know. I’m not doing what I’m supposed to be doing … you try and you get a little way but then you take three steps back …

Similarly, Angela had begun to lose hope in her ability to assert her own agency and resist within the system, including her efforts to make her school more aligned with her identity. She had recently been transferred to another school within her district (a common practice) after developing a presentation and plan for making the school more inclusive to district administrators. She had begun to consider leaving:

I’ll be honest with you. I always used to say that I’d never quit teaching as a public school educator. But I was so devastated when we were all set to go to this … I mean our school was going to be an inclusion school at my district and when that got shot down. I came home and I told my husband I think I’m getting old enough (after over thirty years), I don’t think I have the fight left in me anymore.

But I hope by teaching at the university level I’ll be able to inspire younger teachers going in because it’s been such a fight, fight, fight, fight all thirty years of my teaching career.

Faced with limited opportunities to enact their identities in meaningful ways, participants began to lose a sense of themselves. Even though Angela saw hope somewhere else (teaching at the university level), she felt little space for her identity as a public school teacher.

For novice teachers, the shift from students in teacher education programmes to full-time teachers was even more challenging to their continued identity maintenance. The multiple realities of teaching (lesson planning, communicating with parents, and setting up a classroom) can be overwhelming to any new, particularly first-year, teachers (Watson 2006). Even more, recognising and negotiating how underlying belief systems correspond with schools’ and districts’ norms can be jarring and discordant (Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop 2004). The disjuncture between university praxis and school praxis, especially for individuals who have been taught that the system of public and special education is flawed, made these experiences more difficult. Lyra recalled an incident when she discussed this fact with her administrator: ”Last year I was really burnt
out and crying every day. I wanted to leave teaching. I told my principal that I hated my job. I said, ‘I don’t know if I can say this to you but I hate my job.’ And she said, ‘I would too, you have really hard kids.’” Lyra’s principal’s response was neither helpful nor valuable to Lyra’s continuing work as a public school teacher. It offered little support in alleviating her feelings of frustration and isolation. Further, her administrator positioned the ‘problem’ located within Lyra’s students, as opposed to the systems, structures, and culture of the school and classroom (Mutua and Smith 2008; Routel 2013). Her administrator ignored notions central to Lyra’s beliefs on the socially constructed nature of disability. If you fundamentally believe in the social model, you can only exist within schools by recognising and addressing the underlying oppressions that marginalise individuals within your practices as a teacher. However, her administrator offered no vision beyond ‘... you have really hard kids.’ The accumulation of these experiences, coupled with the desire to disrupt and transform these systems, made the experiences for participants who were within their first few years of teaching even more jostling. They felt overwhelmed by the multiple and complicated demands that were placed on them and were disheartened by what they had come to understand as the status quo of schooling.

Feelings of seclusion exacerbated participants’ understanding of their place in their particular school systems and in schooling more broadly. Individuals who felt as though they were going at it alone, were alienated within their current role, and/or had limited, infrequent/irregular modes of social support were more apt to express desires to leave.

All of the teachers in the study discussed their desires to make a difference in their students’ lives, but the system itself made it difficult, especially with the heightened pressure that has become a hallmark of today’s schools. Eric who was in his fifteenth-year teaching and had come to know DSE only recently discussed his frustrations about his role in sustaining the system, which became further delineated after he had come to identify as DSE:

[Eric]: If anything, I think that disability studies has made me think more about my place within the system. And I guess the tension that I feel is that one mindset is to just look at the changes you can make in the system. Another way of looking at it is to understand that my presence in the system is inclusively sustaining that system. There’s no way around the system … It’s starting to boil. The older I get, the harder it’s becoming to do that covert work I guess … I think it’s the idea of being silent. That’s what is becoming harder for me. For me, right now, I will always be a teacher in some capacity. I will always be in the field of education, but I don’t know if I can be silent on things anymore. It might be time to pass the baton to someone else to do the work within.

As Eric highlighted, within his own teaching he was simultaneously attempting to disrupt the system while perpetuating the tensions to which he had become more keenly attuned. Although he stated that he could not remain silent about these tensions any more, he did not view speaking out against these tensions as a viable option. His work as a public school teacher became a non-option for his own identity maintenance. His recognition of his own limitations in and maintenance of the system made it difficult for him to remain within it. The continued and ongoing tensions that participants felt by taking up and enacting their belief systems made it difficult to remain a ‘cog’ in the system. These experiences of identity restriction were magnified by participants’ feelings of the impositions that the reform movement had placed on their individual schooling contexts.

Amelia mentioned numerous times that the increased emphasis on standardisation and testing stifled opportunities to teach toward her identity within her classroom:
Part of what sent me over the edge that year was that I had just started teaching a tenth-grade class and I felt the pressure with them … I was passing these students on to these other teachers and they’re going to want them to have read particular texts to prepare for the regents [exam] … I tried to kind of do it in my own way, but the reality was I had a real hard time integrating my beliefs and my pedagogy with what I believed were the required texts. I think this is under fire right now and I think our pedagogy, my pedagogy, I’ll speak for myself, is under attack. It’s hard not to take that in because it’s your core.

Amelia admitted that the increased focus on accountability led to a questioning of her own fidelity to the foundation of her professional identity. If she did not prepare the students in tenth grade using the ‘required texts’, her own or other educators’ performance might be called into question. In essence, in order to ensure adequate preparation and readiness for the exam, Amelia felt as though she had to abandon many elements that were central to her teaching. The pressures associated with preparing for the test positioned many educators with less time and/or opportunity to teach toward their identities. Furthermore, the lack of support in response to accountability and standardisation left participants increasingly frustrated. Amelia placed much of this blame on her administration’s blatant ignoring of stressors associated with these demands. She stated,

[Amelia]: I don’t know where to go anymore. I don’t know what to do with my life. Everybody is kind of in that space. Like what do we do? … It feels like there is a lack of solutions. It feels like nobody knows what to do … I sometimes think I would feel differently if the administration was actively outspoken and supportive of its teachers. But they aren’t.

Author 1: They aren’t recognizing the issues?

[Amelia]: No, no … that doesn’t happen in my building. [If they would] just be transparent about it and try to openly talk about our values and what we think makes a great education, while still checking those boxes. Really talking about how we can support each other in this insane time. If there was any kind of that going on I think it would feel quite different.

Administrators, like Amelia’s, who did not exhibit any shred of camaraderie with their school staff around the heightened, and sometimes unattainable, demands of reform facing public educators, but instead fed into or acted as cheerleaders for these reforms, obstructed participants’ fidelity to these school systems. Amelia felt that even just recognition of these feelings as legitimate might have helped maintain her own commitments to her work as a public school teacher. But her administrator’s own uncritical alignment with state initiatives and their continuing non-recognition of stressors that had been placed on teachers made it difficult for educators like Amelia to feel validated in their beliefs and values about teaching. Feelings of misalignment with their districts’ missions for efficiency, performance, and normalisation were particularly evident for Amelia, who felt as though her work with students had been made to seem less valuable and meaningful to her through the demands and priorities of reform:

[Amelia]: It takes a real toll. I mean it is one thing to do that when you’re 20 or 22. But it’s another thing to do that when you have kids and a family of your own. You know? Or like me, where I made the choice of doing that and it literally made me disabled. It’s becomes this choice. Justice for me has always been a really major trigger. It is a huge part of my identity. I was somebody who was an advocate and an activist. But, I’ve just kind of had to realise this hard thing, which is that I can’t be that any more …

Amelia came back to how she had attempted to protect herself later in the interview:
You know I feel like to survive you almost have to turn it into a job, as opposed to a career or a calling or a passion … But the thing is when you do that with teaching there’s a real cost on so many levels. I mean it’s an identity cost in terms of who we are … there’s a financial cost in the sense that I would never have chosen teaching to be the job just to pay for things. Right?

Amelia felt increasingly frustrated and hopeless as the demands and conditions that had become inherent to reform left her unable to enact her own professional principles. She felt that a once salient aspect of her identity, seeking justice, was not a sustainable feature within her current school contexts. The space for sustained activism and advocacy seemed to be dwindling, and that upset her. Who could she be if she were not enacting her identity as teacher? To protect herself, she had attempted to position teaching as only a ‘job’, but continued to feel dissatisfied. As exemplified by Amelia’s experience, if ‘teachers [begin to] derive absolutely no satisfaction from their work, they may lose the ability to hear themselves and become, bitter, cynical, or indifferent’ to their underlying belief systems and purpose (Estola, Erkkilä, and Syrjälä 2003, 252).

Furthermore, the environment that had been constructed at her school as a result of the reform movement had exacerbated and manifested in heightened physical pain associated with her disability label. She stated that trying to work within the schooling environment had literally ‘made me disabled’. Throughout her career, Amelia had always identified as an individual with a disability and had been recognised as an asset as a public school teacher to the State of New York (she was named Teacher of the Year the year prior). Nevertheless, the increased, unwavering, and sometimes unattainable demands of the roll out and implementation of the reform movement had constructed a new schooling environment that was based on competition and performance, rendering it nearly impossible for her to exist within it. It had even triggered a substantially intense re-emergence of her chronic illness that placed her on medical leave. The reform culture created within her school disabled her. The continued and increasing loss of personal autonomy and choice that had developed as a result of the reform movement, partnered with a lack of authentic support, made it difficult for participants, like Amelia, to realise a sustained space for their multiple identities within today’s public schools.

Teaching continues to be emotional work. To the participants, the lack of colleagues and individuals who were personally driven to work toward change made it even more difficult for participants to perceive a space that focused on student success as central to the purposes of the school. When faced with limited opportunities to enact their identities in meaningful ways that moved their schools forward in some manner, no matter the reason, participants began to lose a sense of their own purpose within the larger systems.

Finding a new path for resistance and identity work

The struggle to maintain a sense of self led the majority of participants to look outside of their roles as public school classroom teachers to meet their own professional goals. Educators had aspirations to, and beliefs in, widening the scope of transformation that they could be part of in order to stay true to their DSE identities. Although participants were motivated to leave the field because of the daily frustrations and setbacks that they faced, they positioned leaving the classroom as a viable option to enact change on a wider scale. Participants in the study believed that by leaving the classroom they would be better able to introduce others to their belief systems and bring about school-
district-level policies and practices that were better aligned. They forecasted that their own work, outside of their role as teachers, would provide them with more relative power within the system. The majority of the individuals who had considered leaving classroom teaching and had not yet left discussed one of two career paths: they would either become teacher educators or teacher leaders.

Many of those who had plans to leave the classroom and pursue faculty positions at a college or university had already finished, or were in the process of finishing, their PhDs. Like Angela described earlier, they felt their roles as teacher educators would help to facilitate wider networks of DSE within surrounding schools and districts. Essentially, participants wanted to flood their communities with more like-minded rookie educators who could support each other in continuing social justice and DSE-oriented work within schools. At the same time, individuals also believed they could have a more substantive role within their districts once they had credibility afforded by the letters ‘PhD’. Many thought they could offer consulting services to schools, districts, and families to attempt to provide services in a more inclusive manner that recognised a DSE perspective.

Those who wanted to remain at the school or district level believed that the most efficient and effective way for them to make more widespread change was to take on a teacher leader or administrative role within their district. Essentially, they desired to provide and bolster practicing teachers’ toolkits through ongoing in-class support and consultation. Participants’ aspirations to persist in some manner in this work, even outside of the classroom, pointed to their belief that their work as individuals could support larger changes in schools, districts, and systems. For all participants, some hope in altering the system (in some way) remained. Through these imagined possibilities, participants attempted to make aspects of their identity feasible through the malleability of their role within it. To them, they could make a difference; just not in their current role. Expanding opportunities for change were viable in roles that held more comparative power. Although a majority of the participants discussed their plans for leaving the classroom permanently to pursue what they believed would result in a potential widening of their scope of influence, and essentially of DSE as a field, there were a few participants who believed that they would remain in the classroom for some time.

Even with the increased pressures that had stalled many of their attempts to meaningfully enact their belief systems within their classrooms and schools, a limited number of participants remained hopeful for their own sustenance and retention within the field of teaching for some time. For those participants, their own enthusiasm for teaching remained centred on their continuing desire to help and support their students.

Author 1: Do you see yourself staying in this career for some time?

[Ava]: Yes. I just hope I don’t lose that drive or spark … I think it’s going to be easier now that I’m back in the place that I wanted to be in … Leaving was never about the kids at my old district, I loved my kids. But everything else was kind of bogging me down and making me drag my feet. But now I feel great at my new school, people are willing to change, listen, and are open …

For participants like Ava who planned to stay, classroom teaching remained a viable option because they could continue to envision the changes that their resistance would have on the lives of their students. By focusing on their students and the tangible changes they could make in their individual lives and contexts, they felt empowered to
continue to work within systems that were not aligned with their underlying belief systems because they saw the difference they were making within it.

**Discussion**

The recurrent conversation between us and the majority of participants about leaving the profession left us feeling increasingly disheartened. Here were people who were both resisting and developing alternative frameworks to the structures and mechanisms of schooling, stating again and again that they were unable to persist. Some participants discussed this in relation to feeling they were ‘abandoning’ their ideological commitments in order to meet the constraints of accountability. The space to enact their identities felt even more limited. Teaching itself is emotional work. Even in situations where the school or district supports your identity and is actively working towards meaningful change is difficult. For teachers who resist and take up alternative commitments as part of their professional identity, like DSE, it can be even more jarring. Many of the central aspects of DSE are in direct opposition to their daily work as public school teachers. Mechanisms of special and public education often depend on deficit discourses that are part of the dominant medical model of disability. Participants experienced these challenges daily; it left them feeling increasingly alienated by their individual school contexts and the system as a whole. Further in the face of reform, their perceptions of the expanded limitations to and consequences of enacting their identities led many to question their own location and maintenance of the system(s).

The majority of the participants discussed how the initiatives of state and national educational reform movements further constrained their ability to do what they believed was best for their students, therefore making it even more difficult to stay true to their underlying pedagogical values. Part of the challenge of the reform movement to DSE identities was the increased segregation of students. For the majority of our participants, inclusion was central to practising their DSE identity. Nevertheless, blurring practising DSE as simply engaging in inclusion ignores the complexity of DSE. This aligns with a finding from Broderick et al.’s (2012) study, in which she, along with seven elementary classroom teachers whom had recently graduated from a teacher education programme grounded in DSE, met monthly for a year to engage in a collaborative inquiry circle. As one teacher engaged in the study observed ‘the focus on instructional practice and technique often neatly obscures larger, more significant questions about the nature of curriculum and the cultural practices of schooling’ (Broderick et al. 2012, 838). When we frame the issue solely around questions of inclusion, we can fail to reconsider the larger systems of marginalisation and suppression that operate in schools. Nonetheless, the more pronounced challenges that participants faced in enacting their identity, and which contributed to their desire to leave their role as teachers, could be assigned as challenges to practising inclusion within the accountability and standardisation movement.

In order to support socially just and DSE educators staying in the field for some time, teacher education must find ways to support and encourage teachers’ continuing resistance in more authentic and meaningful ways that provide them space to consistently uphold their underlying belief systems and commitments. One aspect of that work is having teacher education spend time preparing teachers to understand that fact going into their careers; they will face resistance from other educators with whom they come
into contact (Ashby 2010). In-service and pre-service teachers need to know and understand that their DSE and social justice-centred philosophy is not the norm and does not always operate as part of schools, and they must also be ready to defend those commitments, while still maintaining themselves. As institutions of teacher education, we must continue to develop strategies that empower and sustain educators who choose to speak up and resist dominant discourses of schooling. This should include the development of consistent, dynamic, and formal teacher social support networks and resources that assist pre-service, novice, and veteran teachers in their ongoing subversive and transformative work (Coldron and Smith 1999; Ritchie 2012).

The majority of participants described their identities and place within public schooling as increasingly hopeless, frustrating, and isolating. For our participants, choosing to actively resist the dominant discourses of school led them to feel increasingly isolated in their work. Their individual levels of resistance at their individual schools and respective districts was extremely unsettling to them, reconfirming Achinstein and Ogawa’s (2006) assertion that ‘individual resistance is not enough to sustain the resistance or the individual’ (p. 58). Teachers in K-12 need more substantive support to sustain themselves within today’s current schooling contexts. If teachers who believe in DSE are abandoning their respective teaching posts, what long-term impact can DSE have to unseat and challenge the oppressive systems of special education and public education? Eight of our 11 participants had plans to leave the field of teaching because they could no longer envision their place within it. As a field, DSE needs to both find and develop tools that support teachers’ underlying belief systems and the ability to stay in the field for some time. Thus, teachers who take up these stances need more opportunities and access to both formal and informal networks of support in order to collaborate with one another (Ritchie 2012). By developing critically conscious communities of practice, socially just teachers can be provided with some semblance of emotional support, as well as a space to re-energise their practice by sharing contextualised resistance and teaching ideas (Montaño and Burstein 2006; Ritchie 2012). Furthermore, these support networks provide teachers a sense of belonging that might sustain their identity work and persistence within the field. Too often, teachers are left to develop these networks and resources themselves; as teacher education institutions, we should both identify and construct critical communities of practice and make them readily available to our students and other like-minded professionals (Ritchie 2012). Teacher education needs to ‘develop strategies and interventions to support quality teachers and look(s) to extended professional communities to sustain alternative visions in the face of the status quo’ (Achinstein and Ogawa 2006, 60).

**Concluding thoughts**

Challenging and positioning oneself in opposition to many notions of public schooling and special education continues to be very difficult within today’s schooling contexts. Although participants did find some success and were able to maintain some allegiance to DSE in their work as public school teachers, the simultaneous and seemingly ceaselessly present in public and special education made participants’ enacting of their DSE identities even more complex and complicated, leaving the majority with a desire to leave the classroom. However, we offer the field both hope and a call for action within the field of DSE. In learning from and about the work of teachers
who identify as DSE, we can not only recognise much of the subversions to the system that our teacher education graduates are engaging within but we can also look to the areas in which we can improve. As a field, we must continue to take seriously and scrutinise how we are supporting and empowering teachers once they enter their respective schools and classrooms. We must examine how programmes grounded in DSE can further expand and meet many of the needs that individuals attempting to practise DSE still experience. We must increase the focus and help fill many of the gaps that still exist in understanding and envisioning what practising and sustaining socially just teaching identities, like DSE, can look like in today’s schools. This includes designing, implementing, and recording salient practices that align with and support DSE commitments, examining how we are teaching pre-service teachers about DSE in relation to their future role as public school teachers, and specific action-based research projects to support practicing teachers’ identity maintenance. By examining public school teachers’ experiences who identify as DSE, we can both leverage opportunities to create sustainable critical communities of practice, as well as find ways to improve our own practices as teacher educators and institutions in order to better support their continued labour and retention in schools.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Carrie E. Rood is an Assistant Professor in the Foundations and Social Advocacy Department at SUNY Cortland.

Christine Ashby, PhD, is an Associate Professor in the Teaching and Leadership Department of the School of Education at Syracuse University and Director of the Institute on Communication and Inclusion.

References


