Realizing the Equity-Minded Aspirations of Detracking and Inclusion: Toward a Capacity-Oriented Framework for Teacher Education

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ABSTRACT

Inclusion and detracking policies seek to remedy the pervasive inequality of educational opportunities in U.S. schools by building classrooms that are integrated across the lines of race/ethnicity, class, and disability and that offer all students access to a rich and challenging curriculum. In practice, however, teachers often struggle with the implementation of these reforms. Drawing on ethnographic research in detracked and inclusion classrooms, this article analyzes the nature and sources of the tensions and dilemmas felt by teachers working in intentionally heterogeneous settings. It argues that the implementation of these policies is not often accompanied by a serious interrogation of the taken-for-granted understandings of ability, standards, and structural inequality that pervade educational discourse inside schools. This failure to challenge dominant discourse about these three issues is at the root of the tensions and dilemmas felt by teachers working in detracked and inclusion classrooms. Drawing on lessons learned from research, the authors propose a capacity-oriented framework for teacher education that might better prepare teachers working in intentionally heterogeneous classrooms to meet the equity-minded goals of these reforms.

“But then when you really think about it, that’s not how life is. Like, your life is stratification. That’s the way that our society exists. To say that we’re all the same—I mean I guess we’re not saying that by putting everybody in the same classroom. We’re not saying we’re all the same. I don’t know. With this differentiation, I’ve been like so like I can’t figure it out. I’m like I don’t really know what I think. Um, but I know I feel frustrated sometimes.”

—High school social studies teacher with a detracked, inclusion class

Inclusion and detracking are equity-minded policies that share a similar rationale. Both policies rest on the notion that sorting students on the basis
of “ability” creates inequitable access to education and that diverse communities offer more opportunities for equity. As ethnographic researchers investigating teaching and learning in both inclusion and detracked classrooms in U.S. schools, we have found that although most teachers support the inclusive and equity-minded goals of these policies, like the teacher cited above, they struggle with seemingly intractable tensions and dilemmas as they work to implement these reforms.

In this article, we outline the contours of these tensions, articulated by in-service teachers across a variety of inclusion and detracked settings. We suggest that although the equity moves of inclusion and detracking challenge and attempt to remedy the uneven distribution of educational opportunity in U.S. schools, in practice, they are not often accompanied by a serious interrogation of embedded hegemonic notions about three key issues: ability, standards, and structural inequality. We argue that the failure to develop nuanced and critical perspectives on these issues is at the root of the ambiguities faced by teachers practicing in intentionally heterogeneous settings, and can undermine the goals of these reforms, at times leading teachers to desire a return to more segregated forms of school organization. Our research conclusions inform our thinking as teacher educators and have led us to ask how to educate pre-service teachers for these intentionally heterogeneous settings. In this article, we outline what we call a capacity-oriented framework for teacher education that would offer teachers critical tools to better prepare them to teach in these contexts. Our aim is to initiate conversation among those involved in the education of both pre- and in-service teachers on how to best prepare teachers to tackle the complexities of teaching in intentionally heterogeneous classrooms.

We begin by briefly reviewing the rationales for detracking and inclusion, examining the shared logic between these two equity-gated reforms and describing what teachers are being asked to do in classrooms in which these policies are being implemented. We then draw on our analysis of common themes we found across a variety of detracked and inclusion settings in which we have conducted research to illustrate key tensions teachers expressed in these situations. These tensions are related to the three areas we argue need to be more fully theorized for practitioners. Finally, we outline a framework that we suggest would better prepare educators to teach in intentionally heterogeneous settings.

I. INCLUSION AND DETRACKING: SHARED LOGIC AND EXPECTATIONS

In the United States, both inclusion and detracking policies share a historical trajectory with the broad ideals of the Civil Rights Movement—with its proposal that truly integrated schools and societies offer the best vision for democracies. These policies have also taken note of the disproportionate
representation of students of color and low-income students in both special education and low-track classes and, in response, seek to remedy the structural inequalities that surround race, class, and disability.

The rationale for inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms draws directly upon the logic and language of the Civil Rights Movement: segregating children with disabilities in special classrooms results in both unequal educational opportunities, and is inherently discriminatory because it communicates that children with disabilities are fundamentally different from children who are not so labeled. Beginning in the late 1980s and continuing to the present day, advocates for children with disabilities began to push for their full inclusion into mainstream classrooms, and schools and school districts across the nation began adopting full inclusion policies. Advocates supported inclusion policies for both ethical and educational reasons. There was growing evidence that children with disabilities who were placed in special classrooms consistently failed to make significant academic gains (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987). Supporters believed that access to the kinds of curricular and pedagogical opportunities found in mainstream classrooms would improve academic gains. The right of students with disabilities to access education of equal quality to their peers without a disability label was violated by such placements. Moreover, advocates of inclusion policies argued that segregating children with disabilities in special classrooms contradicted democratic ideals of living and learning in diverse communities and was failing to meet with the promises of federal policy to educate students in the “least restricted environments” (Biklen, 1992; Kluth, Straut, & Biklen, 2003; Lipsky & Gartner, 1996, 1997, 1999; Rizvi & Lingard, 1996; Skrtic, 1991). This violation of democratic ideals is exacerbated by a growing concern with the disproportionate representation of children of color and children living in poverty among those identified with disabilities (Artiles, 2003; Artiles, Klinger, & Tate, 2006; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Losen & Orfield, 2002). Thus, inclusion policies are premised on two critical beliefs: that all children have a right to an equitable education, and that in a democratic society, there is value in working together in diverse settings.

Detracking, a response to school tracking, follows a similar rationale. Tracking, the sorting and grouping of students for instruction by perceived ability, is a long-standing organizational practice in U.S. schools. Proponents of tracking argue that ability-driven tracks make it easier for teachers to target instruction appropriately for varying student needs (Hallinan, 1994). Many researchers have argued that the practice of tracking is inherently unfair and that it plays a crucial role in the creation of inequalities within our society (see, for example, Goodlad & Oakes, 1988; Mehan, 1992; Mehan, Hubbard, & Villanueva, 1994; Oakes, 1985, 1992; Slavin, 1991, 1995). These researchers argue that tracking serves as a back door device for sorting students by race and class. Moreover, these researchers claim that students in different tracks do not receive the same quality of
These critics hold that curriculum, teaching, and social interactions in the classroom are all affected by tracking, to the detriment of students in the lower tracks. The consequence is a system that is demoralizing and demotivating for the children, usually poor and of color, who end up in the lowest tracks (Murphy & Hallinger, 1989; Oakes, Gamoran, & Page, 1992). Indeed, as is the case for special education classes, the correspondence between school tracking and structural inequalities found in the larger society has been well documented (Mickelson, 2005; Oakes, 1992; Welner & Oakes, 1996). In the late 1980s and 1990s opposition to tracking moved beyond the academic community and, in some places, became policy.

Detracking is the dismantling of ability-driven tracks and the placement of students into classes that are intentionally heterogeneous in terms of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, perceived ability, and previous achievement. Although there is considerable variation in how detracking has been carried out, the reform generally entails grouping students heterogeneously as a means of ensuring that all students have access to high-quality curriculum, teachers, and material resources. Fine, Weis, and Powell (1997) argue that such integrated spaces can become “communities of difference,” multiracial communities that are “rich in racially and ethnically diverse connections and difference” and hold the possibility of “racial democracy, social challenge and intellectual stretch from which public education has long walked away” (p. 279).

Inclusion and detracking are based on similar rationales (that separating students by their perceived differences is unfair and inequitable) and share similar hopes (that creating more heterogeneous learning environments will benefit all students).

II. TEACHING IN INCLUSION AND DETRACKED SETTINGS: DECONSTRUCTING DILEMMAS OF PRACTICE

As researchers with a commitment to advancing educational opportunity for students who have traditionally been disenfranchised in U.S. schools, we are, on a personal level, hopeful about the possibilities of detracking and inclusion. Neither of us can ignore, however, sentiments expressed by the educators at our research sites that provide a less optimistic view of detracking and inclusion as equity measures. In our two different research projects, one examining detracking in three public high schools (Rubin, 2007, 2008) and the other exploring full inclusion in a middle school that had simultaneously implemented heterogeneous classroom groupings (Abu El-Haj, 2006), we found that although most teachers were supportive of inclusion and detracking in theory, they struggled with the implementation of these policies.

Rubin’s research focused on the enactment of detracking in the ninth-grade social studies classrooms of three distinct public high schools. One
school was located in an affluent, largely White community, with a student body that was 88% White, 5% Asian American, 4% African American, and 2% Latino, with less than 2% of the students eligible for free/reduced lunch and 16% of the students holding individualized education plans (IEPs). The second school was located in a low-income, largely African American and Latino community, with a student body that was 61% Latino, 35% African American, 2% White, and 1% Asian American, with 70% of the students eligible for free/reduced lunch and 15% holding IEPs. The third school was located in a racially and socioeconomically diverse community, with a student body that was 47% African American, 43% White, 5% Latino, and 4% Asian American, with 17% of the students eligible for free/reduced lunch and 17% holding IEPs. All three schools had detracked their ninth-grade social studies course, with all ninth graders placed randomly into various sections of the same World History class. Rubin followed one of these classes at each school for an academic year, collecting observational data, interviewing students and teachers, and following students to classes. This study focused on understanding the enactment of detracking across a range of contexts.

Abu El-Haj conducted an 18-month ethnographic study in a small, public middle school located in a large U.S. city. This school was founded as part of the city’s desegregation program. The school district official statistics listed the student population in the following categories: 62.3% African American, 3.2% Asian American, 1.6% Hispanic, and 32.8% White. Almost seventy percent (68.3%) of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch. The school was a member of the Coalition of Essential Schools and teachers were actively involved in the process of school reform that included the adoption of a full inclusion policy. All classes in the school were heterogeneously organized and all included children labeled with disabilities. Abu El-Haj’s research investigated the beliefs and understandings about learning diversity that implicitly undergirded educators’ discourse and practices. For the first year of the study, Abu El-Haj conducted intensive fieldwork, spending 2 full days a week observing classes; interviewing students, teachers, and administrators; and attending team and faculty meetings and professional development workshops that were focused that year around the question of how to address learning diversity in the classroom. In the second year, she returned to share her ongoing data analysis with teachers and administrators discussing initial findings and reconsidering the data in light of their input. She also conducted further interviews to follow the trajectory of the reform efforts.

In each of our projects, we heard teachers express similar confusions and tensions about the practices of inclusion and detracking that often resulted in disillusionment with these policies. Therefore, we decided to look at educators’ discourses across our various research sites to analyze these tensions thematically. This secondary analysis built upon the original analysis of data, which, as in most interpretive research, was iterative and
ongoing. For our original analysis, we both employed a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), writing reflective memos throughout the data collection process and noting key issues that emerged during all stages of data collection. After data collection was completed, we read our data sets, utilizing the constant comparison method to delineate codes and categories of codes. Relationships among codes and categories led to the development of theoretical assertions. For this secondary analysis, we compared assertions and reviewed code categories and associated data that were related to the dilemmas articulated by the teachers in the two studies. This allowed for a focused analysis on this shared aspect of two research studies conducted in different locations, with students of varying ages and backgrounds.

What we found through this analysis were three areas where we believe the theory and practice of detracking and inclusion are underexamined for practitioners, contributing to the ambiguities, confusions, and dilemmas we heard teachers express. As they worked to implement the new policies, educators continued to draw primarily on certain implicit, shared understandings about ability, standards, and the impact of social inequality on schooling—understandings that reflect hegemonic ways of thinking that are deeply embedded in the everyday fabric of school discourses. Although detracking and inclusion policies pose fundamental challenges to these common ways of thinking, these critiques are often implicit and do not seem to be articulated in thorough and complex ways inside schools. We suggest that the equity moves of detracking and inclusion call for significant shifts in how we understand ability, standards, and the relationship between schooling and structural inequalities—shifts that must be both explicitly engaged and applicable to practice.

Deconstructing School Discourses About Student Ability

Inclusion and detracking intend to shake up the traditional ways that students are categorized and sorted inside classrooms and schools. Detracking challenges typical schools structures that rank and slot students into hierarchically organized ability groups. Of course, students in special education do not come to inclusion classrooms truly decategorized because they bring with them their diagnoses and IEPs; however, their presence in the inclusion classroom also implies that we might do best to rethink our assumptions about learning diversity. Implicitly premised on the notion that diversity is the norm in all learning communities, these policies posit a challenge to the dominant tendency of schools to separate and rank learners in relation to ability and diagnostic categories.

Despite the decategorization of students brought about by inclusion and detracking, teachers across our research sites still sought to sort and categorize students. Most of them held tenaciously to the idea that students
fell into three groups: low-, middle-, and high-ability learners. Detracking and inclusion threw traditional categorization systems into disarray, but the desire to categorize persisted, resulting in confusion. For example, many teachers in detracked classrooms expressed a belief that many of the students they referred to as “low ability” were really in need of testing and classification for special education purposes. These teachers often sought to categorize students who struggled, but who were not identified as special education students. A social studies teacher in a detracked, full inclusion middle school attempted to describe some of his students:

A lot of them should be in special ed. who aren’t labeled. At some point, I forget who is on the special ed. list and who is not. I’m looking at behaviors and at production, and I’m saying, “Isn’t he on the special ed. list? Well he should be.” But he hasn’t been tested, or his parents don’t want him to be. Sometimes it’s a guessing game.

This teacher’s sense that many struggling students really should be identified as students with disabilities demonstrates how for him, as for many of his colleagues, detracking had done little to shift dominant educational discourse that insists on categorizing learners.

If teachers in detracked settings wrestled with the relationship between children with disabilities and those they viewed as of “low ability,” many teachers in inclusion classrooms sought more diagnostic information and prescriptive direction for their students labeled with disabilities. A social studies teacher working in an inclusion classroom expressed her frustration as follows:

I was told [by the principal], “Well, really your lessons should be tailored to meet the needs of all the students no matter what level they are.” That’s a bunch of crap. You tell me what’s wrong with the student. You tell me what their needs are and I’ll do my best to address it.

Many teachers continued to view children labeled with disabilities as learners with specific “problems” and “deficits”—as having something wrong with them. As we will discuss in more detail below, this framing of disability—as a problem that resides in the brains and bodies of particular children—narrowed the potential of inclusion and detracking to truly expand opportunities for students and made it more difficult for teachers to figure out how to get the best from their students.

In addition to the tendency to reify ability levels and to cling to deficit-oriented views of disability, teachers also expressed frustration over how to teach the wide variability of skills, knowledge, and learning styles represented by the students in their inclusion and detracked settings. One middle school science teacher working in a detracked and inclusion setting had this to say:
I find that the range I have to teach sometimes feels overwhelming. There are occasions where I think I’m getting everybody. But it’s not that way most of the time. The group that’s hardest for me is the group that has low skills, and sometimes I feel like I’m beating my head against the walls. And, the other group is the group that are very bright, who, you know things do come very easily to, are very interested, value a challenge. Once in a while, I think I give something that gives them a good run for their money, but most of the time that’s not how I feel.

As expressed here, many teachers continued to see students in terms of the categories of “low, medium, and high,” and they struggled with tailoring their lessons away from the assumed mean, teaching instead to “the range.”

A social studies teacher in a suburban high school reflected on the difficulties of teaching students with different levels of preparation in her detracked class:

There’s nothing in our high school for kids who either come from out of district or who just gave up maybe in middle school and now they’re 3 years behind in skills. There’s no place for them. Unless they are classified, in which case there is a place for them.

This teacher, similar to many teachers working in detracked settings, pointed to the lack of resources for students who come ill-prepared to these new heterogeneous classrooms, but who, because they are not diagnosed with disabilities, receive no extra resources to support their learning. Teachers’ feelings that they do not have the resources to address the variable needs of their students certainly point to the challenges of teaching in these new heterogeneous contexts. However, once again, the fact that resources follow only students who are labeled with disabilities implicates the unresolved ambiguity in educational discourse about how to explain the difference between students who are identified as “truly” different by virtue of their disability, and those who simply continue to underachieve for no identifiable reason—an ambiguity that is instantiated in the institutional structures of our educational system.

We suggest that the confusion and frustration teachers felt as they tried to practice in these new intentionally heterogeneously grouped settings is related to contradictory ideas about ability (and the implied underlying intelligence) that permeate dominant educational discourses in schools and often remain unchallenged as these policies are implemented. On the one hand is the notion that, given access to equal opportunities, all students will attain at similar levels. Detracking and inclusion both implicate this belief that, in most cases, students’ variable performance reflects the kinds of educational access and opportunities they have been offered. The argument is that low-track classes and many self-contained special education classrooms provide students with uninteresting and unchallenging curriculum and pedagogy that limit their opportunities for learning in meaningful and rigorous ways. As a result, these students do not develop
the skills, knowledge, and attitudes toward learning that foster high levels of academic achievement. Moreover, critics of tracking and exclusionary special education placements, as noted earlier, argue that the differential learning opportunities that students receive are intimately bound up with racial and class inequalities; students of color and students from low-income families disproportionately populate these classrooms.

This line of thinking in the detracking and inclusion movements challenges common notions about ability (and the underlying intelligence it assumes) as a relatively fixed quality of each individual student. If the type of educational environment in which young people are educated significantly affects performance (by limiting or expanding it), then changing the contexts in which children are educated holds out the possibility of undermining the hierarchy of abilities that emerge in classrooms and schools. Ability is, in this view, malleable and shaped by what the learning context affords. There is an optimistic and democratic impulse that trusts that young people are, for the most part, similarly capable of learning and performing well.

At the same time, everyday discourse in schools often holds tenaciously to the idea that ability is to a large extent a relatively fixed quality of the individual student. Ability is thought to index an individual’s capacities and limitations that shape how and what s/he is capable of learning. Although there is debate inside schools about whether ability results from intrinsic qualities of the individual, environmental influences of children’s homes, or some combination of the two, schools are usually set up to see children through the lens of distinct categories of learners. As the comments of the teachers quoted in the previous section suggest, in everyday school vocabulary students are often divided into groups of “high,” “middle,” and “low” ability or are referenced in terms of distinct categories of “disabilities.”

Moreover, with its focus on categorizing individual learners, special education draws primarily on a medical framework to diagnose students’ particular disabilities. For the most part, disabilities are understood to signal differences located in the biological makeup of particular children, who then require various educational accommodations and treatments to remediate the academic consequences of these differences (see for discussions, Gartner & Lipsky, 1987; Mehan, Hertweck, & Meihls, 1986; Minow, 1990; Rizvi & Lingard, 1996; Slee, 1999; Varenne & McDermott, 1998). Moreover, in common school talk, children become their categories (Varenne & McDermott, 1998). They are “classified” as particular types of people (e.g., attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, etc.). This view of disability, as a difference that is located inside the bodies and brains of particular individuals has been resoundingly critiqued for failing to examine the relationship between what an individual brings to a situation and what the situation affords for learning and inclusion (see especially Minow, 1990; Varenne & McDermott, 1998). Disabilities are, from this perspective, constructed in the interactions between individuals and the
implicit normative values, rules, and assumptions of the environments in which they must live and learn. Relocating disability as a by-product of the interaction between individuals and their environments generates possibilities for radically reconstructing classrooms around new assumptions, values, and practices that could be broadly inclusive of children and youth.

Closely related to these undertheorized views of ability and intelligence are taken-for-granted understandings about learning. Theories of learning embedded in current suggestions for detracked and inclusion settings posit learning as an event that takes place in the minds of (different) individuals. Classified students in inclusion settings have IEPs that tell educators how each student should learn. Teachers in the detracked settings we studied were advised to differentiate their instruction so each student could learn in the way that was best for her/him. In these settings, teachers often interpreted multiple intelligence theory to mean that they should determine each student’s unique intelligence and teach that student using techniques appropriate to that type of individual. Such approaches are rooted in the notion that learning is something that happens in an individual mind and that the remedy for having many different minds in one room is to teach each of them differently. We strongly share the belief that classrooms, curriculum, and pedagogies must be organized to create multiple entry points for students to learn and to express what they know. However, current suggestions for how teachers should address the rich diversity of ways that people learn often reinforce the tendency to think of students in categorical terms (as kinds of learners/people), rather than encourage new ways of viewing learning diversity.

A situated perspective on learning (Greeno & MMAP, 1998; Lave, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991) is based on a different view of how and what students learn in classrooms. This view of learning is undergirded by sociocultural theory which posits that learning and development are embedded in social settings and interactions (Vygotsky, 1986; Wertsch, 1998). This approach is distinct from the cognitive theories of learning that underlie many common approaches to teaching and that focus on the thought processes of individuals. In contrast, a situated perspective holds that the activity systems within which students learn shape their learning profoundly; indeed, they shape learner identity itself. In this view, classroom practices are more than vehicles for learning. They are “participatory activities that are fundamental to what students learn” (Boaler, 2000, p. 391), and they entail a process of identity construction (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wortham, 2006) in which, through participation in particular practices, students come to understand the world and define their places within it. In this view, teaching practices that reinforce categorical understandings of students will have negative implications for young people’s senses of themselves as learners. Students engaging in such practices may come to think of themselves and one another as particular types of students—special education, low track, gifted, and so forth—despite the intentionally heterogeneous
nature of the detracked or inclusion setting, at times reiterating the very inequalities these reforms were designed to address (Rubin, 2003).

Thus, the detracking and inclusion movements’ attempts to disrupt existing educational discourse about individual ability in favor of a broader vision of student learning often run aground on the existing deeply entrenched school discourse and practice that categorize, sort, and in so doing, determine educational approaches for students. At school sites, assumptions about ability, intelligence and learning that undergird teachers’ work are often at odds with the expansive understandings upon which detracking and inclusion are premised. As we argue in more detail below, teachers need tools that support them to fundamentally reconceptualize student learning.

Standards

Standards proved a second undertheorized issue contributing to tensions and ambiguities faced by practitioners as they implemented detracking and inclusion policies. The difficulty of holding all students to equal (high) standards weighed heavily on teachers in these settings. One teacher working in a detracked classroom described how she tried to manage this dilemma for students with disabilities:

So I kind of, you know, I can’t, I mean, I try to adjust things by giving them easier test skills in their reading and kind of extending their deadlines a little bit. You know, it’s, I’m not sure philosophically if I should be but I mean not that I try to be because it’s not, the kids aren’t going to do the work and they’re going to fail again.

A middle school social studies teacher worried about the real-world consequences of both holding and failing to hold all students to the same standards—consequences she felt had particular resonance for students of color.

I do present options for failure and succeeding because I just think it’s realistic. And you know, being a minority you learn that you’re going to have failure, and I don’t like to protect students from that. I like them to see—I think learning failure is just as good as learning success. Because if life is presented to you, if you’re sort of in a sheltered environment, where options are just open, and failure isn’t presented to you, then you sort of live in like a never, never land. And then when you go out into the real world, it starts hitting you. I’ve used different tactics with them as far as dealing with them on their level, and grading them according to their ability. But then I ask myself, is that realistic? Am I presenting success to them, whereas in actuality it’s really not success?

These teachers, face to face with the concrete dilemma of how to both teach to the same standards and teach each student in accordance with his
or her needs, voice frustration, confusion and a deep sense of responsibility for helping students navigate schools and society successfully.

Some teachers struggled less with the tension expressed above. A science teacher working in a detracked, full inclusion classroom, argued:

Even though we say we have high expectations of the kids, in practice the expectations turn out to be lower. I think what we can do is just put our expectations in place in the beginning of each year and then just stick with it and let the chips roll where they may. Some kids will probably not be able to meet them. But I think unless you put the standards out there, nobody will meet them. (Emphasis added)

For this teacher and some others, standards offered a means for requiring that all students be expected to meet the demands of a challenging and rigorous curriculum. Although failure for some students was likely to be an inevitable outcome of “let[ting] the chips roll where they may,” the high standards for all students would work to provide a more rigorous education for many students who were traditionally not beneficiaries of the educational system.

Other teachers, however, worried that this approach failed to acknowledge the wide variability in the ways that their students came prepared to meet the challenges of these new standards. A Language Arts middle school teacher expressed this struggle as follows:

I went to a conference and I brought student writing, and people were looking at it. And my question was, is this stuff that I marked as exemplary really exemplary? And in the cases that I gave them, only one of them was truly exemplary. And I realized that I was grading it exemplary based on what I know about the kid. One of them was by an eighth grader who is autistic. And for him, I thought this was incredible, and so I graded it exemplary. And there was another young lady who never wrote, who submitted the paper five times—wrote about her grandfather’s death. And it brought me to tears. And so I grade that, by the fifth time that was exemplary writing for her. And what this panel of people said is, “you have to hold to the rubric, and you can’t let that other stuff get in the way.” And it raised a question for me. If we’re really supposed to personalize education and we’re really supposed to get to know kids well, is it fair to say that we can be their coach and their adjudicator?

This teacher, similar to many others, explicated the tension between standards as uniform measures of performance, and a view of learning as a process of development over time. Teachers wondered again and again how to manage the tension between the necessity of holding more challenging expectations for all students, and recognizing the variable ways that their students made strides toward meeting those standards.

Ideally, detracking and, to a large extent, inclusion rest on a commitment to create high standards for all students. Teachers are expected to find varying ways to individuate instruction so that all students meet high standards for academic achievement. There is, particularly in relation to students with disabilities, also the acknowledgment that the paths to
meeting and assessing these high standards may need to vary to accommodate individual needs. Nevertheless, the idea is to provide all students with an education based on high standards for achievement. In practice, it proves difficult to create such an education, we argue, because the nature of those standards is rarely investigated.

Beginning in the 1980s, educational reform in the United States has largely been focused around standards as a means to leverage equity and excellence for all. By the mid-1990s, standards were the rallying point for educational reforms in school districts across the nation. In 1994, President Bill Clinton signed into law the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, which put standards at the forefront of the national discourse about school reform. Systemic reform efforts in major U.S. cities were organized around content and performance standards to which all students would be held. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 (PL 107-110) directly tied federal funds to schools’ capacity to ensure that all students meet equal academic standards as measured by standardized testing. Importantly, NCLB currently mandates that English language learners must meet the required standards within a year. The law is more ambiguous for children in special education. In their case, their IEP goals should be linked to the standards; they must take the standardized tests; and their scores must be reported. The expectation, however, is that they be moving toward the goals of meeting the standard, without a requirement that they will meet the grade-level standards. Thus, even though the standing federal legislation allows for some differences in student capacity to meet these standards, the overarching push is for equal standards for all.

Our purpose here is to explore the consequences that this focus on standards has for teachers working in detracked and inclusion settings. Because all schools that receive federal funds are being held responsible for ensuring that their students meet specific educational standards at or above the proficiency level, teachers working in these intentionally heterogeneous settings must contend with how to do this within these new contexts of diversity. Teachers in these classrooms are being asked to implement a curriculum that, for the most part, holds students to the same standards, granting accommodations for students in special education according to their IEPs. In practice, this often seems a difficult, even an impossible, task: How can one simultaneously hold all students to the same standards and accommodate their diversity?

While we support the notion, embedded in both detracking and inclusion policies, that educational inequalities to a large extent follow from the vastly different curricula, pedagogies, and expectations that students experience in their classrooms, we also suggest that the adoption of equal standards can prove problematic in two ways. First, adopting equal standards without providing a wide range of strategies to engage students in learning and to assess what they have learned can limit rather than expand possibilities, particularly for students already disadvantaged by the
educational system. We cannot simply expect all students to be subject to the same standards without also taking seriously the need to radically reimagine curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment in ways that tap into a range of experiences, expressive modalities, and materials available for creating meaningful learning opportunities for all students. The dilemmas about standards expressed by teachers in our studies are, to some extent, inevitable outcomes of establishing standards without reconfiguring curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment in ways that allow students to benefit fully from the new opportunities that heterogeneous classrooms seek to provide. Importantly, such an expansive reconfiguration of classroom pedagogies would create new learning opportunities for all children, not just for those who are marginalized by the existing educational system.

Second, in the press to have all students meet the same standards, there is rarely any serious discussion about the standards themselves. Standards are generally treated as abstract, universal, and measurable markers of knowledge and skills that all students should be expected to demonstrate. More and more since the passage of NCLB, standards are being dictated to practitioners, and school communities have fewer opportunities to explore and develop a common set of agreed-upon standards. School districts are adopting single sets of standards for all students, and teachers are asked to adapt their pedagogy to support all students to learn them, without being given opportunities to interrogate the standards themselves.

In reality, standards are not universal, abstract measures of learning. All standards reflect specific values and ways of knowing that are the outcome of particular social processes and relationships (see Abu El-Haj, 2006). Standards are constructed within specific communities and they are subject to challenge, negotiation, and change over time. In social studies, for example, there are competing sets of national standards (National Standards for Social Studies by the National Council for the Social Studies; National History Standards, by the National Center for History in Our Schools) as well as standards written by each state. States, districts, schools, and individual teachers debate, discuss, and interpret these standards, often quite differently. Standards are both written and enacted within particular social, cultural, and historical contexts. Yet the socially constructed nature of standards is typically hidden from view, unveiled only during moments of public contention, such as the debates over the literary and historical canons, or the best way to teach mathematics.

Unfortunately, failing to interrogate standards as markers of socially constructed values and relationships can hide the processes through which the knowledge, values, and assumptions of dominant social groups are often privileged in our educational system. Moreover, the invisibility of the constructed nature of standards, often obscures the fact that our social order values a very narrow range of human capacity for learning, making it next to impossible to create educational environments in which all students are successful (Varenne & McDermott, 1998). Focusing practitioners’
attention almost exclusively on whether students meet or do meet given standards, there is little room to explore the ways that standards embody social processes that value hierarchically certain ways of knowing and particular bodies of knowledge, and not others. This hierarchical valuing of different ways of knowing sets up relationships between students; it marks some students as capable, and others as deficient; some as “high” and others as “low”; some as “disabled,” and others as not. In schools this means that regardless of race, class, and disability (although usually coincident with it), children are judged on whether they learn or fail to learn, a limited set of tools or skills.

Today, in schools across the nation, these problematic aspects of standards are exacerbated by contemporary educational policies such as NCLB. In the face of budget cuts and new accountability systems, children are being held to a set of standards pared down to include only a narrow range of knowledge, focusing primarily on skills and disciplines seen as economically necessary (literacy, mathematics, and science). Practitioners rarely have opportunities to co-construct the standards for learning and assessment that they are asked to implement. Moreover, students are being assessed on their mastery of these standards primarily through high-stakes testing, rather than through more expansive assessment tools that might better account for what a range of students know and can do (Allen, 1998; Himley & Carini, 2000). These narrow measures of academic achievement have been criticized for maintaining, rather than remedying, race and class inequalities (Lipman, 2002, 2004; McNeil, 2000; McNeil & Valenzuela, 2001; Natriello & Pallas, 2001). All teachers experience the pressures associated with standards-driven education. For teachers in intentionally heterogeneous settings, such pressures are amplified. The words of the teachers quoted above suggest that a deep sense of frustration results from being asked to hold all students to the same standards, yet teach each of them differently. As educational anthropologists, we insist on the import of calling attention to the socially constructed and value-laden nature of all standards. However, this stance should not be misread as an argument that in the arena of educational standards, “anything goes”: Rather, we suggest below that teachers need opportunities to critically examine both the socially constructed nature of all standards and to consider the ways that pedagogies can be expansively reconfigured if they are to navigate successfully the tension between holding all students to equal standards and addressing the diverse ways that students approach learning.

**Structural Inequality and Schooling**

Detracking and inclusion aim to offer all students the kind of education that only a few have traditionally had. Although these policies are
intended as remedies for inequalities that are rooted in broader structural inequities, teachers working in inclusion and detracked settings do not necessarily hold explicit theories of the ways that schools and society are structured to produce hierarchical outcomes along the lines of race, class, and disability. Without such theories, teachers in our research studies tended to fall back on commonsense understandings of why certain groups of students struggled in their classes. They typically focused on students’, families’, and communities’ values and competencies, rather than the features of the school setting and the social, economic, and historical contexts that are deeply implicated in the production of race and class-linked disparities.

Teachers struggled to make sense of the impact that the local community had on students’ lives in school, often concluding that their “cultural” contexts were responsible for perceived student deficits. One teacher expressed this sentiment as follows:

Some of them are aged beyond their years. But that’s cultural, social. . . . Most of the ninth graders in an urban environment like Oakcity, uh, chronologically they’re going on 25, 30. They’ve seen too much . . . they’ve been around too much. So they come to us with street smarts and we need to make them book smart.

In addition to this widely held belief that students’ academic struggles were related to the social context of their city neighborhoods, teachers often pointed directly to students’ families as another prime source of their underachievement. One teacher speculated that

. . . they go home, they get an F or an A, there’s no . . . difference how their parents treat them. You know, I might be wrong, but it seems like a lot of times the parents don’t put a big emphasis on school. . . . I think that has a huge, huge impact on [students’ motivation].

Across our research contexts teachers continually drew upon dominant explanations for the ongoing academic underachievement of students from marginalized communities: “street” culture and parental values detracted from the promises of school success.

Moreover, they often used these frames to explain why, despite detracking and inclusion reforms, certain groups of students underachieve. A school counselor working in a detracked, inclusion middle school explained why some students continued to underperform academically as follows:

There are kids that have nourishment barriers up that won’t take. They are so broken and damaged in some way that they are resisting everything that is here for them. And we don’t have the resources I don’t think, either in the school, or in the ability to work with the family to make an impact on them.
Although this counselor rightfully pointed to the reality that schools are often being asked to turn around educational inequalities without sufficient resources to do the job, his sense that academic underachievement can be explained as due to youth being “broken and damaged” was not an uncommon sentiment expressed across our research sites. Many (although happily not all) teachers at our research sites believed that detracking and inclusion efforts were unlikely to succeed as long as students, their families, and their communities did not change in significant ways. These teachers are not alone in their perception that students’ academic underachievement is related to the behaviors and values of their families and communities. Dominant discourses about education (in the media, schools, and academia) hold tenaciously to a belief that the families and communities of low-income and racially and ethnically marginalized students do not offer them the kinds of experiences and values that will support their academic success (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Many educational researchers have pointed to the pervasiveness of this discourse to explain the persistent failure of public schools in the United States to educate children of color and children living in poverty well (see for just a few examples, Dehyle, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 1996). Despite a wealth of educational studies that have shown how race and class inequalities of our society are woven into the micro-politics of everyday life inside schools and classrooms (see, for example, Anyon, 1980; Fine, 1991; Oakes, Wells, Jones, & Datnow, 1997), local educational discourse often focuses attention on families and communities as the source of these seemingly intractable inequalities (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Detracking and inclusion policies are often implemented without a concurrent exploration of these embedded beliefs about the sources of academic underachievement. Local understandings of students’ intellectual capacities are constructed within hierarchies of racial and class difference that are both locally situated and framed by larger societal discourses and patterns of inequality (Rubin, 2003, 2008; Oakes et al., 1997; Wells & Serna, 1996). If left unexamined, such assumptions can shape teachers’ work in intentionally heterogeneous settings, to the detriment of the students they hope to serve. Without an analysis of how their practices are embedded in larger structural inequalities, teachers may resort to commonsense explanations for the performance and behavior of students from particular racial, ethnic, and social class groups, undercutting the purpose of intentionally heterogeneous settings. Teachers need opportunities to develop perspectives on how schools reproduce social and economic inequalities and understandings of how everyday practices can both contribute to and undermine inequalities. Moreover, they need tools for constructing practices that go against the grain of this reproductive dynamic.
III. A CAPACITY-ORIENTED FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHER EDUCATION: PREPARING TEACHERS FOR INTENTIONALLY HETEROGENEOUS SETTINGS

The equity-geared reforms of detracking and inclusion, in challenging the idea that students are most appropriately educated when divided by perceived ability, also confront many of the problematic assumptions and practices that guide schooling. Yet these reforms do not, at the school level, necessarily challenge ideas about the nature of ability and educational standards, and they are not, at least in many schools, accompanied by an analysis of how schooling is framed and affected by larger social inequalities. These reforms, meant to create greater opportunities for students, often result in tensions and dilemmas for teachers. We wonder: How could teachers be better prepared to teach in consciously heterogeneous settings?

One of the most hopeful premises supporting the rationale for detracking and inclusion is the belief that all children and youth have great capacity for learning. Read most expansively, inclusion and detracking policies are, at their heart, democratic projects that are committed to offering every person a liberating education: one that acknowledges our universally shared human capacity to create, in our own distinctive ways, a life’s work. Patricia Carini (2001) speaks to this view of education eloquently, writing of “humanness and the valuing of humanness as the starting point for education” (p. 1). For Carini, this humanness entails “a widely distributed capacity [of all people] to be makers and doers, active agents in the world and their lives” (p. 20). An education that begins from an assumption of this “widely distributed capacity to be makers and doers” is one that does not tolerate a limited and limiting curriculum and pedagogy for any child. Acknowledging our fundamental human equivalence, however, does not mean denying the different ways we learn, make sense, and act upon our worlds. Rather, if we hold to a universal equivalence of all humans as active agents who continually seek to make sense of, and make their worlds, then we must be committed to developing education that fosters each person’s passions and interests and develops the knowledge, skills, and competencies for her/his full participation in society (Abu El-Haj, 2006).

A vision of an education that is expansive and liberating is compatible with the goals of inclusion and detracking. Unfortunately, as discussed above, these reform efforts are often implemented without offering educators the tools needed to examine deeply entrenched assumptions and practices that limit possibilities for creating an expansive, equitable, and democratic education for all. We suggest that in order to realize the broad democratic and equity-minded goals of detracking and inclusion, teacher education programs might become more centrally focused around a capacity-oriented framework that emphasizes three key elements: tools for observing learners in noncategorical, nonevaluative ways; critical inquiry
into standards; and opportunities to develop curriculum and pedagogies that interrogate structural inequalities.

**Tools for Understanding Learners**

Educators need tools for studying children and children’s learning in ways that emphasize children as sense makers and that focus on children’s strengths and capacities as a starting point for developing curriculum and pedagogy. These tools equip teachers to think outside of the typical school labels that tend to measure students in comparative and hierarchical terms, group them in terms of reductive categorizations of learning styles or intelligences, or slot them into deficit-oriented diagnostic categories. These are tools for deep description, rather than evaluation and comparison of students.

There exist a variety of educational projects that focus on children and children’s learning from a capacity-oriented framework (see, for example, Abu El-Haj, 2003; Featherstone, 1998; Himley & Carini, 2000; Roosevelt, 2007; Schultz, 2003). One powerful example is the approach developed by Patricia Carini and her colleagues at the Prospect Center for Education and Research.9 Carini and her colleagues, in conjunction with teachers from across the country, have developed a set of structured oral inquiry practices for describing children, children’s work, and teachers’ practices (see Abu El-Haj, 2003; Carini, 2001; Featherstone, 1998; Himley, 2002; Himley & Carini, 2000; Kanevsky, 1993).10 Falling within the paradigm of teacher research (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 1994; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Himley & Carini, 2000; Zeichner & Nofke, 2001), Prospect’s descriptive processes teach educators to recognize and specify, in detail, children’s strengths as learners and thinkers in order to develop classroom practices that build on these strengths and capacities. These processes create a structure for observing children and children’s work. Teachers, working collectively, using descriptions of children and their works to create and refine their curriculum and pedagogical practices. These tools for observation and description ground educational practices within the specifics and particulars of actual children and classrooms, rather than within the realm of preformed categorizations about learners and learning. From this attention to the particular, teachers develop knowledge about teaching and learning that attends to the wide variability of children and youth as learners (see Abu El-Haj, 2003; Himley & Carini, 2000). Although the descriptive processes focus on individual students, the practices that develop from this work expand possibilities in ways that benefit many children.

Importantly, in contrast to the norms of most educational evaluation, the prospect processes describe, rather than compare, children. Moreover, these descriptions do not attempt to categorize a child, but rather make
visible each learner’s complexity and capacities. This is an approach that refuses to identify children in diagnostic terms, to measure them in relation to a normal curve, or even to describe them in relation to preset categories of intelligences, learning styles, and so forth. These descriptive processes emphasize children’s strengths. This does not mean ignoring young people’s vulnerabilities and needs as learners; however, the focus is on strengths and capacities as the starting place for academic growth. In addition, learners’ vulnerabilities as well as their strengths are described in nonevaluative and noncategorical language. Focusing on children’s strengths and capacities, Prospect’s processes ask teachers to examine how their educational practices must change to be broadly inclusive of children. These processes help teachers develop new ways to work with the diverse approaches to learning that exist in every classroom.

Preparing teachers to work in inclusion and detracked settings requires that they have opportunities to study the diverse ways that children and youth learn, drawing upon perspectives that emphasize strengths and capacities. They need tools that help them to interrupt the strong tendency in education to rank students comparatively and to categorize and label students, especially in ways that focus on deficits or that reify the normal curve. Preparing educators to teach in intentionally heterogeneous classrooms requires offering them sustained opportunities to develop tools for observing children and youth in ways that make visible the complexity and “incommensurability” (Dewey, 1922/1966) of all learners. Radically reconstructing our teacher education programs toward a capacity-oriented observational framework is a necessary step toward empowering teachers with tools needed for teaching in intentionally heterogeneous classrooms.

Critical Inquiry Into Standards

As a corollary to this idea that educators need new tools for observing children and youth as learners using descriptive, rather than categorical and evaluative, perspectives, we propose that teachers must have ongoing opportunities to interrogate the assumptions and values embedded in educational standards to which students are held. As we discussed above, practitioners face a central quandary about standards: How can they simultaneously address the diversity of learners and press for all students to meet the same standards? The federal NCLB legislation heightens this quandary by holding schools and teachers accountable for having all students meet the same proficiency standards. As we argued above, this quandary is related to the tendency to assume that standards are universal, abstract measures of learning, rather than markers of socially constructed and negotiated values and relationships. Moreover, it is often a consequence of adopting new standards without reconstructing curriculum, pedagogy, and
assessment in ways that are broadly encompassing of the diverse ways that people learn and express what they know.

Preparing practitioners to work in inclusion and detracked settings requires engaging them in sustained inquiry about the educational standards to which they hold their students. They need opportunities to investigate how the implicit norms, values, and assumptions embedded in standards line up with the diverse skills, knowledge, and ways of learning that their students bring to the classroom (Abu El-Haj, 2003; Himley & Carini, 2000). Moreover, this diversity not only reflects that of individual learners, but also embodies differences in the knowledge, norms, values, and assumptions of cultural communities (see, for example, Dehyle, 1995; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Valdes, 1996).

Making the interrogation of standards a central focus for teacher education is critical at this moment when curriculum standards are, for the most part, dictated to teachers. Rather than directing pre-service teachers to simply align their lessons and curriculum with existing standards, we must also ask them to analyze the standards in relation to both their inclusive and exclusionary consequences. Questions must be asked: Whose knowledge is reflected in these standards? What kinds of learning are valued? What ways of knowing are privileged? In Rubin’s teacher education program in social studies, for example, students examine the varying sets of standards related to social studies, ask questions about the perspectives and assumptions embedded in each set, and analyze the standards in relation to research on how students learn social studies. Practitioner inquiry that offers ongoing opportunities for teachers to consider standards thoughtfully and critically can help teachers to expand curriculum, pedagogical approaches, and assessment in ways that create multiple entry points to an inclusive learning environment. By focusing critical attention on the standards themselves, educators can figure out how in their practice they might bridge the gap between the assumptions and values embedded in the existing standards and the diverse experiences and approaches to learning of the actual students in their classrooms (Abu El-Haj, 2003).

In arguing for critical inquiry around standards, we are not suggesting that educators should abandon the quest to identify fundamental disciplinary knowledge, skills, and dispositions that students should learn. We are, however, proposing an approach that makes transparent the socially constructed, and therefore mutable, nature of educational standards in order that they might be implemented in ways that reflect and are broadly inclusive of the diverse knowledge, experiences, and ways of learning that children bring to classrooms. Moreover, exploring and renegotiating educational standards must occur in conjunction with the development of tools for observing learners described above. This will protect against the risk that taking a more relativist than universal approach to standards can reinforce existing educational inequalities when it devolves into a tendency to sustain low expectations for students who are viewed as less capable of learning.
because of presumed individual or community deficits. However, educating teachers with powerful tools for observing learners, focusing on their capacity, complexity and strengths, as well as with the tools for interrogating the inherent assumptions and values embedded in all educational standards, opens up possibilities for developing curriculum standards and classroom practices that account for the diversity of learners, and encourage the development of a curriculum that is rich, challenging, and engaging for all students.

**Developing Tools for Action: Critical Approaches to Curriculum and Pedagogy**

As noted earlier, the commonsense explanations for the performance and behavior of students from particular racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups that are prevalent in school discourse are not rooted in a thorough understanding of the place of education within broader social and economic structural inequalities. If teachers are to shift away from seeing problems of educational inequality as located in particular children or their families and communities, then they need ways to build strong, alternate theoretical and practice-based frameworks that resist this tenacious explanatory framework. This is only possible if practitioners are able to explore the relationship between schooling and structural inequalities and to develop new capacity-oriented approaches to pedagogy and curriculum that challenge these broader inequalities.

We suggest that teacher education programs need to provide pre-service teachers with a deep and sustained focus on the relationship between schooling and inequality. Moreover, pre-service teacher education must offer students ongoing opportunities to create strong relationships with children, their families, and communities that help these pre-service teachers learn to interrogate their assumptions about the communities with which they work. Many leaders in the teacher education community have argued for just such a focus (see for a few examples, Cochran-Smith, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Nieto, 1999) and there are notable pre-service teacher education programs that offer students ongoing opportunities for developing a deep understanding of, and commitment to work against, structural inequalities (e.g., Center X at the University of California, Los Angeles [UCLA]). More typically, teacher education programs offer social foundations courses that help students probe theories about social reproduction and construct a sense of how schools are situated amid larger social structures. Pre-service teachers are also likely to be required to take a course on diversity that explores a range of issues including race, ethnicity, culture, gender, sexuality, and disability. The hope is that, done well, these courses will help pre-service teachers to contextualize and theorize the inequalities they see in their schools settings.
However, pre-service teachers need more than framing explanations and diversity courses to shake up the deep-rooted commonsense explanations for academic underachievement. First, they need opportunities to develop relationships with families and communities that build understanding and appreciation for local knowledge, experiences, competencies, and values. They need a set of tools that, similar to those described above for observing individual children, help them to view families and communities through lenses that focus on capacity and strength and that reject categorical thinking about the communities with which they work. One good example of this approach is found in the funds of knowledge work developed by Luis Moll and Norma Gonzalez (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Utilizing ethnographic tools, teachers research the communities in which they work, exploring the local knowledge and resources—the funds of knowledge—that can form the basis of a relevant and effective curriculum. Importantly, this approach rejects categorical or monolithic descriptions of various social groups, emphasizing, instead, local and particular knowledge, experiences, and values. These funds of knowledge provide a starting place for developing curriculum that is locally relevant for students. Most importantly, for pre-service teachers, this and other similar approaches offer them tools for building relationships to students’ families and communities—relationships that, by focusing on local capacities and strengths, can help educators see families and communities as resources for, rather than obstacles to, academic achievement.

Educating teachers with the tools necessary to reframe their understanding of and relationship with families and communities is one key aspect of a capacity-oriented approach to addressing structural inequalities in pre-service education. A second goal is to create opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop curriculum and pedagogy that centers on critique of structural inequalities and social action. These approaches support educators to join with students in investigating, critiquing, and acting upon the structural conditions that limit educational opportunity. There are many examples of such approaches to curriculum and pedagogy. In a problem-posing approach to education (Freire, 1970), for example, students begin their educational journeys by reflecting upon the world around them; this problem-solving approach is premised on the notion that the most effective pedagogies are those that encourage students to be active and critical participants in constructing knowledge. By encouraging students to appraise and analyze their own experiences, teachers both validate and leverage student knowledge and experience while building analytical skills. Teachers taking a culturally relevant approach (Ladson-Billings, 1994) help students who are on the fringes of the classroom become the intellectual leaders of the class, build a learning community, legitimate students’ real-life experiences as part of the curriculum, encourage students to engage in collective struggle against the status quo and become aware of themselves as political beings. One final example, youth participatory
action research (Torre & Fine, 2006), allows youth to document, investigate, and challenge the inequalities they see in their own communities. In school settings, this method has helped young people to develop writing, research, and analytical skills while investigating critically relevant issues (e.g., Duncan-Andrade, 2006; Morrell, 2006; Nygreen, 2006). All of these approaches share a commitment to drawing upon students’ strengths, experiences, and questions to help them develop both academic skills and a critical analysis of the world around them. From a situated perspective, participation in such activities can help students develop a positive sense of themselves as learners, and as empowered actors both in the educational setting and beyond. Pre- and in-service teachers need sustained opportunities to develop and work with these alternate pedagogies.

A capacity-based framework for teacher education should offer pre-service teachers paths for moving beyond intellectual discussion of structural inequalities toward developing tools and practices for action. Such an approach will help teachers resist the tendency to slip, often unconsciously, into educational discourses that view students from particular racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups as learners with deficits, blaming the students, families, and communities for their persistent academic underachievement. Instead, this capacity-oriented approach would provide new teachers with tools to draw upon the knowledge, experiences, and competencies of students, their families, and communities to support academic engagement. Such pedagogical and curricular approaches capitalize on the rich diversity often found in intentionally heterogeneous settings, reconceptualizing this diversity as a strength to be tapped to the benefit of all of the students in the classroom, rather than an obstacle to be surmounted.

CONCLUSION

Detracking and inclusion policies resonate with the promise of a truly democratic education that offers all children the possibility of full and fruitful participation in and beyond the school walls. Realizing this promise, however, will require that we challenge commonsense educational beliefs and assumptions about learners and learning that make a hierarchy of school outcomes appear inevitable. As teacher educators, we have an opportunity to offer prospective teachers tools that will better prepare them to tackle successfully the joys and challenges of teaching and learning in intentionally heterogeneous classrooms. We recognize we cannot expect teachers to bear the primary responsibility for changing the deeply entrenched inequalities that structure educational opportunities in our schools and reverberate well beyond the classroom walls. However, a capacity-oriented framework for educating prospective teachers can help them build grounded practices that draw on the strengths and capacities of all children as learners.
NOTES

1. We put quotation marks around the word *ability* because we are critical of the commonsense notion of ability that permeates school discourse—the idea that children have inherent, identifiable, and hierarchically ranked “ability” levels.

2. Learning diversity is part of every classroom; however, it is rarely acknowledged as such. We refer to inclusion and detracked classrooms as intentionally heterogeneous because these policies explicitly address the issue of the diversity of learners.

3. We must note here that we are primarily discussing inclusion of children with mild or moderate cognitive disabilities, as the goals for students with severe cognitive disabilities are not to have them meet similar academic standards.

4. For the purposes of argument, we are drawing an artificial line between fixed and malleable views of capability and intelligence. These ideas are interwoven in the academic and everyday discourses about human cognition. Academic research about human cognition recognizes that environment deeply shapes performance. However, school discourse often fails to take account of this relationship. Intelligence/ability, as a measurable quality that exists in the shape of a normal curve, is a taken-for-granted, almost unquestionable tenet of educational thinking at the school level. And even pre-service teachers are routinely exposed to the idea that children can and should be categorized in relation to a normal curve.

5. We have become very much aware of how often we hear the pre-service teachers in our programs refer to children as “classified”: they often appear to view the children as not simply children with specific disabilities, but as different kinds of people.

6. Inclusion for students with severe cognitive disabilities does not aim to have all students meet the same academic standards. In this case, the goals are aimed at social interactions between children with and without disabilities that aim to support their membership in society at large.

7. Importantly, advocates of bottom-up reforms take a different stance and would use standards as frameworks within which local professionals can develop high-quality, innovative curricula and pedagogy tailored to individual students and particular communities (see Darling-Hammond, 1997; Meier, 2000; Sizer, 1992; Wheelock, 1998).

8. John Dewey wrote in a similar vein of the moral equality of all humans being located in what he called “incommensurability” of all human work (1922/1966).

9. We offer this example because one of us has extensive experience with the Prospect processes as a teacher and teacher educator, and has conducted research on this work (Abu El-Haj, 2003).

10. A lengthy description of the format of these processes is beyond the scope of this article (see Himley, 2002; Himley & Carini, 2000).
11. See note 7 for the goals for children in special education.

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