

Reflections on the Discourses of Inclusion: A Case Study of the Banality of Good

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During a recent department meeting, while discussing how to expand the diversity of our teacher candidate cohorts, one of us was chastised by a colleague for using the term *person of color*. The argument was made that “person of color” was not the most politically correct phrase and that we needed to use terms such as “underrepresented minorities” or “historically disadvantaged groups” when discussing issues of diversity and inclusion. Caught off guard and feeling embarrassed, he responded that he was not aware that “person of color” had become a controversial term. A colleague who was finishing her dissertation at a major research university was called upon to weigh in on this debate to get the latest and most accurate information on the issue. Later that day, when we had a chance to reflect on the confrontation that arose during our meeting, we realized that something deeper may be at play than political correctness. We realized that the minor conflict was related to what could be called a *banal discourse of inclusion*.

This paper is a meditation on the discourses of inclusion in education with the help of some insights from Hannah Arendt, her critics, as well as more contemporary scholars. First, we revisit Arendt’s notion of the banality of evil, which we juxtapose and use to explicate the concept of the banality of good. Then, we present two challenges to certain discourses of inclusion in education based on two different critical perspectives. We argue that, since many discourses on inclusion are shallow and not very thoughtful, they can be considered a case of the banality of good. Lastly, we attempt to explain how educators might move to create a more thoughtful discourse of inclusion in education.

THE BANALITY OF EVIL AND GOOD

In coining the concept “the banality of evil,” Arendt pointed to a phenomenon unique to twentieth-century political life and, especially, totalitarian regimes. She challenged political thinkers to reflect on the potency of this con-

cept, even though she never developed a theory of evil.¹ When describing this phenomenon, Arendt insisted that banal individuals, who are thoughtless and remote from reality, can commit crimes on a mass scale without even realizing that they are doing wrong:

Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III “to prove a villain.” He merely, to put the matter colloquially, never realized what he was doing. . . . It was sheer thoughtlessness—something by no means identical with stupidity—that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period. . . . That such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together which, perhaps, are inherent in man—that was, in fact, the lesson one could learn in Jerusalem.²

The phrase chosen by Arendt to describe what she witnessed—“the banality of evil”—was provocative, and her book documenting the trial of Eichmann stirred up a big controversy when it was first published not only among Jewish leaders and intellectuals but also many historians. In addition, as Seyla Benhabib has argued, this phrase was confusing to readers and led many of them to misunderstand it, as though Arendt was referring to Eichmann’s deeds. Benhabib writes that Arendt “did not mean that what Eichmann had cooperated in perpetrating was banal or that the extermination of the Jews, and of other peoples, by the Nazis was banal. The phrase “the banality of evil” was meant to refer to a *specific quality of mind and character* of the doer himself, and neither to the deeds nor to the principles behind those deeds.”³ Richard Bernstein echoes Benhabib’s sentiment, noting that the banality of evil is not an expression that refers to Eichmann’s actions: “There was nothing banal about these. . . . Rather ‘the banality of evil’ refers to his motives and intentions.”⁴ In this view, the banality of Eichmann pointed to a kind of shallowness of thought, a shallowness that was striking for Arendt when she covered his trial in Jerusalem, notwithstanding the tremendous death and destruction that he had helped bring about.

To be sure, historians have taken issue with Arendt’s representation of

Eichmann as an instance of banal evil as opposed to the pathological, sadistic monster that the prosecutors tried to portray at his trial. Indeed, Susan Neiman explains that what was both unique and controversial in Arendt's notion of the banality of evil is that it called into question two centuries of modern thought about motive that identified "evil and evil intention so thoroughly that denying the latter is normally viewed as a way of denying the former."⁵ The difficulty in Arendt's concept was the need to come to terms with the idea that being guilty of mass murder, as Eichmann was, did *not* require one to display forethought and malice. Still, regardless of how one depicts Eichmann, Bernstein is correct to assert that Arendt's bigger point is that "normal people with banal motives and intentions can commit horrendous crimes and evil deeds."⁶ Following Arendt, Bernstein, and Benhabib, we contend that there are evil actions that are motivated by banality and thoughtlessness.

In addition to the existence of banal evil, we submit that there are good deeds carried out in ways that can be considered banal or thoughtless. How should we identify or define the banality of good? One way of accounting for good actions that are banal is described by Geoffrey Scarre, who notes that such deeds are characterized by "the absence of moral commitment on the part of the agent to producing the results that he or she intentionally brings about."⁷ Scarre's understanding of being banally good suggests that banality is a matter of intentions, not the consequences of one's actions. More specifically, for Scarre a good act is banal when it is *not* motivated by some ethical tenet, be that tenet religious, secular, or personal. Thus, we can imagine someone recycling her waste not because of a moral commitment to save the planet but because she does not want to stand out when all her neighbors are recycling. Likewise, we can envision a retired man who volunteers at a homeless shelter in order to help pass the time rather than out of a deep-seated desire to assist those in need.

Although Scarre's characterization of the banality of good—as admirable deeds that are not based on any significant moral commitments—is plausible, it does not fully address what we are trying to illustrate here with the anecdote that opened this paper. However, Scarre gets closer to what we have in mind when he examines a specific category of the banality of good that consists of "good

acts that, albeit well-intentioned, are practically foolish or ill-thought-out.”⁸ In this case, what is at stake are well-meaning actions that are motivated by worthy ideals but are not fully thought through and hence end up being shallow and divorced from reality. Akin to Arendt’s understanding of the banality of evil as thoughtlessness and remoteness from reality, we would argue that there are specific types of well-intentioned words and deeds that are banal in the sense that they are thoughtless.

In order to illustrate this conception of the banality of good, consider the concepts of woke and wokeness. According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, the adjective “woke” means to be “aware of and actively attentive to important facts and issues, especially issues of racial and social justice.” Originating from Black vernacular, being woke also implies a willingness to take a stand and be active in order to challenge injustices and racism in disadvantaged communities and fight hatred and discrimination wherever they occur. In her *New York Times Magazine* article, Ligaya Mishan refers to “wokeness” as a loaded term derived from the adjective “woke,” “which invokes a spirit of vigilance to see the world as it really is.”⁹ Hence, wokeness has to do with developing a critical awareness of the way in which power is unequally distributed in the United States, how institutional racism continues to manifest itself, and how the justice system privileges some (for instance, those with power, money, and connections) while disadvantaging others (for example, minorities and the poor).

We have no issue with “woke” and “wokeness” as terms that suggest a need to be aware of structural forms of inequality and racism and work to change these conditions. If the goal is to signify a preference for inclusive language and the need to avoid expressions or behavior that can be seen as excluding, marginalizing, or insulting groups defined by race, sex, gender, or disability, then these terms can have a moral and educational value. The problems emerge when notions such as woke are used to cancel, censure, or silence individuals, ideas, or phrases of which one disapproves. Thus, when people on the left engage in efforts to police other progressives for not being “woke” enough, then we are moving into the realm of banal power struggles that have little to no political, moral, or educational value. In this case, we believe that, despite what

might be considered good intentions (for instance, being politically correct), the result is a thoughtless rejection of terms like “person of color” and, even more troubling, potentially shutting down discussions rather than advancing them. Even when done with good intentions, in the name of a newly acquired wokeness, the suppression of “controversial terms” or opposing perspectives can often lead to shallow, uninspiring conversations that merely reinforce the participants’ existing beliefs. Put bluntly, there is limited educational value that can arise when a woke perspective engages with another, or even more radical, woke perspective. In contrast, when a woke opinion confronts a different, more traditional viewpoint, there is an opening for contested dialogue and genuine learning to take place. As Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas have taught us, such dialogues across differences are morally valuable because they are opportunities to view the other as a unique person that deserves to be treated with responsibility and dignity.¹⁰

To be perfectly clear, our analysis of the banality of evil and good is *not* meant to suggest a kind of moral equivalency between the two forms of banality. Evil that is thoughtless can bring about horrific death and destruction (as Arendt demonstrated with the case of Eichmann), whereas good that is banal does not produce such results since it is not motivated by malicious intentions and is generally informed by a vision of a better world. As Scarre reminds us, while the latter *is* banal, it can also be praiseworthy, and it is always preferable to doing evil. Still, our argument thus far is twofold: First, it is possible to characterize certain good deeds and words as banal in Arendt’s sense of the term, as thoughtless. Second, banally good discourses can be problematic when the original intention is inclusion, greater diversity, and social justice. In the next part of this paper, we develop this second point while examining some discourses on inclusion in education as case studies of the banality of good.

CHALLENGING DISCOURSES ON INCLUSION

In her book *Inclusion and Democracy*, Iris Marion Young points out that one of the most important norms in democratic societies is inclusion in decision-making:

Democracy entails political equality, that all members of the polity are included equally in the decision-making process and have an equal opportunity to influence the outcome. Inclusion increases the chances that those who make proposals will transform their positions from an initial self-regarding stance to a more objective appeal to justice, because they must listen to others with differing positions to whom they are also answerable. Even if they disagree with an outcome, political actors must accept the legitimacy of a decision if it was arrived at through an inclusive process of public discussion.¹¹

Young goes on to note that when the norm of inclusion is not followed, it becomes a powerful means for criticizing the legitimacy of seemingly democratic processes and decisions.

Of course, democracies often violate the norm of inclusion in politics, economic and social opportunities, and education, which explains why this issue has received a great deal of attention among progressives over the past several decades. The problem is, as Young points out, that most discussions on inclusion and exclusion in the context of democracy have focused on what she calls *external* exclusion. External exclusions are the most obvious and pertain to “those that keep some individuals or groups out of the fora of debate or processes of decision-making, or which allow some individuals or groups dominative control over what happens in them.”¹² Young maintains that, while no democratic society has done enough to challenge and limit external exclusions, a great deal of scholarly work, laws, and practices have been devoted to mitigating them. Examples of these include the deliberative democratic theories of John Rawls and Jurgen Habermas, laws that mandate including children with special needs in mainstream classrooms, and the practice of considering minority candidates in hiring and admission decisions.

However, Young insists that democratic theorists and practitioners have given much less attention to what she calls *internal* exclusion and inclusion. These more subtle types of exclusion happen when those in power dismiss or patronize the statements or expressions of those that have been newly admitted

into the decision-making process:

Though formally included in a forum or process, people may find that their claims are not taken seriously and may believe that they are not treated with equal respect. The dominant mood may find their ideas or modes of expression silly or simple, and not worthy of consideration. They may find that their experiences as relevant to the issues under discussion are so different from others' in the public that their views are discounted.¹³

Young calls these all-too-familiar experiences internal exclusions because they pertain to the ways that historically excluded groups lack effective opportunities to influence the thinking of others even after they obtain access to settings and procedures of decision-making.

According to Young, mainstream theories of deliberative democracy do not realize that their emphasis on argumentation and providing sound reasons for one's positions leads to internal exclusions based on idiom and style. She writes,

A norm of "articulateness" devalues the speech of those who make claims and give reasons, but not in a linear fashion that makes logical connections explicit. A norm of dispassionateness dismisses and devalues embodied forms of expression, emotion, and figurative expressions. People's contributions to a discussion tend to be excluded from serious consideration not because of what is said, but how it is said. Norms of orderliness sometimes exclude disruptive or emotional forms of expression that can be very effective in getting people's attention and making important points.¹⁴

Young's point is that a more comprehensive, nuanced, and thoughtful theory of democratic inclusion ought to encompass other modes of political communication besides making arguments, such as situated rhetoric and storytelling.

Another critique of how we talk about inclusion is offered by Linda Graham and Roger Slee in their article "An Illusory Interiority: Interrogating

the Discourse/s of Inclusion.” Graham and Slee draw on their experiences with the public education system in Queensland, Australia to make the case that the goal of including students with disabilities in regular classrooms is admirable but has not resulted in a more inclusive education in their country. In their words, “we contend that to include is not necessarily to *be* inclusive. To shift students around on the educational chessboard is not in or of itself inclusive.”¹⁵ The study by Graham and Slee illustrates that the Queensland model is based on some problematic assumptions about identity, difference, and academic trajectories, which have led to reform agendas that do no more than tinker around the edges to produce an appearance of more inclusive schools.

In order to substantiate their claim that current discourses on inclusion are misleading and banal, Graham and Slee draw on the critical theories of scholars like Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. For instance, Graham and Slee turn to Deleuze’s notion that we use language to constitute external reality to point out that the term inclusion “‘implies a *bringing in*; it presupposes a whole into which something (or someone) can be incorporated. It would be reasonable to argue that there is an implicit centered-ness to the term *inclusion*, for it discursively privileges notions of the pre-existing by seeking to include the Other into a prefabricated, naturalised space.”¹⁶ Likewise, Graham and Slee draw on Derrida’s insight that language contains the necessity of its own critique within itself in order to ask compelling questions about inclusion, such as: What do we mean when we talk about including? Into what do we seek to include? What happens when we include students into a mainstream classroom? And finally, whose interests are being served by the practice of inclusion?

Wrestling with such critical questions in the context of Foucault’s notion of discourses of power, Graham and Slee assert, forces us to recognize that much of the literature and scholarly conversations on inclusion have bought into an *illusory* notion of center and margin, which is then used to drive educational policies of inclusion and exclusion. They argue that the maintenance of these mythical notions of normalcy “‘results in an exercise of disciplinary power where alterity is subjected to perpetual rehabilitation through an intensification of normalising practices. Perhaps this is inclusion but it is not inclusive.”¹⁷ From this

perspective, talk of inclusion can only be made by those who occupy positions of privilege and are situated at the center, not the margins. Moreover, Graham and Slee remind us that most efforts to include do not question the underlying structures of power and normalcy that sustain those positions of privilege. As such, they believe, these efforts and the discourses of inclusion that inform them function to obscure and re(secure) the existing order of education in Australia and other democracies.

We bring up these two critiques of discourses of inclusion to illustrate the notion of the banality of good that was introduced earlier. Recall that we defined the banality of good as well-intentioned words or deeds that are motivated by democratic ideals but are not fully thought through and hence often result in shallow practices. The two critiques of the discourses of inclusion presented here are intended to support our contention that these discourses represent the banality of good. Young's assertion that discourses of inclusion in democracies tend to neglect subtle but damaging internal types of exclusions suggests that current efforts to address only external types of exclusions is misguided and not well thought-out. Similarly, the argument presented by Graham and Slee demonstrates that the discourse of inclusion in Australia not only serves to perpetuate current structures of power and privilege but has also failed to bring about educational practices that are more inclusive. As such, it makes sense to consider many of the current discourses of inclusion in education as cases of the banally good. These discourses are good since they are based on a vision of democratic ideals like equality and fairness. At the same time, these discourses are banal in the Arendtian sense of being shallow and not very well thought through. In the final part of this paper, we describe what a more thoughtful discourse of inclusion in education might look like.

FROM BANALITY TO THOUGHTFULNESS

Many discourses on inclusion in education do not consider that the focus of engaging with disadvantaged students should be on sustaining inclusive structures, which often involves challenging current exclusionary structures. This is not the same as the typical patchwork approach that Alfredo Artiles and Elizabeth Kozleski claim "revolves around moving students from one type of

space to another.”¹⁸ Rather than just shuffling people around in mainstream spaces or keeping up with trendy discourses, the conditions that constitute mainstream structures need to be directly confronted. In Artiles, Harris-Muri, and Rostenberg’s review of various discourses of inclusion, they identify a prevailing assumption that achieving inclusion or access alone will lead to social transformation.¹⁹ However, that is not always the case. This assumption fails to consider the experiences—the everyday enactments—of students’ complex intersectional identities *after* accessing particular physical settings or resources. For instance, not all minority identities share the same experiences. Being a white woman with a disability in STEM is very different from being an able-bodied Black woman in STEM. Without an understanding of the multidimensional aspects of experience, the practice of inclusion tends to ignore intersectional differences by focusing on individual cases, which can “obscure the structural and systemic factors associated with power, privilege, and systemic oppression.”²⁰ It is not enough to open doors to spaces if those spaces are not inviting.

Like Artiles and Kozleski, we believe that educators ought to think deeply about the everyday enactments of inclusive policies and practices and ask whether those enactments actually transform existing structures of exclusion. By asking this question, we move discourses of inclusion closer toward social justice, the view that systems of oppression must be dismantled in order to distribute resources more equitably across social identity groups. When inclusion becomes aligned with social justice, the goal of inclusion is not just to critique but to transform spaces, systems, and people. Artiles, Harris-Muri, and Rostenberg capture this point by citing Carol Christensen:

For inclusion to live up to its promise of social justice, future work must craft and test transformative models that tackle individual as well as historical and structural forces because the “transformation of the social identity of one group [e.g., the dis-abled, the culturally different racial minority] will not occur if the social identity of the other group [e.g., the abled, the cultureless European American] remains intact.”²¹

If one accepts the premise that focusing our efforts on ways to *include* disadvantaged students into regular classrooms is good yet banal, then a more thoughtful discourse of inclusion will need to go far beyond the issue of *how* to integrate these students. A thoughtful discourse of inclusion acknowledges the contradictions, limitations, and assumptions inherent in any approach. Such discourse is deeply critical in analysis and reflexivity, but also embraces, as Lee Anne Bell suggests, “participatory strategies in which distribution of resources, access, and social cohesion constitutes the foundation of democratic egalitarian alternatives.”²² The point is that educators must hold honest discussions about inclusion and what it means to be inclusive, but they must also work toward the meaningful change of traditional structures in education that are exclusionary and marginalize students that are perceived as other.

We recognize that there are many models, strategies, and frameworks that cross disciplinary fields related to inclusion, each with its own limitations and contested concepts. Engaging in these discourses always involves a deliberate negotiation that calls into question the outcomes and identities of the participants. Therefore, our conclusion is that we should embrace a both/and approach. Such an approach consists of empowering individuals and critiquing dominant community values; sustaining social cohesion and addressing the needs of particular identities; providing access and following through with systemic support; negotiating institutional forces; and consciously redistributing resources to the most marginalized groups. We can debate the appropriate terms for racial minority individuals while at the same time directly addressing apparatuses that marginalize individuals based on race.

To return to Arendt, we have seen that banality is defined by the ordinary and the commonplace, qualities that signal the opposite of being thoughtful and reflective. Ultimately, we propose that educators challenge “current narratives of inclusion and equality through drawing a moral line which resists the inclusion of anyone or anything which works to harm the most vulnerable in society.”²³ By challenging banal narratives of inclusion, we take a step closer to genuine transformation and thoughtful inclusivity in education. Acknowledging that inclusion requires educators to actually *be* inclusive requires us to

recognize that it is not so much an individual student who is “in need,” either because of cognitive ability, socioeconomic status, or race or gender. Rather, it is a system of education that is in desperate “need” of a critical negotiation of engagement.²⁴ Attending to the ways in which certain discourses of inclusion are informed by a banal good would benefit philosophers of education in their efforts to have a more thoughtful conversation about inclusivity in education.

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