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Towards Linguistic and Disability Justice in Education

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The use of terms like social justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion have exploded in recent years within the field of education, highlighting the increased attention to issues of power and social change. However, scholars have shown the vague and nebulous ways in which such terms and concepts are deployed in ways that ultimately serve to uphold systems of oppression (Ahmed, 2012; Urciuoli, 2010). Thus, it is imperative to attend to how different stakeholders, communities, and groups conceive of such work. In this essay, we offer a starting point for examining the intersection of linguistic and disability justice as a way for us, as language education scholars concerned with social justice, to unpack and trouble how notions of justice are conceptualized and operationalized in education. Disability justice affords us a framework through which to attend to students who are multiply marginalized in language education.

We follow Tuck and Yang's (2018) lead in *Toward What Justice?*— rather than delineating specific goals of social movements or proffering a unified or normative conceptualization of justice, we examine justice as *projects* that are developed in specific contexts and communities, and with specific purposes. For Tuck and Yang, justice is not a framework, epistemological stance, or axiology, but rather, the *practice* of justice. They state, “we use

project as a way to refer to the worldview combined with strategy combined with motive combined with practices and habits” (p. 7, emphasis added). Thus, this essay explores how linguistic and disability justice have been practiced in order to bring together different justice projects and how they comprise “serious work at the nexus of staunch tension” (Tuck & Yang, 2018, p. 8) that can allow for seemingly incommensurate justice projects (e.g., Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Therefore, instead of assuming that all justice projects have the same means and goals, it is imperative to highlight the contradictions and inconsistencies evident in competing justice projects. For example, within both language education and education pertaining to students with disabilities, many activists and educators advocate for ensuring disability rights or linguistic human rights (LHR) (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000), asking for protections and rights for disabled students and for students to have rights to a language-related identity and access to their mother tongue. However, scholars studying both language and disability have challenged the affordances of a rights-based framework; considering LHR, Makoni (2013) also questions the ways that a rights-based framework does or doesn't account for those who are marginalized within each group or straddle both identities. Similarly, coming from a

feminist crip-of-color perspective, Jina Kim (2017) argues that a rights-based framework assumes that justice practitioners seek salvation from the state, pointing to differences in theories and practices of social change among different groups and constituencies.

In fact, many education scholars who study justice, language, and/or disability in and out of education have moved away from focusing on rights, troubling the notion that policy changes are the sole way for social change to occur. Flores and Chaparro (2018), for example, point to the importance of attending to the material dimensions of policy, while others have pointed to the interest convergence that occur when organizing and activist efforts become institutionalized (e.g., inclusion efforts for students with disabilities and the ways that special education legislation reifies ableism and racism, Beratan, 2006; Latinx activists and the Bilingual Education Act, Sung, 2017). Also imperative is the understanding that legislation pertaining to language and disability are often race-evasive, entrenching rather than weakening the ways that students of color are disproportionately classified as in need of remediation because of language or disability (Phuong, 2021). This demonstrates the complexity of social justice, particularly in considering who is struggling for what purposes and for what ends, as well as who and what gets erased. The multiplicity and complexity of the category of disability also mediates the ways that language education often marginalizes, erases, and/or invisibilizes students, teachers, and other stakeholders with disabilities.

While many other conceptualizations of social justice exist, we pay particular attention to the ways that disability justice and linguistic justice efforts coincide. The importance of considering both lies in Lorde's (1982) insistence that we do not live single-issue lives. Students who are classified as having a disability and as an English Learner, for example, often receive fewer resources and lower expectations in both bilingual and monolingual education settings, as well as both general education and special education settings due to their multiple marginalization (Ehlers-Zavala, 2011). Cioè-Peña (2017) points to an *intersectional gap* for such

students, especially pointing to the ways that policy does *not* allow for intersectionally addressing the needs of students who are both language-minoritized and classified as disabled.

Thus, it is important to consider how ableism, racism, and linguicism converge and diverge. What would it look like to center the needs of a Latinx student with a speech impairment? An autistic linguistically-minoritized Black student? A deaf Asian American student? An Indigenous student with a learning disability who wants to learn the language of their community? What does it mean to specifically attend to linguistic minoritization not only as a euphemism for racism that is tied to language, but also to consider how students with disabilities are linguistically minoritized and positioned as languageless all together? What might it afford us to explicitly foreground ableism in the construction of standardizing and normalizing language practices and policies that construct language minoritization to assumptions undergirding the ways that problems are framed and addressed?

To that end, we return to Tuck and Yang's (2018) notion of justice *projects*, beginning specifically with the project of disability justice, which emerged in the 2000s. The principles of disability justice include emphasizing the wholeness of individuals regardless of pathologization, the importance of interdependence, and leadership of the most impacted, among others (Sins Invalid, 2019). Rather than provide specific, operative definitions of disability justice, Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) emphasizes the indeterminate nature of what counts as disability justice. They highlight the ways that disability justice requires relationship-building and constant reflexivity, exploring the ways that generative conflicts can and will arise in organizing spaces. Their tome on disability justice offers narratives of historical and contemporary disability justice practices, underscoring the local and context-dependent nature of organizing. Similarly, some sociolinguistic justice work, such as Bucholtz et al.'s (2014), is also more concerned with creating ethical partnerships with community members and doing research that emerges from the needs and inquiries

of the communities that researchers work with. They argue for the importance of sociolinguistic justice being “rooted in practice rather than policy” (p. 146), similar to the arguments laid out above.

One of the core principles of disability justice as outlined by Sins Invalid (2019) is the importance of “leadership of those most impacted” (p. 23). This means that when approaching the intersection of disability and language, we have to center the needs of and look to the leadership and guidance of those who are marginalized by ableism and linguistic discrimination. This includes considering the theoretical ways we make sense of language, such as presuming competence (Biklen & Burke, 2005) and changing our practices as we inhabit white normative perceiving positions to assess the language practices of others (e.g., Cioè-Peña, 2020; Rosa & Flores, 2017). Henner (2021) powerfully offers a framework of crip linguistics to decenter normativity in language, which includes considering multimodality and expanding understandings of culture to include disability. Rather than introducing this concept in print, Henner filmed a video in which he uses American Sign Language instead, again countering hegemonic norms of knowledge production and dissemination in academia.

Disability justice also has implications for pedagogical practices and teaching philosophies. Cioè-Peña’s TrUDL (2021) framework that examines the overlaps between translanguaging and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) or Waitoller and Thorius’ (2016) exploration of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies and UDL highlight the fruitful ways in which pedagogical practices and philosophies that emerge to specifically address the needs of multiply marginalized students can afford more equitable

practices in the classroom. Continuing to practice and refine these frameworks and pedagogical tools, considering the local contexts and communities, would be crucial for practicing justice in the classroom.

In addition to teaching, it is also imperative to consider our responsibility as scholars and educators, as well as the limits of scholarship. For example, Angela Reyes (2010) reminds us that the speech practices of Black communities in the United States have been widely analyzed and valorized as legitimate within the field of sociolinguistics. However, as Baker-Bell (2020) points out, “Black people and Black language scholars keep having to remind y’all that it is a legit language” (p.13). This points to the constraints of solely disseminating scholarship as part of the sociolinguistic justice project of the Principle of Error Correction (Lewis, 2018), highlighting the importance of researcher reflexivity and centering the needs of linguistically-minoritized communities and disabled communities (e.g., Zavala, 2018).

We end this essay not with a straightforward definition of justice, since that would be counterintuitive to the vision of educational justice to settle on one definition or one approach. Living under the sign of justice (Tuck and Yang, 2018) means continuously challenging everything we think we know about language, disability, and its intersections in language education, aligned with disability justice’s focus on relationality, reflexivity, and care. In this way, we can work towards confronting the pillars of white supremacy and ableism (Bucholtz et al., 2014), and as Baker-Bell (2020) concludes, “to create something we ain’t never seen before!” (p. 101).

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