Reflecting on a Daughter's Bilingualism and disAbility Narratively

Hyun Uk Kim

Barry University

To cite this article: Malak, M. S., Sharma, U., & Deppeler, J. M. (2017). Development of a scale for measuring teachers' attitudes toward students' inappropriate behaviour. *International Journal of Whole Schooling, 13*(1), 21-34.

Abstract

This paper explores societal perceptions of a child's disability and bilingualism through the author's observations and reflections. Drawing from the observations of the child in different public schools in the United States, the author shares how the child has been viewed differently and similarly by school personnel. By reflecting on different perceptions of the bilingual child with a disability label, the author promotes least restrictive attitudes toward *all* in schools and society.

Keywords: Bilingualism, disAbility, Attitudes, and Public Education

Introduction

This is a narrative story of my bilingual daughter, who was given a disability label at 27 months. I retell our personal stories to share how deeply interwoven disability, ability, and attitudes are, especially for bilingual children with a disability label in public schools in the United States. This presumably 'personal' story of mine resonates quite powerfully when considering the shifts in demographics in the U.S. society and schools.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau data collected from 2009 to 2013, 62 million (i.e., one in five residents) speak a language other than English at home, and 27.2 million or 44 percent of them were born in the U.S. Among the school-aged children ranging from 5 to 17, one in five speaks a foreign language at home, and roughly one in three students in Texas, Nevada, and New York speak a language other than English at home (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2015). National Center for Education Statistics (2015) further reports that approximately 13 percent of students, that is 6.4 million, between ages 3 to 21, received special education services in 2012-2013.

Despite dramatic shifts in demographics and diversified characteristics represented in the classrooms, many general and special educators feel unprepared to meet the needs of students with culturally and linguistically diverse students with disabilities (Garcia & Ortiz, 2006; Utley, Obiakor, & Bakken, 2011). Educators' lack of knowledge and reluctant inclination toward these students have created prevalent misunderstandings that students with disabilities cannot and should not be bilingual, and that English should be the only instructional language, through pull-out services (Cheatham & Hart Barnett, 2016). In addition, the perspective that associated bilingualism with disability (Connor & Boskin, 2001) has led English Language Learners to be disproportionately represented in special education programs (Artiles, Harry, Reschly & Chinn, 2002; Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 2005), a persistent concern for over four decades (Dunn, 1968). It may be "because society in general, and schools in particular, define this as a problem, the purpose of education becomes the elimination of all signs of the native language" (Nieto, 1992, p. 115). Similarly, a student with a disability label are perceived as someone with a "problem" inherently in him or her, and the purpose of education becomes the elimination of all signs of "problems" in segregated educational settings although education in inclusive classrooms can benefit these students and increase their academic achievement (Snell, 2009; Wehmeyer, 2011).

The federal legislations such as the No Child Left Behind Act [NCLB] (United States Congress, 2002) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act [IDEIA] (United States Congress, 2004) have given impetus to this perspective. For example, if your native language is a language other than English, and if you come from a home environment where a language other than English is dominant, you become limited English proficient (LEP). Due to your LEP, you are provided with specialized services and assessments to ensure that you succeed in school, work, and life (Hakuta, 2011). NCLB further mandates that all states must have a means to identify those with LEP. The vast majority of states have adopted home language surveys (HLS) as an identification tool (Bailey & Kelly, 2010; 2013); however, the validity of HLS has been raised and questioned, as HLS have been used as a sole measure to identify English language learners (Bailey & Kelly, 2013), in addition to inconsistent LEP classifications across and within states (Abedi, 2004; Bailey & Kelly, 2010; Goldenberg & Rutherford Quach, 2010).

In a similar vein, the Child Find mandate in IDEA (2004) requires all school districts to identify, locate, and evaluate all children with disabilities from birth to 21 in order to provide them with a free appropriate public education (FAPE), including special education and related services that are "designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment and independent living" (20 U.S.S. 1400[d]). The current IDEA frames and interprets disability as individual pathology or deficit that needs to be identified, located, evaluated, and intervened; however, disability must be interpreted in its social, cultural, and historical context (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012) as it can be a social system (Valle & Connor, 2011) and/or educational contexts that disable students.

The purpose of this paper is two-fold. First, it is to narratively share the experiences of a bilingual child with a disability label in U.S. public schools. Using a first-account narrative story as the mother of a bilingual child with a disability label, I retell our stories to expose how she has been placed either in the most restrictive environment in one school or in the least restrictive one in another. Second, I reflect further on our personal stories as a teacher educator to explore why bilingualism and disability continue to be perceived as a "problem," and what must be done to foster a school culture where *all* students are welcomed and feel belonged, regardless of who they are, where they come from, and what they speak.

Mother to Daughter

My husband and I picked a Korean name to give to our child long before she was born and collected books both in Korean and Engish to raise our child to appreciate both cultures that she would be exposed to: Korean and American. Jinhee[1] was born in 2005, and my husband and I exposed her to Korean as her native language, with an equal exposure to English through conversations, books, and media. She said her first word in Korean at around nine months. At 15 months, she started communicating with us in single words. She was able to understand us, but had a hard time expressing herself in words. Nonetheless, she enjoyed scribbling as a toddler and used drawings as a form of communication when we could not understand what she meant and wanted. We cherished her drawing, and it soon became the most dominant form of her communication in our household.

At around 26 months, during a regular check-up, the pediatrician of Jinhee's recommended speech evaluation for her, knowing that she could not communicate her needs and wants with spoken words. I followed up with the doctor's recommendation as I am aware of the benefits of early interventions, especially for language development. Within weeks, a monolingual English speaking evaluator came to our home to assess Jinhee's speech. The evaluator used two different standardized language assessments, normed for English speakers, to evaluate Jinhee's receptive and expressive language abilities in English. A month later, we were notified that she scored two standard deviations below the norm, which made her eligible for early intervention services with the diagnosis of Speech or Language Impairments (SLI).

At age 27 months, identified as a child with SLI, she began receiving early intervention speech services twice a week. A speech teacher came home to provide services and she also incorporated basic sign language with spoken words. Jinhee absorbed sign language like a sponge and used it immediately with us. She signed, drew, and spoke to communite with us and so did we. When she signed, we accompanied her signs with spoken words. When she drew to communite with us, we taught her the corresponding spoken words. She was free to use any form of communication she felt comfortable using with us. In a few months, it was time for a transition meeting to prepare Jinhee for her preschool in January 2009. Two representatives from a nearby elementary school came home for the transition meeting and we discussed our hopes and expectations for Jinhee with them. My husband and I were confident that Jinhee would have a seamless transition to her preschool.

One day I sent an email to Jinhee's classroom teacher to inquire how Jinhee had been in school. I was told that she had not been saying any words in the classroom, and that the only time she would hear Jinhee say anything was at dismissal when she saw someone familiar to her: her parents. Did her teacher expect JinHee with an SLI label to remain silent, quiet in class? Did Jinhee's label enter the classroom before she did (McDermott, 1993)? Was the teacher not aware of the recommendations from the transition meeting? Rather than altering the classroom environment and teaching strategies to accommodate her needs, her teacher let Jinhee remain quiet in the classroom for month.

This incident led my husband and me to consider moving to another school district in a more affluent school district with more rigorous education programs that allocates far more resources in education. Assured by the school data and reputation, we were confident that Jinhee would have teachers who took an interest in her and see her before her label.

Mother to Teacher

In 2010, Jinhee began attending a different public preschool and continued receiving pull-out speech services twice a week under the care and guidance of presumably excellent team members. At the Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) meeting with the team members, however, the speech teacher told us that we needed to immerse Jinhee into more English at home. The speech teacher knew we communicated in Korean at home, in addition to English, and seemed to assume that Jinhee's exposure to Korean hindered her progress in English. However, if more exposure to English were to 'cure' her English, Jinhee's Korean should have been considerably more advanced than her English. In order to raise Jinhee bilingually, my husband and I decided to speak more Korean at home as Jinhee was exposed mainly in English at school. As she spent more time at home, her exposure to Korean exceeded that of English, and yet it was the drawing that Jinhee used more fluently and frequently to communicate her needs and wants with us.

Emerging research contends that bilingualism does not lead to language delays even for children with special needs (Cheatham, Santos & Ro, 2007) and with autism (Hambley & Fombonne, 2012; Petersen, 2010; Yu, 2015). Despite these research findings, teachers and professionals whom I have encountered seem to still believe that bilingualism in children with disabilities is nothing but an impediment in language development. Nonetheless, we continued immersing Jinhee into Korean as a means of preserving her Korean cultural identities and heritages through the language.

The following fall Jinhee started kindergarten and continued speech services twice per week.

One day, I received a letter from her school noting that Jinhee was identified as an English Langauge Learner (ELL) or a child who would benefit from ELL services. This resulted from the Home Language Survey (HLS) that I filled out earlier in the school year as part of mandatory school registration process. In the survey, there were these three questions: "What language(s) do you speak to your child?" "What language did your child first hear or speak?" "What language(s) does your child speak at home with adults?" (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2010). I provided information on the survey that we speak another language at home, and that Jinhee is exposed to another language at home. Although Jinhee has been identified as a child with SLI, receiving speech services since she was 27 months old, the results from the mandatory home language survey was used to identify, classify potential ELLs, and evaluate them for ELL services (National Research Council, 2011). I sent an email to the school psychologist to inquire more, and she responded through an email:

> I spoke to the ELL teacher. She said that the procedure here is that the secretary takes any of the "Dominant Language" forms that indicate a second language and pass them on to the ELL teacher for testing. Which is what was done. I sent the copy of the test home today with Jinhee. ELL services do not take away from speech services, but can be a complementary support. ELL would be a pull out service so it is your decision as to whether or not you would like her to participate. (September 7, 2010)

The nature of complementary ELL services and the statement that "ELL services do not take away from speech services" is quite disquieting and can be very misleading. As a school with only a half-day kindergarten program, the complementary pull-out ELL service is subject to take more time away from the classroom. The ELL screening process, often gathered only through home language surveys, is used to identify all children raised in a bilingual household to mandatorily evaluate them for their English proficiency. Awaiting its place in Jinhee's public education was another label, ELL, only because she was exposed to another language at home.

A few days later, I received a note from her classroom teacher. It reads, "Jinhee had a hard time telling me what she did over the weekend. She did end up telling me she went fishing with her dad." Jinhee and her classmates were asked about what they did over the weekend. Although other children were readily able to give a verbal response to the teacher's inquiry, Jinhee must have taken longer time answering. In reality, we had not gone fishing and had not talked about going fishing even once. As a child with a talent in art, her teacher could have asked her to draw what she did over the weekend as she could draw better than she could speak (see Fig. 1), only if her teacher had spent some time to get to know her. However, the teacher appeared to be concerned only with Jinhee's verbal communication abilities, as verbal communication abilities are considered the solely appropriate, favorable form of communication (Wexler, 2009) and acceptable form of participation (Collins, 2011) in her classroom.

Another incident further illustrates how teachers and professionals perceived Jinhee at her school. During the third week of the school year, I was asked to come in for a conference with the classroom teacher and the speech teacher. The speech teacher told me that the meeting was convened to inform me that Jinhee had Auditory Processing Disorder (APD). Trying my best to keep my poise, I asked what made them give Jinhee a diagnosis. I also asked whether they knew Jinhee had been receiving speech therapies since she was 27 months old. No answer from either

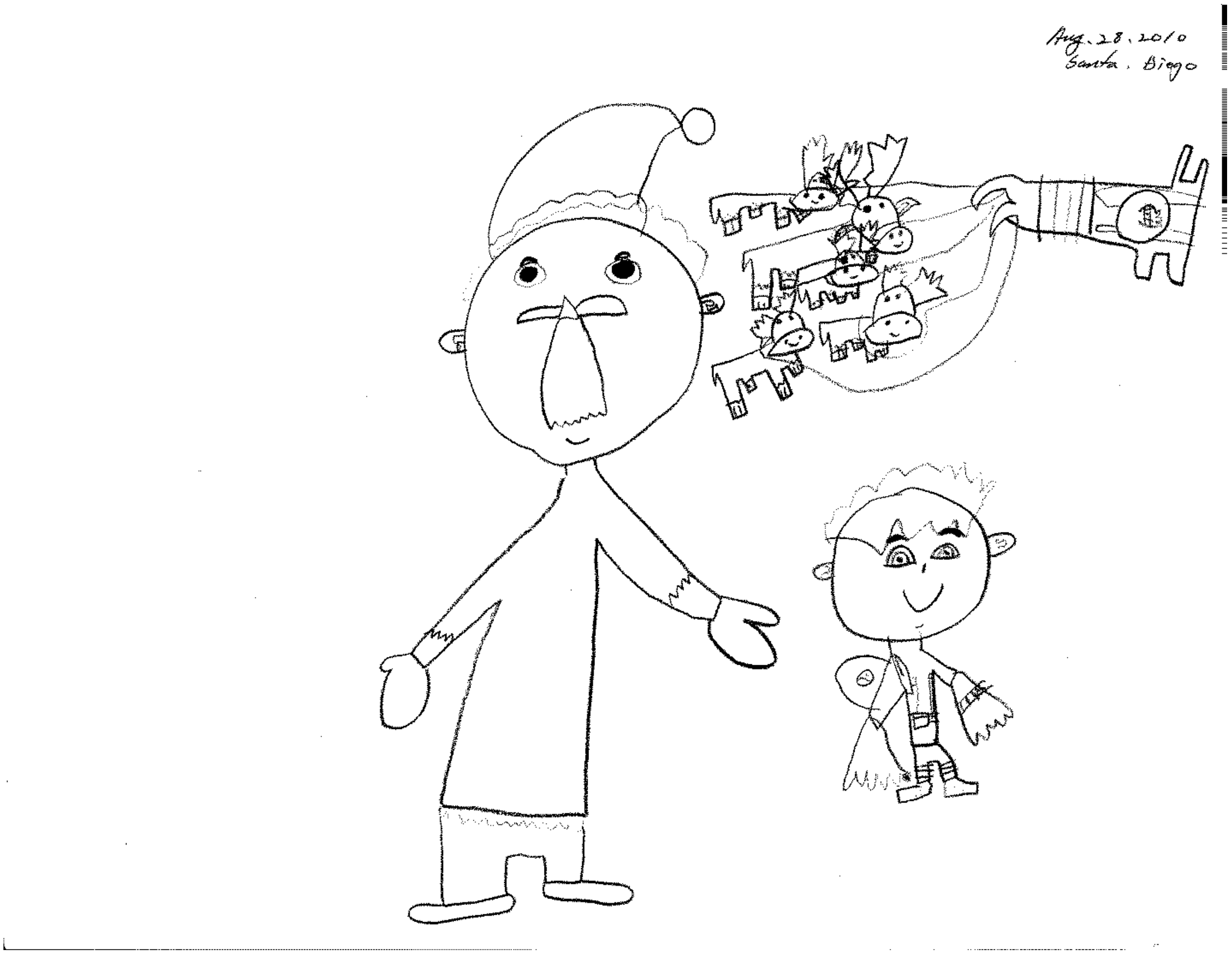

Figure 1. Santa with Diego (2010).

of them. Another question posed to them: Did you know Jinhee is exposed to two languages? A blank look on their faces. Apparently neither the classroom teacher nor the speech therapist took the time to get to know Jinhee, or read her file, even before the meeting with the parent of a child. Instead, they were very quick to label Jinhee with APD during the third week of the school year, only after the speech teacher spent only one or two encounters with Jinhee. Although Jinhee's classroom teacher was present at the meeting, she did not share or comment on what the speech teacher or I had to say. Perhaps the classroom teacher was in agreement with the speech teacher, based on her observations of Jinhee in class, as evidenced in an earlier note. Jinhee was quickly flagged for her inabilities to speak in a given context. Teachers' expectations and understandings about children are directly related to students' performances (Ivey, 2007; Biklen & Burke, 2006), and yet Jinhee's teachers only saw what she *could not* do, as opposed to what she *could* do.

Disability to disAbility

Jinhee has been viewed by many school personnel that something is 'wrong' with Jinhee, and that it is upto school districts and federal government to remedy her disability and bilingualism so that she is able to function in general education classrooms. This reflects the medical model of disability, which conceptualizes disability as a deficit in a person that must be rectified (Siebers, 2008). The legally-binding and mandated special education system of the U.S. has inevitably solidified the belief that disability is internal to the individual. It becomes more apparent with the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), which, for instance, defines Speech or Language Impairment (SLI) as follows:

> Speech or language impairment means a communication disorder, such as stuttering, articulation, a language impairment, or a voice impairment, that adversely affects a child's educational performance. (Part 300 a 300.8 c 11)

SLI does not exist alone: it must be understood in a context, as the given context provides a meaning to a disability, making it more salient in one context than another. This was the case of my daughter who used drawings to communicate her needs and wants. Jinhee would have excelled in art classrooms where the communication mode is not necessarily spoken words. When the most fundamental statute in the current special education system, known as IDEA (2004), treats, attributes, and defines disability as internal to the individual in a legitimated ableist system, it is almost understandable why many schools, districts, teachers and professionals abide to operate and educate students with disability labels as well as culturally, linguistically diverse backgrounds under the deficit perspective, as did some of Jinhee's teachers.

Labeling of individuals in the U.S. has become a legal exercise. Through the Child Find mandate, Jinhee was already tagged as a toddler to be located, identified, and referred to a system commissioned to fix her differences through the medicalization of disability, which "casts human variation as deviance from the norm, as pathological condition, as deficit, and, significantly, as an individual burden and personal tragedy" (Linton, 1998, p.11). Jinhee has consistently been viewed as having a deficit that needed to be rectified by the society and institutions. She was compared to a monolingual, abelist society's expectation of what a child with tyical development should look, talk, and behave like; it was her deviation from the norm and exposure to another language at home that rightfully deemed her to be eligible for free language intervention services and ELL services.

When monolingual verbal communication is the only acceptable and allowed mode of expression and participation, it fails to include students who present themselves differently from the arbitrary standards set in the classroom. It appears, in many classrooms in the U.S., that studens are expected to act, learn, behave, respond, react, and understand in the same way (Kluth & Straut, 2003). It was through this deficit-based medical model of disability that Jinhee was perceived and bombarded with misunderstandings and misconceptions, always preceding long before her teachers knew Jinhee as an individual and a learner. Jinhee could have communicated through her drawings fluently, only if she were given opportunities to share her fluency;

however, her diverse languages were not appreciated in mainstream classrooms where spoken English was only accepted form of the language. Her differences as a learner with a disability as well as with culturally and linguistically different backgrounds were targeted as flaws that impeded her learning and her belongingness in the classroom. Indeed, teachers and school professionals perceived Jinhee who is different in terms of language, race, ethnicity, and abilities as deficient rather than different (Nieto, 2005).

In order to confront the dominant societal and cultural perspectives that assume deficiency in people with disabilities and differences based on the arbitrary norm and, more importantly, to create inclusive, accessible schools for *all* (Connor, Gabel, Gallagher & Morton, 2008), disability must be "viewed …through a social lense, as a series of historical, cultural, and social responses to human difference" (Valle & Connor, 2011, p. xi). It is not the individuals with disabilities and differences are not abnormal and must not be fixed to make them "whole and healthy" (Solis, 2004), but "it is the society which disables physically impaired people" (Oliver, 1996, p. 22) "by this physical structure and social organization of society" (Wendell, 1996, p. 39), including expectations and attitudes of people within any given society (Vygotsky as cited in Gindis, 1999).

Special Education to Gifted Education

In 2011, just two months after Jinhee began second grade, we had to move to a nearby urban city, not in a search of even more rigorous programs and systems, but in reconciliation of personal conflicts. My husband and I were very apprehensive about the move as we would soon be living in an urban school district with the worst reputation with regard to graduation, performance rates, and poverty-driven issues in the entire state. As with many schools in urban settings, her new school was ethnically and linguistically diverse, compared to other schools that Jinhee had previously attended. At her former school, for example, there was not a single professional staff of color, with only 1.9 percent of students from bilingual homes, while 28 percent of staff come from diverse backgrounds, with 38.8 percent of students from bilingual homes at Jinhee's current school as of 2012 (Connecticut Education).

Within a few weeks in the new school, it was time for report card conference. The teacher reported that Jinhee works well with all her new peers, asks intelligent questions, and actively participates in class. Quite surprised at the teacher's praises, I thanked for and acknowledged her praises, and inquired about Jinhee's speech services. The teacher responded that she was not aware of Jinhee's services let alone her disability. Jinhee's teacher, certified both in general and special education, further shared that she did not notice any delays in Jinhee's language and speech. Had she seen any needs in Jinhee's speech and language, she might have inquired more. To comply with the IDEA regulations, Jinhee continued with speech services, twice per week, until she was reassessed by speech teachers the following year.

In April 2013, a triennial IEP meeting was convened to review Jinhee's reevaluation results to determine her continuing eligibility for special education services. For her triennial reevaluation, Jinhee was reassessed with a battery of tests, including classroom observations, parent reports, and review of IEP goals and objectives. Comprehensive test results showed that her receptive and expressive language skills were within the average range of functioning, and that Jinhee successfully met all of her IEP goals and objectives, further evidenced throughout the speech therapy sessions.

Within six months of our reluctant move, Jinhee exited from special education based on her triennial comprehensive reevaluation, therapy sessions, and the IEP meeting. Did Jinhee meticulously become 'cured' from her 'disability' within a few months? I think not. Would Jinhee have exited from special education at the former school based on her triennial reevaluation? Probably. One thing has remained constant: Jinhee, the bilingual child with a disability label. What has changed was the people in the environment that Jinhee inhabits at a given context that determines and interprets what or who she is and should be.

In fall 2013, Jinhee began third grade and completed it with three honor roll recognitions. Jinhee just began fourth grade in the same urban school district where we were initially so reluctant to send her to. She was also selected as a gifted and talented student, spending one day a week with an enriched curriculum. Would Jinhee have been selected as a gifted and talented student at her former school? I hope so.

Fellow Educator to Fellow Educator

As I reflect on our move in search for better school environments for Jinhee, one thing seems to matter more than others: people (Ivey, 2007; Biklen & Burke, 2006). Although people, including many educators, share their apprehension toward the school district that we currently live in, we are very content with the school: rather, I am content with the people that Jinhee is receiving her education from. Whereas those in schools in a more affluent town, or far less diverse school districts, were very apprehensive about Jinhee, about who she is and about what she has, that is, her bilingualism and disability, the people in this urban school district, which I had been warned numerous times not to live in, saw Jinhee as who she is, not as who she should be.

All of Jinhee's teachers have been White Caucasian females, including her current fourth grade teacher, regardless of which school she has attended so far. It is not new that predominantly White female teachers have been teaching students of color in U.S. classrooms, with as high as 82 percent of public school teachers being non-Hispanic White (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014), as evidenced by a plethora of literature about White teachers who bring very limited cross-cultural background, knowledge, experience and attitudes toward urban students (Barry & Lechner, 1995; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Gilbert, 1995; Picower, 2009; Sleeter, 2001).

As I have walked with my daughter through her journey in and out of special education, I realize that Jinhee *is* the epitome of these recurring and persistent concerns and struggles of the past as well as of the present. Her educators affected her learning and being tremendously. Jinhee encountered teachers and school personnel who practice with little or no knowledge about diverse students, and those who, once a label has been assigned, attribute all of the child's differences to a disability (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999) and to diverse backgrounds.

As Christensen (2008) eloquently put, teachers have the power to "signal to students from the moment they step into a school, whether they belong or whether [teachers] see them as trespassers" (p. 62). Jinhee, one of the many diverse students in this diverse school, was not viewed as a trespasser: She was one of the many, not one in a very few. Additionally, once considered as deficient parents to raise a bilingual child in a predominantly monolingual school district, we were perceived as extremely competent parents who support a bilingual and talented child in a diverse school district.

In order to create welcoming school environments regardless of students' abilities, backgrounds, cultures, and languages, school personnel must "overcome the widespread tendency to view culturally and linguistically diverse children from a deficit perspective" (Klingner & Artiles, 2003, p. 70) and those with disability labels. It is also imperative that teachers "dance in partnership on that floor of knowledge" (Biklen & Burke, 2006, p. 169) by presuming competence and holding high expectations for *all* students. These are the teachers who appreciate their students for who they are, not who they should be, according to the dominant cultural norms and perspectives. When teachers embrace and celebrate diversity manifested in different abilities, languages, and backgrounds among their students, they, then, help their students become empowered and appreciate diversities in others to create a more just society. As Zaks (2010) states, "the call for a just and tolerant society is not a liberal plea for more welfare, but rather the desperate cry of a civilization that will cease to function without the diversity that fuels human endeavor and compassion (para. 33)."

In order for Jinhee and many more Jinhees yet to arrive in classrooms today and tomorrow, each one of us must "promote social justice, equitable and inclusive educational opportunities, and full and meaningful access to *all* aspects of society for people labeled with disability/ disabled people" ([emphasis added] Connor et al., 2008, p. 448) and with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. After all, this should be the crux of public education and the entitlement of every human being in a democratic society, as "any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely…[and] destroys our democracy" (Dewey, 1900/1968, p. 3).

Note.

1. It is a pseudonym.

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