

The Power of Home, and the Home of Power

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Lest the reader take the premise that all students deserve to “be at home” in education as uncontroversial, let me unequivocally attest that Furman has entered radical ground. Not only is it well documented that “contemporary education tends to require children to assimilate to a pre-determined norm,”¹ but also this assimilation serves the function of maintaining “home” as an able-bodied, white, heteronormative, nativist space of learning.² Against the backdrop of the deeply inhospitable, where being human is no guarantee of one’s inclusion in humanity, Cara Furman’s argument is a call to reclaim the space of the classroom as a space for all humans. Radically, then, Furman offers us a deeply engaging article that beautifully weaves together difficult ethical and epistemological questions in inclusive education, and offers us a window into holistic practice, challenging us all to be more thoughtful teachers. I here endeavor both to affirm the significance of Furman’s work for philosophers and teacher educators alike – and those of us who straddle these worlds – and, in an effort to promote deep engagement with the insights Furman provides, to offer some potential complications and lingering questions.

Furman’s article is a reminder that engaging in inclusive practice in education is, first and foremost, epistemological. From the skepticism and fear of educators in encountering students who resist classroom norms of ability and behavior, to the danger of labels as epistemic resources, to the power of descriptive inquiry as a tool of knowledge, Furman shows us that inclusion is not simply attitudinal or structural, but necessarily a way of knowing about humans in and of educational contexts. The framing of classroom inclusion in terms of hospitality re-focuses the formal right to the classroom space towards a right to *influence* the educational space, indeed to transform it into one that centers children’s diverse ways of knowing and being. Furman’s use of stories – and the vulnerability of her own teaching reflections – off-sets the descriptions that labels impose onto students, portrayals that fail to describe students in the

richness that hospitality necessitates. Each of these arguments demonstrates that efforts at substantive inclusion – creating the conditions for students “to be at home” – require deep epistemological work.

Furman suggests that inquiry into children’s ways of knowing about their experiences replaces the pre-packaged sense-making that comes through diagnoses and labels. This inquiry is not outcome-oriented, but rather open-ended, aimed at a rich description that allows “the subject time to speak, to show itself.”³ Furman writes in one excerpt of her advice to a student: “One must suspend one’s understanding to assume that there is coherency to each person’s perceptions and perspective.”⁴ I find this call beautifully reminiscent of what Douglas Biklen and Jamie Burke described as “presuming competence.”⁵ To presume competence “educators must assume students can and will change and, that through engagement with the world, will demonstrate complexities of thought and action that could not necessarily be anticipated.”⁶ Thus, while Thomas’ behaviors or ways of being in the classroom may befuddle and irritate his teachers – while he may not make sense to them – Furman advises her students that “there’s a good chance he makes sense to himself.”⁷ Here, Furman offers what is perhaps the most poignant line in this powerful article. It reflects a view of the inadequacy of normalized ways of knowing, and how the encounter with the child *reveals* these inadequacies. It promises that the child’s internal logic must supersede the educator’s normalized judgment. Moreover, I take this argument to support the view that when educators suspend their understanding they can work towards facilitating the child’s increasing “connectedness” with their social community, a connectedness that depends on letting go of immediate or easily quantifiable outcomes.⁸

What is involved in “suspending understanding” and, instead, “making visible” through rich description and story-telling? First, I take Furman to be arguing that a significant part of this suspension of understanding is the eschewing of labels as informative mechanisms for education. This is because labels act against educators’ ability to suspend judgment about the coherency of children’s ways of being. Targeting labels and labeling within the discourse of exceptionality invites educators and peers to work against preconceived

assumptions about children that deprive them of their “right to differences.” I regard educational and diagnostic labels as both over and under-informing us about the capabilities of students; that is, they simultaneously provide too much information and too little information about the students’ learning and needs, primarily (although not only) because they operate as generalizations. As a result, labels act as unhelpful and even dangerous epistemic resources for educators because they fail to provide information that substantively aids teachers in supporting students’ learning and growth. Moreover, and as Furman clearly shows in the example of Ashley from Ayers, they *mis*inform by providing information based on a deficit construction of the student, thus affirming harmful beliefs about and practices of classroom “inclusion.”

Despite these criticisms, and while I am inclined to enthusiastically agree with Furman’s assessment of labels, I do want to offer two brief potential complications. A first is that labels may not necessarily and always operate as negative epistemic resources. That is, labels may offer us positive information about a student or information that can be used to positively inform our teaching practice and facilitate peer connections. Two examples come to mind. The first is the use of a label such as “neurodivergent” that is self-assigned or emerges from within disability communities. Here, disability-associated naming practices could occur as expressions of disability pride. A second example is the use of a label to facilitate empathy. In the latter case, knowledge of a peer’s educational or diagnostic label – or self-identifying label – might help students to generate caring and understanding attitudes. Of course, this requires significant work on the part of the educator to disrupt the negativity and colloquial attachments of the label within the classroom community. What is at stake is the question of how differences are best honored within the classroom, especially knowing that rendering ability differences invisible cannot facilitate a community of inclusion. Perhaps Furman’s article calls us to consider further how to cultivate empathy through positive descriptions that avoid negative attachments on the one hand and rendering disability pride invisible on the other.

Second, is it possible, and does Furman’s approach require us, to move away from labels entirely? Might the rich and positive descriptions based in in-

quiry that Furman calls for nevertheless recreate new labels that complicate our abilities to enable students' belonging? Even in our best efforts to avoid negative attachments and to describe, name, or otherwise discursively construct students as members rather than others, our efforts are permeated by the discursive power of the normal. For example, in describing Thomas, Furman writes that "Thomas would certainly have challenged me as well," even while describing Mia and Natasha as "bright, hard-working, kind, and open-minded."¹⁰ Importantly, Thomas is not directly assigned the label "challenging" (an oft-assigned label for students perceived as disruptive and difficult), and yet the description of being challenged by him might call to mind that label, however indirectly. Indeed, research by Fernanda Orsati and Julie Causton-Theoharis¹¹ shows the commonality of discourses that construct students as challenging when they disrupt the social norms of the classroom, a phenomenon that confirms Furman's premise in her article. I use this example not to minimize the potential promise of descriptive inquiry in rendering coherent a child's *own* way of being, but rather to draw attention to our embeddedness within hermeneutical structures that persistently reassert the power of the normal.

Early in the article, Furman reminds us that teachers need help, not sanctions. They need guidance, they need pedagogical tools, but they also need the opportunity to cultivate new epistemologies for responding to difference, new ways of seeing, knowing, and interpreting students. Given the context of power in which educators must act – and to which many are called to assimilate – the critical practice of "suspending understanding" has crucial meaning. In closing, I would ask us all to think deeply about what this suspension of understanding entails, what it looks like, and how it can be modeled. Is it a blanking of the mind? Is it an effort to stave off the unwanted attachments that come with even the most colloquial of labeling practices (good student, challenging student, smart student, and so on)? Is it an active and critical divestment from the psychological models of interpreting students?¹² Is it perhaps an ongoing examination of one's able-bodied positionality or attachments to the un-examined normalcy privilege that most of us carry? Perhaps it is all these things. Whatever the answer, to enable students "to be at home" is to embrace a radical futurity.

1 Cara Furman, "To Be at Home: Including Each Human in the Classroom," this volume.

2 David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, "Curricular Cripistemologies; or, Every Child Left Behind," in *The Biopolitics of Disability: Neoliberalism, Ablenationalism, and Peripheral Embodiment* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015).

3 Patricia F. Carini, *Starting Strong: A Different Look at Children, Schools, and Standards* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001), 163, cited in Furman, "To Be at Home," this volume.

4 Furman, this volume.

5 Douglas Biklen and Jamie Burke, "Presuming Competence," *Equity & Excellence in Education* 39, no. 2 (2006): 166-175.

6 Biklen and Burke, "Presuming Competence," 168.

7 Furman, this volume.

8 Christopher Kliever, Douglas Biklen, and Amy J. Peterson, "At the End of Intellectual Disability," *Harvard Educational Review* 85, no. 1 (2015): 1-28, 23.

9 Furman, this volume.

10 Ibid.

11 Fernanda T. Orsati and Julie Causton-Theoharis, "Challenging Control: inclusive teachers' and teaching assistants' on students with challenging behaviour," *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 17, no. 5 (2013): 507-525.

12 See Deborah Gallagher, "The Scientific Knowledge Base of Special Education: Do We Know What We Think We Know?," *Exceptional Children* 64, no. 4 (1998): 493-502.