NATIONAL CENTER
on Inclusion Toward
Rightful Presence

Rightful Presence in Education Systems

Rightful presence as a concept was first introduced by authors like Jonathan Darling, Vicki Squire, Harald Bauder, and Emma Cox, in writings about sanctuary cities and the global refugee crisis (Bauder, 2016; Cox et al., 2019; Darling, 2014; Squire & Darling, 2013). Education scholars like Angela Calabrese Barton and Edna Tan (2020) reimagined it as a way to explore issues of educational (in)equity at the classroom level.

SWIFT Education Center extended the concept of rightful presence, applying it at the educational systems level as a foundation for building equity and justice for students, families, and communities who often experience the inequities in the current system (McCart, Kelly & Sailor, 2023). This brief defines rightful presence in education systems and provides one example.

What is Rightful Presence in Education?

What does it mean to have rightful presence? How does rightful presence align with or differ from other efforts, such as inclusion, equity, and belonging?

The following description highlights the key features of rightful presence for building equity within an educational system.

"We believe an environment conducive to learning and personal growth is established first and foremost through the cultivation of a culture of **true belonging**. Efforts toward that goal must begin with the presumption of the rightful presence and **inherent value** of the disenfranchised. Inclusion efforts alone cannot bring about substantial

change because they adhere to the same guest/host **power dynamic** that serves to normalize the existence of a group who is 'invited' and a group with the power to invite." (McCart et al., p. 22)

True Belonging: To truly belong is to take a deep sense of comfort, safety, and peace, and connect it to an experience or place. Students, families, and educators feel most peaceful in a state of non-judgment and emotional connection.

Inherent Value: Inherent value means a person's value does not need to be proven to exist; it is assumed to exist, even if undefined or unconventional. It is the responsibility of educators and institutions to look until that value is seen. Rightful presence honors people's humanity, intersectional identities, and culture.

Shared Power: Rightful presence is characterized by a fundamental shift in power. Students, families, and communities who most frequently experience systemic inequities become integral in the shaping and design of educational systems, policies, and practices. Rightful presence promotes the co-creation of school experiences that benefit students, educators, staff, families, and communities.

Rightful presence lives in schools when previously excluded students, families, and communities experience a sense of belonging, while also holding the power to contribute to educational policy and practice decisions.

Guiding Principles

Rightful presence starts with the following assumptions:

- All students have the inherent potential for meaningful learning when provided appropriate resources and support in an environment of true belonging.

- Environments are more conducive to learning and personal growth when co-created with and for students from identity groups that

most frequently experience inequities in the current system.

- Systemic power dynamics need to be attended to, and often shifted, to ensure educational policies and practices are equitable and just for students across the intersections of race, ability, ethnicity, gender identity, religion (or spiritual preference), economic status, sexual orientation, nation of origin, age, and immigration status.

Rightful Presence Contrast with Inclusion

A current example of how rightful presence is systemically being co-created is in the context of one type of equity effort that too often falls short of its ideal, that is, inclusion of students identified with disabilities. U.S. law mandates efforts must be made to include these students in the "least restrictive environments," but often these efforts do not achieve their aim because they start from a place of exclusion. This starting point carries with it unconscious biases that perpetuate the assumption that some students must be invited into what school offers, rather than assuming that students with disabilities belong in general education in the first place. Students with disabilities are "guests" in the general education setting, only allowed access if they meet predefined criteria, without the expectation that the general education setting may need to be adjusted to become a place where they too can thrive. Many schools put the burden on students to earn their way into less restrictive environments by demanding they prove they are ready, despite the reality that school systems often are not designed to support their needs. Thus, these students often must lay aside their unique qualities to assimilate or risk being excluded again.

Rightful presence in school presumes these students who benefit from intensive or specialized support belong with grade-level peers from the start, negating the need for inclusion in less restrictive environments. In this example, rightful presence is characterized by a fundamental shift in power that disrupts systemic inequities by ensuring the necessary support for real, meaningful engagement in general education and the opportunity to learn and achieve academic and social outcomes aligned with the high standards our nation holds for its children.

In a more general sense, Calabrese Barton and Tan (2020, p. 436) contrasted contemporary inclusion movements with rightful presence in the chart below.

Inclusion	Rightful Presence
Extension of a set of rights.	Political struggle is integral to disciplinary learning: The right to reauthor rights.
Located in the abstract future.	Rightfulness established through presence: Making visible the intersections and justice/injustice in the present while orienting towards new social futures.
Burden/cost of the enterprise borne by the othered, who seeks membership.	Shared burden/cost between currently powered and the othered.
Culture of hospitality, involving an ethical commitment to leverage guest/host relationships towards equitable ends.	Culture of disruption towards justice, where modes of power/authority are collectively called into question.

Conclusion

Recall, rightful presence lives in schools when students, families, and communities who experience systemic inequities gain a sense of belonging and hold the power to contribute to educational policy and practice decisions. Creating these conditions requires collective action from all parts of an educational system to change culture, policies, systems, and practices. See the Rightful Presence Implementation Guide (swiftschools.org) for ideas about how to get started on the journey in your community.

Suggested Citation

SWIFT Education Center. (2025, May). *Rightful presence in education systems.*

References

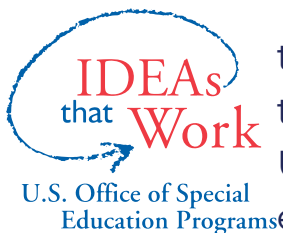Bauder, H. (2016). Possibilities of urban belonging. *Antipode*, 48(2), 252-271.

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