AN INVESTIGATION OF AGENCY AND MARGINALITY
IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

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A qualitative case study design was used to investigate the extent that special education program serves the student or serves the organization. If special education serves the student, then a researcher should be able to identify resulting agency and emancipation among the students. However, if special education is serving the organization, then a different picture could be painted. Special education could be serving the functionalist needs of sorting and tracking students. An unintended finding of the study was the apparent neglect and subsequent isolation and marginality of special education teachers, especially teachers who work in self-contained classes. Responses clearly reflect a deficit in social capital. With regard to students, most responses reflect a functionalist approach to serving students in the special education program in that the program sorts challenging students from the mainstream who might impede the progress of other children. These findings are discussed relative to reform for special education, including learning communities.

Specialized programs have become a convenient way for leaders to provide services to students. Often, the leadership paradigm is to administer each specialized program (e.g. Special education, English as a second Language, at-risk, Title 1) in isolation from each other. Thereby, program administrators are assigned oversight of specific programs with such monitoring being completed in isolation from each other. However, critics have purported that as long as these specialized or separate programs exist, then the situation provides little incentive for the schools to meet the needs of all students (Capper, Frattura, & Keyes, 2000; Feinberg & Soltis, 2004; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). As leaders, we need to be aware if our monitoring of programs is promoting dependency or agency. This paper will define agency, then investigate the role of a specific program, Special Education, in promoting agency among students in the public schools.

Human agency, or active involvement, can assist people in overcoming oppressive reproductive forces. Agency requires access to the resources of a field and the cultural capital needed to appropriate them. Individuals empowered with agency will use resources to meet their goals, and in doing so, change the schema and practices which become part of the dynamic structure of the field. In the case of education, the school environment is the field and learning is the goal. In schools, an important role that teachers play in promoting learning is their relationships with students; more specifically the extent that the student identifies with the teachers (Nieto, 1999). The process of agency requires *institutional agents*; individuals who help young people negotiate institutional resources and opportunities, including information about academic programs, career decision making, role modeling, emotional support and moral support. Through theses instructional agents, students are able to develop social capital.

A cultural assumption about special education, also called the Exceptional Children's program, is that special programs are required in order for a school to meet the needs of all the students. Therefore, if special education is serving students, the special education program should be helping students be actively engaged in interpreting data, engaged in resources, and developing goals for themselves throughout their participation. However, critics have argued that much of special education was deliberately designed to meet the needs of the organization quite as much as the interests of the *special* children (Tyack & Cuban, 1995):
Such differentiated classes buffered students and teachers from misfits, *children who do not advance at the expected rate or who caused discipline problems. In such cul-de-sac classes they were kept from receiving a standard education, not exclude but segregated* (p. 25).

There is evidence that efforts to homogenously track students leads to a disproportionate numbers of students from the lowest social-economic groups in the lowest tracks, while children from higher socioeconomic levels have been found to be consistently over-represented in higher tracks (Brosio, 1994; Spring, 1994).

Problems Statement
Does special education serve the student or serve the organization? If special education serves the student, then a researcher should be able to identify resulting agency and emancipation among the students. However, if special education is serving the organization, then a different picture could be painted. Special education could be serving the functionalist needs of sorting and tracking students.

Overview of the program
The mission of the Exceptional Children's program is to assure that students with disabilities develop mentally, physically, emotionally, and vocationally through the provision of an appropriate individualized education in the least restrictive environment. Each student is provided services based on their IEP. An IEP is a written statement for a student with a disability that is developed, at least annually, by a team of professionals knowledgeable about the student and the parent. The plan describes the strengths of the child and the concerns of the parents for enhancing the education of their child, and when, where, and how often services will be provided. The IEP is required by federal law for all exceptional children and must include specific information about how the student will be served and what goals he or she should be meeting.

Method
Context of the Study
The WS/FC school district has an enrollment of about 48,000 students with a racial make-up of 51% White, 35% African-American, 10% Hispanic, 1% Asian, 3% multi-racial or other. The three schools represented are traditionally feeder schools (with the pseudonyms): AB Elementary, CD Middle and EF High. The schools are located in a predominantly rural area outside the city limits of a large city and a smaller city. Racial make-up of the school is commensurate with that of the school district.

Data Collection
This study is the examination of the existence of agency in students in special education programs. The question of this research is best addressed by qualitative case study because it provides ample opportunities for rich description of specific activities. An open-ended interview was used in this study to form the basis of understanding of teachers' perceptions of the special education program. The interview was comprised of the following four open-ended questions:
What do you see as the challenges and benefits of E.C.?
Are E.C. and support services provided on the basis of need or availability? Explain.
What are the characteristics of children more likely to be mainstreamed back into regular classes?
If you had the power, are there any changes that you would like to make in the E.C. program?
The questions had been provided to each teacher at least one week prior to the interview to permit time to reflect on their responses. On the day of the interview, the questions were transcribed as the teacher responded orally.

Subjects
The sample size of this study is comprised of twelve special education teachers from the three schools. Within special education, the teachers had three different general roles: case manager, inclusion/resource teacher, and self-contained teacher. The roles and sites can be placed on a 3x3 table:

	Case Manager	Resource/Inclusion	Self-Contained
Elementary	1	1	2
Middle	1	1	3
High	1	1	1

N=12

Data Analysis
The teacher interview, which took about 20-40 minutes, was conducted on a one-on-one basis. Responses were analyzed by their content related to agency. Unexpectedly, a theme of professional marginality merged that was so significant that, even though not a theme originally intended to be

studied, became part of the study. The dynamic of sorting teachers towards unequal and separate tracks has been studied previously with the induction of new teachers relative to district capital (Achinsetin, Ogawa & Speiglman, 2004) and with regard to promoting an equitable education for students with diverse backgrounds (Wilbur, 1998), however not with the Special Education population.

Results

Governance

An unintended finding of the study was the apparent neglect and subsequent isolation and marginality of special education teachers, especially teachers who work in self-contained classes. Responses clearly reflect a deficit in social capital (see Appendix 1). Social capital involves relationships, a sense of trust and collaboration with colleagues and ties to outside experts and professional networks (Spillane & Thompson, 1997). Rather than provide teachers with social capital, the special education program appears to be a system that sorts and socializes teachers into a separate, more isolated, and less appreciated professional track. Wilbur (1998) has proposed an equity culture model that honors how teachers do their best work and serves as a stepping stone for inquiry about outcomes, values and criteria that guide decision about curriculum and instruction. Although the model may not have been explicitly written for working with the Special Education population, its application seems to be keenly appropriate in this situation.

Pedagogy

A positive remark regarding pedagogy was made by an inclusion/resource teacher at the high school level. He indicated that, based on information from his current graduate classes, pedagogical practice that were typical to special education, such as teaching across curriculums and constructivism, were becoming the new methods for teaching regular education students. However, this response represents the minority as other responses were less positive. Fore example, one teacher referred to her class as having a larger class size than *higher* curriculum tracks (honors/AP). Others referred to Special Education teachers having *hand-me-down* materials, being excluded from field trips and uninvited to school-wide curricular decision-making.

Societal demands

A consistent response made by almost all teachers was the conflict between national legalization, such as NCLB, and classroom practices. Eight of the twelve teachers referred to high stakes testing as a challenge of the special education program. Specifically, the fact that the students were forced to take tests that did not correspond with the heavily modified material that was being taught in that class. Also, several teachers referred to governance outside the school system (Department of Public Instruction Audit, No Child Left Behind Act yearly progress data) as contributing a milieu of fear and anxiety.

Critique

Functionalism

The major goal of a program from functionalism perspective is to identify social system components and to describe how systems work with an emphasis on how order and equilibrium are maintained and transmitted. Responses that reflect a functionalist approach to serving students in the special education program are listed in Appendix 2. One teacher explicitly stated that her students were being better prepared for the job market than regular education students. Although this comment was made in a positive manner, the content reflects the functionalist requirement for schools that students be selected and sorted for the job market. Although unlisted, most responses to question number three (a question loaded for a response regarding agency) were related in terms of standard practice jargon. For example, response often described not specific traits or attributes of students, but the students' EC classification (Specific Learning Disabled, Other Health Impaired). One response indicated that the EC program enables students to be *unsuccessful* academically:

A disadvantage to this though is that EC inadvertently enables these children to almost become lazy. We modify everything for them and in some cases they get to the point they expect to get A's and B's without putting forth much effort.

Several responses referred for the need for students to *fit in* or be *normal*. Two responses stated that parent capital is the major factor in their child's returning to the mainstream:

They are usually economically better off, better support at home, I hate to say it. The ones I can think of, they are the ones who call me, get a tutor, and go to Barnes and Nobles to read with their kids. With the support of home and EC, they can be exited.

Another stated a similar theme:
The unfortunate fact is that parents that are educated and are aware of special education laws and their rights are usually the parents who get the needed services for their child. It is the parents who are uneducated or ignorant of the fact that they have rights that their child has rights who get passed with the needed services

To say the least, I am concerned the teachers' responses reflect a perspective of a program that promotes order and compliance while discouraging creativity and collaboration. In principle, as long as the work in schools is distributed through specialization and coordinated through standardization, there is no need for personnel to collaborate.

Emancipatory
The goal of an emancipatory approach is to unmask sources of oppression, to promote understanding of causes and consequences of oppressions and to encourage participation in liberation. If responses were to reflect this, I would expect to see teachers talk of themselves as adopting a role as institutional agents who actively promote agency in their students. Unfortunately, there was a paucity of responses in this realm. The four strongest references to agency are listed on Appendix 3. The high school teacher inclusion/resource teacher that is currently in graduate school classes indicated that the role exists (constructivism). Several others related their efforts to instill positive self-image characteristics (*courage, unique, smart*) in their students. All teachers clearly intended the best for students; however, these efforts fall short of playing the role of an institutional agent or promoting emancipatory agents.

Conclusion
I am concerned that provisions of safety nets in the Special Education program are provided with the best intentions but the results shape marginality. The result of functionalist practices combined with the unexpected finding of teacher marginality may not be so disconnected. Several studies have indicated that the means to educational restructuring will come in the form of interactions, collaborations and codependence, whether it be in the form of learning communities for principals (Malloy, 2002), multi-cultural students (Nieto, 1999) or central office professionals (Capper, Frattura & Keyes, 2002). Conversely, the blind adherence to educational standardization may be a submission to domination.

We need to ask if the need for specialized programs makes it difficult for public schools to empower their students theoretically so that there is a chance for the students and teachers to recognize and resist the hegemony maintained in the machine bureaucracy conditions. Efforts must be made to analyze the tendency of specific programs to meet the economic goals of education: to sort and select talent for the labor market, develop human capital and plan economic development (Spring, 1994). Leaders in education need investigate the extent that the top-down, assembly line management of school programs, such as special education, is actually the perpetuation of capitalism's dynamic of sorting and dominating subaltern groups.

From a functionalist perspective, the role of special education would be to sort *misfits* into vocational preparatory coursework and keep them separate from the general student body. In order for special education to be reformed, blind adherence to educational standardization should be questioned. On the other hand, collaboration emerges when work is distributed on the basis of an interactive division of labor and coordinated through mutual adjustment. The result is an arrangement that is premised on a team approach to problem solving and yields a form of interdependency premised on reflective discourse.

Considerations for further research
Mitchell, Sackney and Walker (1997) suggest that postmodern organizations will be driven by processes and relationships rather than structure and rules. Verbal communications will be the chief vehicle for creating individual meaning and organizational change. It would be interesting to examine the impact that a true learning community might have on special education referrals, placement and programming. As long as the concept of *handing off* children reigns supreme in public education, then restructuring and reform will be unlikely. Conversely, if a true learning community implementation strategy might reverse the prevailing attitudes and promote a more inclusive and emancipatory approach to serving students in special education.

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Appendix 1
Specific teacher comments related to teacher Marginality and infer student segregation

Question 1: What do you see as the challenges and benefits of E.C.?

Another challenge in teaching EC is that the department is sort of like the "red headed step child" of the school. We are the last to get supplies and materials. Much of the materials that I use in the classroom are the hand-me-downs that are several years old, and materials I have purchased with my own money MS/SC/l

...19 EMD students in 1st period semester and I was teaching 3 subjects...My class size is larger than their class sizes. We have honors/AP classes that are smaller than the resource/OCS classes HS/SC/k

Question 2: Are E.C. and support services provided on the basis of need or availability? Explain.

After almost 30 years in EC I have never been in a school where EC was a primary focus or concern ... out of sight out of mind. MS/SC/h

Question 4: If you had the power, are there any changes that you would like to make in the E.C. program?

I would give all EC students the right to be included in all reg. ed. activities (field trips, etc.). It is amazing the number of times in any year that I hear 'I am sorry, I forgot about you'...NCLB has made the EC child feel "lower class" once more. I would give EC teachers more opportunities to fight for their children. Many teachers begin to feel like second class citizens as the children do... Teachers automatically assume the worse when they see EC besides a child's name. MS/SC/h

When I was trained, I was trained to be separate, separate myself from regular education HS/CM/j

(Principal) is trying really hard for the communication on site. I think we always need to talk to each other...I do not see a lot of professionals talking to each other. I think the level of directness; I don't think people know how to talk with each other. Fixing problems is an almost knee-jerk many times. ... I don't there is a lot of visitation. I can count on my hand the number of times that people have come out here. ES/SC/l

Appendix 2
Specific teacher comments related to student Agency
Functionalist

Questions 1: What do you see as the challenges and benefits of E.C.?

(EC) has become a dumping ground for any student that has special challenges...that doesn't for the mold, or what the teacher teaches, or doesn't fit the curriculum...lot's come into place from the testing procedures that have been put in place. I'm not trying to bash regular education teachers. Everyone is stressed. Rumors are that we may be getting a visit from the state next year because of our AYPs. HS/CM/j

A disadvantage to this though is that EC inadvertently enables these children to almost become lazy. We modify everything for them and in some cases they get to the point they expect to get A's and B's without putting forth much effort. MS/SC/l

I think the biggest challenge being felt these days is coming form the NCLB legislation...NC Extend 2...The testing does nothing but tell them they are unsuccessful. MS/SC/l

Question 2: Are E.C. and support services provided on the basis of need or availability? Explain.

...They are in what we call the DNQ black hole. As a classroom teacher you can see it. That was my frustration as the classroom teacher. In EC, I know how to teach to you. Here is my group. The Regular Ed teacher does not have time to try different things; like we do in here teachers don't have the luxury with DNQ children. There is pressure on all of us to make that grade on the test. ES/SC/y

The unfortunate fact is that parents that are educated and are aware of special education laws and their rights are usually the parents who get the needed services for their child. It is the parents who are uneducated or ignorant of the fact that they have rights that their child has rights who get passed with the needed services. MS/SC/l

OCS offers these kids the life skills they actually need. Now, our kids are better trained for work than the others in Regular Ed. HS/SC/k (functionalism)

Question 3: What are the characteristics of children more likely to be mainstreamed back into regular classes?

They are usually economically better off, better support at home, I hate to say it. The ones I can think of, they are the ones who call me, get tutor, and go to Barnes and Nobles to read with their kids. With the support of home and EC, they can be exited. They just need extra confidence. ES/SC/y

The children who are more likely to be mainstreamed are the children who have strong parental support and strong work ethic. MS/SC/l

Students have to be more "normal", able to function, not bother the Regular Ed teacher. It is usually a fight to have them mainstreamed which has to be fought by the EC teachers and parents...otherwise again out of sight out of mind. MS/SC/h

Appendix 3
Specific teacher comments related to student Agency
Emancipatory

Question 1: What do you see as the challenges and benefits of E.C.?

a lot of school systems are using…figuring out...the technique we have been using to try to get Special Ed kids up to level. We are using...in Special Ed to get kids up… (examples) teaching across the curriculum...and what's the name….constructivism...that's how we are going to teach all kids. HS/R-I/g

Question 3: What are the characteristics of children more likely to be mainstreamed back into regular classes?

Students would be more engaged in the classroom, more likely to ask questions that they don't understand. Teachers say they are willing to ask questions. Self-advocacy about their abilities. HS/CM/j

I am always talking to the kids about courage and confidence. I do a lot of confidence building. They are smart, they are unique. ES/SC/y

Organization…initiative…take it upon themselves to make the grade, not someone else…non-behavioral issues. HS/R-I/g