

Re-Thinking Disproportionality in Special Education as a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

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Classroom Imaginings: The Perceived and the Real

When typical pre-service teachers muse over classroom dynamics, they seldom pause to consider the fact that humanity exists in continua on several levels: their physical abilities, cognitive abilities, and culturally-enabled or -engendered abilities and “disabilities.” For this reason, they need guidance in order to bridge their classroom imaginations with classroom realities. Similarly, in-service teachers—their experiences notwithstanding—often need their tools of the trade (including their oft-transparent cultural spectacles or filters) sharpened and periodically recalibrated in order to be capable of registering true reality, as opposed to their culturally- or societally-induced realities. This is extremely important, because in classrooms all over the world, the lives of millions of real students depend on, and are determined by, the perceptions of teachers who often use mis-calibrated instruments to determine their psychological, social, and economic futures. The world of special education is not exempted from this calamitous act.

Because the average teacher education candidate is likely to be of average physical ability whose education was centered on the average student, special education students are not likely to be factored into their future experiential calculus. For this reason, it comes as a surprise for many when they first report to their classrooms for their clinical experiences only to realize that there is such a thing as “mainstreaming” of special education students, and that there are specific responsibilities for teachers to execute, including IEPs (or Individualized Education Programs) and 504 Plans. Another surprise for pre-service students is the realization that there are several classrooms with students who fall in the demographics of high-incidence disabilities—exactly for the reason why it is so-called: “high-incidence disabilities”—and that the onus rests on the average teacher to manage such classrooms—often with no dedicated, special education professionals to help.

In a similar vein as the preceding assertions, and granted that the pool of teacher education candidates is not racially diverse, chances are high that they

would have experienced a limited racial and religious diversity, among other issues, in their own past schooling. Such limited exposure mis-positions these teacher candidates for their future professions, since their experiences do not harmonize with America's current school demographics or the kinds of students they would encounter in their professions. Their limited exposure to America's realistic school demographics exist partly by dint of housing segregation (and hence, racialized schooling experiences), as well as in-school racial segregation, even in situations where the overall schools themselves may appear racially and culturally diverse. Consequently, due to racial misunderstanding, misperception, and hence, mis-assessment (cf. Michael, 1981), students of color and low-income students may be shuffled into special education programs, thus contributing to the broad research category of "disproportionality" in special education.

Addressing Culturally-Engendered Disabilities

Teacher preparation programs generally include courses that address both special education and diversity or multicultural issues, because there are compelling reasons for the treatment of those issues. That said, however, whereas the notions of physical ability and cognitive ability are discussed as a matter of course in special education courses, there is little nuanced consideration for the place of cultural capital (Bourdieu & Rice, 1977) and related, synergistic issues in the matters of placement in special education—especially when it comes to border-line student cases.

In the context of American education, the thrust of cultural capital is that students at large from low socio-economic backgrounds, and students of color in particular, do not possess what Bourdieu and Rice (1977) deemed cultural signifiers or symbols that are valued by society. For this reason, they, as humans, became dispossessed of their cultural value (or currency). In a radical-but-practical educational sense, cultural capitalism portends that teachers are likely to be unconsciously biased in the assessment of certain groups of students—not because of what they know or do not know, but because of who they are. This cultural blinding is a good illustration of the notion of prejudice: literally translating as "judgment before [knowing]." This engenders the question: How do teachers evaluate their students' work? To this, Delpit (2005) and Michael (1981) would contend that instruction is mediated by one's cultural upbringing, and that assessment can be subjective, and unconsciously so.

Another vital phenomenon is often manifested for students whose social pedigrees would generally predict success in schools—often because their parents have achieved success in society. The problem, however, is that they are often the token minorities in their current schools, and that factor negatively impacts their academic performance. What teachers (and parents) do not realize is the mental toll such children experience, and not surprisingly, therefore,

fail in so-called “good schools.” In one study, Delia Saenz (1994) showed that tokenized students worry about their tokenized states of mind, which translates into cognitive performance deficits. In the book, *What Happens When Students Are in the Minority*, Hutchison (2009) used the narratives of several people in different life contexts to show what was conceptualized as the “minority effect” syndrome and its related “cognitive allocation.” Saenz’s and Hutchison’s research are in agreement with the broader research that shows that when children are emotionally taxed for a variety of reasons, they perform poorly academically. Such artificially-induced academic deficiencies are not considered for what they are; therefore, such victimized children are mistakenly viewed as poor students.

For low-income students and students of color, it is the compounding of a myriad of small factors that ultimately accrete into significant classroom challenges that may appear as academic improficiencies. To illustrate the foregoing assertion, let us consider, for example, a student taking a test where cultural disconnection (or cultural capital gap) may translate into 5-8 percent loss on the test. Add a second factor: their discomfort due to their minority effect (Hutchison, 2009), translating into another 10-15 percent loss. For teenagers, related sheer frustration while taking the test may translate into another 10 percent or so loss on the test.

Ultimately, for that test alone, this student could conceivably lose about 30 percentage points—meaning that this student could effectively fail the test under some grading schemes—and we have not even considered the possibility of an induced behavioral and emotional mis-response from the student (even if unjustified) and its long-term life implications, if no interventions are implemented, or if the parents keep the students in such unmitigated learning environments. For B- or C-caliber students, when the stated factors consistently produce undiagnosed failing grades, the loss of 30 percentage points may translate into false positives: a misdiagnosis of otherwise capable students who are shuffled into special education programs. No wonder, therefore, that there is a problem of “disproportionality” of students of color in special education programs—which, on deep inspection and analysis, may actually be a form of self-fulfilling prophecy. It is also no surprise that, in a world of prejudice, there are some who could comfortably—and even justifiably—deduce the fallacy of racial supremacy and “justified prejudice—by the ‘evidence’”—by dint of erroneous methodology.

When the Rubber Meets the Road

In summary, in real classrooms, there are compounding, criss-cross matrix of factors that impact the perceptions and emotionality of teaching and learning, and hence, assessment and placement in all programs. Such factors have significant, verifiable impacts on student learning outcomes and hence, their futures. It is specifically because of such factors that, in the matter of place-

ment in all aspects special education (especially for border-line student cases), extra care needs to be taken to examine undiagnosed, sub-surface factors that impact human performance in all of educationdom.

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