INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: A MARGINAL TEACHING SITUATION?

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore whether a similar a line of reasoning holds true for special educators. Though critical teacher shortages in the area of special education remain an ongoing problem in the United States (Billingsley & McLeskey, 2004; McLeskey, Tyler & Saunders Flippin, 2004), little work has been done on the teaching conditions that differentially influence special educators' vs. general teachers' commitment to the profession. This paper seeks to examine the crisis of "the revolving door" in special education through the lens of marginality. While the initial inspection of statistical data on teacher attrition in the United States might alert us to a potential systemic dysfunction, in order to understand the origin and nature of the phenomena, detailed work involving teacher narratives is indicated.

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In North America, there has been a panacea of drives and initiatives to make education more inclusive. In United States, the "No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and "The Individuals with Disabilities Act" (2004) are landmarks of its commitment to inclusivity. The need to remediate the problem in Canada also have been chronicled in a number of governmental reports, including "Taking Stock: An Assessment of the National Stay-In-School Initiative (1994)" and "For the Love of Learning: Report of the Royal Commission on Learning."

While the adoption of these and other equity programs express a desire to meet the needs of marginalized students, very few of these initiatives address the concerns of marginal teachers. The precarious position occupied by certain groups of teachers has been addressed with respect to race (McKellar, 1989), gender (Acker, 1989), class (Purvis, 1991), subject specialty (Richards 2002, Sparkes, Templin & Schemmp, 1990) and part-time or temporary status (Daminanos, 1998). In her study of elementary core French teachers, for example, Richards found that subject marginality plays a substantial role in a teacher's desire to leave that area or to suffer substantial discomfort in that role. Sparkes, Templin and Schemmp's work on physical education teachers also shows that being defined marginal to the central functioning of the school is a demoralizing experience which has a detrimental effect on one's motivation, enjoyment and commitment to the

school (Sparkes, Templin & Schemmp, 1990). Thus, in as much as certain educational experiences put students "at risk" for drop-out, so, too, are certain teachers.

The purpose of this paper is to explore whether a similar a line of reasoning holds true for special educators. Though critical teacher shortages in the area of special education remain an ongoing problem in the United States (Billingsley & McLeskey, 2004; McLeskey, Tyler & Saunders Flippin, 2004), little work has been done on the teaching conditions that differentially influence special educators' vs. general teachers' commitment to the profession. This paper seeks to examine the crisis of "the revolving door" in special education through the lens of marginality. While the initial inspection of statistical data on teacher attrition in the United States might alert us to a potential systemic dysfunction, in order to understand the origin and nature of the phenomena, detailed work involving teacher narratives is indicated.

Special education defined

According to Wikipedia, s**pecial education** (Also known as **Special ed**, SPED)

> refers to the teaching of students with a learning disability (i.e., any kinds of various cognitive, neurological, or psychological disorders that impede the ability to learn, especially one that interferes with the ability to learn mathematics or develop language skills), a Developmental disability or a behavioral problem, or to that of gifted children (i.e., those students with an exceptionally high IQ).

Special Education as a Marginal Teaching Situation

Special education can be seen as a marginalized group in comparison to general classroom teachers who constitute the norm in North American schools. Both in elementary schools and in high schools, general teachers are the ones who are in charge of large groups of mixed-ability students and who are responsible for teaching a subject or a particular group of subjects. Often there are two or three other teachers teaching the same grade level or subject area. Through activities such as grade team or departmental meetings, these teachers have an opportunity to get support, advice, new ideas, and encouragement from similarly minded professionals.

In comparison to the general teacher, the special educator is often excluded from this normative setting. While more and more schools are using an inclusive model in which children with disabilities receive most, if not all, of their instruction and services in the general education classroom, the majority of these students still work within segregated settings. Often there may be only one or two special education teachers in a school building, and, frequently, the special education teacher's office or classroom (if there is one at all) is in an outlying or remote part of the building (Henke, Choy, Geiss, & Broughman, 1996). This streaming is further reinforced through the differential education each group delivers. In general education, the school system dictates the curriculum, but in special education, the child's individual needs dictate the curriculum (Lieberman, 1985). For example, dressing, eating, and toileting could be a typical part of the curriculum for many

students with severe disabilities. While in theory, both types of teaching are important, in practice, it is only the more “academic” pedagogical experiences that count, rendering those who teach the more individually-driven modes of instruction devalued.

Ideologically, this unequal distribution of rewards is justified by a rhetoric that serves to present these divisions as perfectly “natural.” By setting up exclusionary criteria, such as IQ tests and province-wide testing, the school system helps “prove” that certain types of instruction are more rigorous than others, with teachers in the “regular” classroom being the privileged class.

While this form of structural marginalization might lead us to suspect that special educators would understand themselves as having little status (contributing to feelings of disenfranchisement and one’s ultimate decision to leave the profession), actors in that situation might feel quite differently. Competing ideologies of caring and inclusiveness, for example, may make special educators feel they are highly valued (Acker, 1999; Nias, Southworth and Yeomans, 1989). In their study of “collaborative schools,” for example, Nias, Southworth and Yeomans demonstrate how ancillary staff were given access to inclusive interpretive strategies to lessen their feelings of outsiderness. As ideas about the social structure differ among teachers, and since these ideas manifest themselves in differing ways across schools, one can not really “read off” teacher sentiment from wider cultural forces. In order to move beyond the supposition that special educators view themselves

as substandard to their mainstream colleagues, that belief must be subjected to an empirical test.

The Theoretical Framework

The idea of one's perception of self as a dynamic identity that responds to social context is best encapsulated through the precepts of symbolic interactionism. At the heart of the theory is the notion that people "act toward things on the basis that meanings those things have for them…The second premise is that meaning of such things is derived from or arises out of the social interaction that one has with one's fellows (Blumer, 1969, p. 2). As special educators channel a widely diverse number of discourses through their interactions with others, it necessary to understand the meaning that they attribute to those interactions in assessing their difference from or similarity to other educators.

The Study

A key component of qualitative research is to allow those who are studied to speak for themselves. As the researchers were interested in how special educators perceived themselves as professionals, three focus group discussions were conducted with a group of 25 special educators in a U.S. Faculty of Education for 2 hours. There were four males and 18 females, with their ages ranging from 23 to 38. All were white. One third of those did not have permanent jobs. Of those that were employed, they had between 2 and 4 years experience in the school system. By analyzing data from people who teach special education either on a permanent or semi-permanent basis,

this study acts as an initial litmus test to better understand how these educators respond to their position of "difference."

The Results

Foucault (1980) believes that one's identity is formed through dividing practices. As various discourses prescribe what it means to be a "normal" teacher, they also subject teachers to their normalizing control. The task of this paper was to examine those interactional processes by which marginality as a special educator was invoked or denied.

The data suggest that there were times when participants positioned themselves as having the same value as others in the school. Bill describes himself as being "one of the bunch." Sarah views herself as similarly empowered, saying, "I feel people look at me the same as they would any other educator." Other times, participants experienced themselves as a "real" teacher when they felt they were supported by colleagues. Wendy, for example, says, "When I send a kid down to the principal, I know that I'm going to be backed up."

While there were stories that spoke of special educators having their legitimacy affirmed, the majority of participant commentary expressed exclusion from the definition of a "real" teacher. This understanding of holding a lesser status than their colleagues was expressed in a number of different ways, the most common in terms of special education being a less demanding job than a "regular" teaching post:

> I think the perception is that special educators have a much easier workload. We are glorified tutors. (Kathy)

> They don't think we have any paperwork. Some of them think we don't even write out any lesson plans. (Leslie)
> They think we are lazy because we don't have a class. (Frank)
> We're just the babysitters, the dumping ground for everybody else (Dawn)

In North American society, jobs that are considered "hard" or "full of responsibility" are thought to be deserving of more pay and status than menial (and therefore unstressful) labor. Despite these teachers asserting that their work often extended into the evenings, that they had the same extra-curricular duties as other teachers, and that keeping control over behaviorally challenging children was exhausting, they were cognizant that other members of staff saw their work in a different light.

These negative stereotypes were felt to endure, in part, because of a lack of integration between regular teachers and special educators. According to Billingsley, Carson and Klein (2004) new special educators are less likely than other new teachers to indicate they feel a sense of belonging in their schools. Tim reiterates this sentiment, saying, "You get kids with real behavioral problems. Kids that throw things at you or scratch you to the point where you're bleeding, but often there's not a lot of support when this type of thing happens. They think we should handle every student by ourselves." While Tim depicts his isolation as arising out of a lack of solidarity with his non-special education peers, others perceived their exclusion as an inability to collaborate with their own kind. Jennifer, for example, says, "It's hard when you're the only special educator at your school. The things you face are different from what a generalist teacher faces, but there's often no one to talk

to about it." This geographical segregation often exacerbated feelings of vulnerability. Yet rather than blame the system for perpetuating forms of systemic exclusion, it was often special educators themselves who were seen as the cause of their own isolation. Beth, for example, says, "I think people see me as a loner." Carla concurs: "You are often on your own, so they assume you are anti-social."

While several participants attributed their difference to perceived physical and psychic distance from other staff members, others understood their illegitimacy as a function of being too close. Tim, for example, says, "When you try to suggest how you might handle a particular student, the other teachers see us as bossy or pushy." Wendy portrays the special educator's intrusiveness in terms of impinging on other's schedules. "A lot of teachers dislike the CSE meetings. They think they're a waste of time." According to Ferguson (1990), dominant groups [in this case generalist teachers] use their political power to define themselves "as representative of a stable centre around which everyone else must be arranged" (p. 9). Under this mindset, all other teaching experiences that deviate from this norm, such as CSE meetings, are by implication unimportant, both in terms of the knowledge they produce and the teaching conditions they create.

Discussion

A study by Brownell, McNeillis and Milller, (1997) reveals that special educators suffer from higher than average attrition rates than their generalist colleagues. In examining the possible causes for this

disproportionate turnover, there are reasons to suspect that marginality plays a key role. Many of the special educators interviewed in this study felt their perspectives were not taken seriously and that their contributions were not valued. While researchers have noted other variables that affect teacher attrition, such as salary, certification status and personal decisions (McLeskey, Tyler & Saunders Flippin, 2004), the impact that marginality has on a teacher's desire to transfer out of a subject area cannot easily be overlooked. As other empirical studies (e.g. Feuerverger, 1989, Richards, 2002) on marginality in the teaching profession attest, being situated on the fringe is often a demoralizing experience which compels marginal teachers to seek employment opportunities elsewhere.

If North Americans are truly committed to creating more inclusive schools, they must attempt to remove all barriers to people's equal participation in the school's power structure—including those facing the teacher. The insistence on greater representation of the special educator's voice, either through individual or systemic change, enables special educators to examine how they themselves participate in these relations and to see how they might work at restructuring those relations. Though there are many strategies for ensuring that special educators' perspectives are heard, in the interest of preserving space, this paper will only focus on two: reframing and recentering.

Recommendations

A) Individual Strategies: Reframing

Part of a marginal teacher's vulnerability stems his or her acceptance of there being a "dominant cultural power" which is representative of a stable centre around everyone else must be arranged" (Ferguson, 1990, p. 9). Simply by refusing to accept the limits that this centre imposes, marginal teachers can resist the normative prescriptions that define their worth. The authors call this strategy, "reframing" (Please see also the excerpt from our book).

Reframing is altering the meaning or value of something by changing its context or description. Instead of acquiescing to someone else's worldview, the person attempts to sustain a worldview which reflects his/her own reality. Here is an example given by a participant showing how various margins can be resisted/subverted:

> If a teacher were to say something to special educator such as "I dislike your CSE meetings. I find them a big waste of time." The special educator could merely respond, "These meetings are intended to benefit the student, not to purposely inconvenience you."

In this example, the special educator recontextualizes the discussion by rejecting the dominant view of the meeting as "wasteful" and then redefines it as "benefiting the needs of the student." By demonstrating how the special educator's and the generalist teacher's roles intersect, the special educator is able to reduce power imbalances arising out of her/his marginality.

Here is a further example:

> Let's say a principal comes in and says, "Special educators have smaller classes and fewer students, so how come you're not networking more with other teachers?" In response, the special educator might say, "I agree. I am not as integrated into the school as I would like to be. Does this mean you are willing to give me more release time from all my paperwork, meetings and preparation so that I can spend more time talking with others?"

In the second example, the principal attempts to devalue the special educator's work by framing it in terms of "normal" classroom parameters. To put herself back into the frame of power, the special educator subverts this idea of "normal" by reminding the principal that she too has a workload that would be comparable to that of other teachers.

To create an education system that is more inclusive, special educators must remind others in that system of their worth. Re-framing is a technique that transforms the special educator from an object of other people's desires to a subject who creates the ground upon which she/he is considered desirable. Yet individual effort alone is not enough to bring about sustained change. If special education teachers are to successfully negotiate the boundaries of their "otherness," they must be able to count on a certain amount of support from the school system at large. These systemic strategies will now be examined.

B) Systemic Strategies: Re-centering

Many of the structural foundations needed for fostering positive interactions between staff are simply not there for the special educator. Due to a very high needs population and significant time restrictions, participants

often felt that they did not have sufficient opportunity to develop relationships in the school where each party was considered to have valuable but different knowledge and to recognize the mutually beneficial role each other plays in the lives of students. Thus, the recommendation of this paper is for greater integration.

According to Gist & Wright (1973), marginality "presupposes some kind of 'barrier' limiting or obstructing social interaction between members of groups that are in some form of relationship with each other" (p. 22). Through keeping social collectivities apart and limiting the exchange of cultural possessions, the separateness of these identities is maintained. Just as special needs need to be integrated into mainstream cultural processes, so do special education teachers. They need, for example, to be given release time to sit in on grade team planning sessions. They need to spend more time being a part of regular classroom environments. They need to have others study their area of expertise so that there is appreciation for what special educators do in the school system. They need to receive ongoing mentorship as way of reducing their sense of isolation (see also Kilgore, Griffin & Wilborn, 2003). None of these things can happen, however, without the consent of those in power. Chronic teacher shortages in special education threaten the quality of educational programs given to vulnerable student populations. If educators are truly interested in inclusion, it behooves us to review and revamp present education practice and policies to improve the educational experiences for all concerned.

Conclusion

Although there is evidence that high turnover in special education has been an ongoing problem, few educators have sought to examine the reason behind this exodus. This paper has explored teacher attrition in special education through the lens of marginality. Though the sample is not large, and though the population is fairly homogeneous (they are all white, they are all at the beginning stages of their career, they are all enrolled in a Faculty of Education) the results lend credence to the belief that high teacher attrition in special education may be rooted in systemic forms of marginality. While some of the participants' views expressed feelings of inclusion, the majority related narratives of exclusivity. It is hoped with a more sustained focus in this area, a dialogue will be opened that will enable larger scale studies to ensue.

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