

COVID-19-Induced Academic Disability: Furthering the Case of Disability by Induction

Charles B. Hutchison

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte, USA

“Truth is best seen through opaque glasses.”

Charles Francis Hutchison

THE OMNIPOTENCE OF TRUTH

Nature is more honest than humans give her credit: she acts with malice towards none, and her truth marches on with omnipresence. It was a bombshell when, in 1962, Thomas Kuhn argued in his book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, that even in the discipline of science, the progression of scientific knowledge is influenced by current accepted paradigms. In simplistic terms, his argument was that scientific knowledge (or emerging *created* knowledge) was being inadvertently manipulated — or to nice about it, misinterpreted — in order to fit what the scientific community expected. This knowledge misinterpretation would continue until new observations emerged that were so compelling as to force a change in the nature of the accepted knowledge. The popularity of Kuhn’s (1962) publication’s forced a change in public consciousness about the nature of science and the nature of knowledge creation, and subsequently helped to further buttress the concept of “paradigm shift.”

As an African immigrant whose educational enterprises have included Ghana, Hungary, and the United States, I have long lived with multiple cognitive dissonances. For example, why is it that the formal educational outcomes of African American are significantly lower than their White counterparts, and yet, the broader society was slow to correlate that fact to the obvious impact of historical racist policies that imposed artificial poverty and deprivation of societal opportunities on previously enslaved people? Everywhere in the world, there is a natural correlation between educational attainment (and the related, *perceived* academic abilities) and students’ socio-economic background. This is not surprising, because children from lower socio-economic households are not only more easily impacted by the economic disruptions, but are also more likely to experience higher educational interruptions (Kuhfeld, Soland, Tarasawa, John-

Insights into Learning Disabilities is published by Learning Disabilities Worldwide (LDW). For further information about learning disabilities, LDW’s many other publications and membership, please visit our website: www.ldworldwide.org.

son, Ruzek, & Liu, 2020). In other words, great students are not born as such—they are made with family resources.

Immigrant minds are often fodder for wonderment, largely because we often mature in the logical, rational facts in one educational context before entering another educational context as immigrants. That fact is notable, because it engenders the necessity for the immigrant mind to hybridize factual information from different educational contexts into new, composite cognitive realities. This new, hybridized reality is akin to what Bhabha (1994) would caption as the “third space”—not only in theoretical meaning-making, but also, in practice. In essence, immigrant academic workers always seek a place of cognitive contentment—and such contentment must be logically reasonable, unless one is willing to eternally live with cognitive dissonance.

Early in my travails as an immigrant in the United States, my third space was one of cognitive discontentment, for a simple reason: In a world where all humans register educational realities with our five common senses, I could not cognitively resolve the simple query: Could educational realities that are powered by human common sense become that easily transformed when one traverses geographic boundaries? How is it that certain obvious, common-sense observations appear to elude many? On further deliberation, however, the answer becomes obvious: Most disciplines are inadvertently ruled by disciplinary paradigms (Kuhn, 1962), and therefore, common sense should not be taken for granted.

Enter COVID-19 and the opacity of truth—truth, at least, in education. The abruptness of COVID-19-induced a shift from face-to-face to online instruction. Almost immediately, I noticed that some of my best face-to-face students had been transformed into either failing or missing online students: They had stopped completing their assignments, and their grades had begun to suffer. In other words, they had become situation-based, academically-disabled students. These students had become victims of the oft-uninspected, as earthquakes would reveal invisible fault lines. As it became obvious in the course of the semester, some of my students who were parents dropped out of school in order to become pandemic-induced, home-school teachers or home care-takers for their children. Other students asserted that they were not disciplined enough for online work, and so needed the physical classroom experience in order to help them complete their work. Still others just did not have the requisite technology (including the necessary wireless network) for their online work. This was, indeed, the report across the world—so much so that most developing economies practically lost the 2020 academic year. This observation naturally precipitated my perennial question: Who is truly academically disabled?

Advanced economies were not spared by the academic effects of pandemic. The U.S. Department of Education Report (2021) highlighted the educational impact of COVID-19 on learning outcomes:

- COVID-19 negatively impacted students' physical and mental well-being.
- Pre-pandemic, many students of color faced significant barriers to educational opportunity. COVID-19 worsened the same.
- Students with disabilities experienced more difficulties transitioning to remote learning than their non-disabled counterparts.
- Before the pandemic, students of color had fewer opportunities, resulting in poor educational outcomes. Post epidemic, they had even fewer educational opportunities and even worse educational outcomes.

All in all, the disruptive impact of COVID-19 on academic enterprises across the world cannot be overemphasized.

TRUTH AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: A HIDDEN TRUTH MANIFESTED TO THE WORLD

COVID-19 was, and still remains an unforgiving teacher, partly because it force-fed the world unpalatable lessons. In the context of education, alongside foisting “social distancing” and the concept of “essential workers,” it precipitated new instructional realities. Of particular note, however, is that it also forcibly removed societies' transparent cultural lenses that were pre-medicated with illusions of social reality. In the silences of locked down cities and people's boredom, the pandemic subordinated the world into silent students of each other's humanity as it compelled peoples of the world to watch more, see more, understand more, and embrace more. Thus was born the Black Lives Matter movement, as an example.

Whereas the Civil Rights Movement long asserted that social justice, educational, and economic opportunities were asymmetrically distributed in society, that reality was not apparent, obvious, or factual to a society engaged in the tedium of life's business. The opacity of COVID-19, however, shed a light on the bitter truth: social inequities were prevalent across society, and Black Lives Had Not Mattered. This truth was powerfully lucid across the world, via social media currents of the youth. The youth of all colors and persuasions, literally all around the world, contested otherwise: Black Lives Matter—and “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” (as Martin Luther King put it). They took this message to the streets and brought their parents and other sympathizers along, in what is arguably the largest social movement in memorable world history, according to the mass media (cf. New York Times' “Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History.” A newer social justice consciousness had been born.

If education is the daughter of the humanities, then the assertions argued thus far should be granted—that educationdom has suffered from a distorted vision, and therefore warrants an ophthalmologist’s prescription, and COVID-19 was the doctor. COVID-19 clearly taught the world that the social realities of Blacks in America was not evident to other American demographics until Black reality was forced into public consciousness, largely through the killing of George Floyd. Black Americans had lived a different socio-psychological reality from their American counterparts—in affirmation of the existence of multiple realities (cf. Ogawa, 1989).

So, what is the point being made thus far? My argument is two-fold:

- 1). The academic world is often blinded by its own incestuous argumentation, such that it is not able to break free from its self-affirming paradigms (cf. Kuhn, 1962).
- 2). Sociology, as a subject of society, is a victim of the problem of subjective instrumentation. It is obvious that Black Americans, as human instruments for registering social reality, were not able to convince their other American counterparts that their experiential, sociological data was tenable: Americans of other races needed to register Black reality in a basic, compelling manner (largely the obvious killings of Black Americans, largely publicized by the social media among the youth), before they could certify the Black American social experience.

Thus emerges my query: If the societal plight of Black lives in America was genuinely invisible to the general public until forcibly triggered by the social environment induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, then what other important, consequential phenomena (social, academic, psychological or otherwise) are we missing? It is my contention that the world of special education has a blind spot in its fuller assessment of students’ academic performance.

DISPROPORTIONALITY AND EXISTENTIAL CONCERN

Anyone who has invested any amount of time to ruminate over the positive correlation between household income and academic outcomes (cf. Kuhfeld et al., 2020) naturally understands why the same correlation is true between the average Black and Latino students and the low academic outcomes that might potentially trigger Special Education referrals. This is indeed the research observation popularly referred to as “disproportionality in Special Education.” The logic that it is the effects of low income, and not innate academic potential, that manifests as low academic outcomes is indeed a problem that deserves more publicity, for different reasons. First, Skiba, Nardo, and Peterson (2002) affirm not only the existence of disproportionality in special education, but also emphasize the fact that there are problems in placement decisions not to mention related disciplinary consequences.

Another reason disproportionality in special education is a social problem is that the student victims of misplaced referrals into special education services are very likely unaware that they are not learning disabled; they just think that they are not as smart as their other classmates. Furthermore, disproportionality in special education (against mostly students of color) is a serious issue is that, very much like the problem of subjective instrumentation argued earlier, there are no objective criteria for determining the referral thresholds for special education services. According to Sullivan (2011),

ongoing disproportionality strongly indicates systemic problems of inequity, prejudice, and marginalization within the education system. Studies of disproportionality have generally focused on the high-incidence categories of specific learning disabilities (SLDs), mild mental retardation (MIMR), emotional disabilities (EDs), and, to a lesser extent, speech-language impairments (SLIs). (p. 318)

Sullivan, citing the work of researchers such as Klingner et al., (2005), laments that there are concerns about the stated high-incidence categories (i.e., SLDs, MIMR, ED, and SLIs), notably “because their definitions are vague and inconsistent across contexts; and diagnostic practices differ considerably among states, school systems, and individual practitioners” (p. 318).

Sullivan’s assertion has always been self-evident, because I have long thought along the same axis. For example, I had previously made the case that disproportionality in special education could possibly stem from other peripheral factors (Hutchison, 2018). These factors include cross-cultural misunderstanding, the absence of cultural capital, and the “minority effect,” whereby human beings are easily cognitively disoriented when a part of their cognitive space has to be allocated to deal with survival needs (as opposed to academic work) in the classroom (e.g., when they are self-conscious of their minority status in the classroom) (Hutchison, 2009). Students who are victims of the above-mentioned contexts are likely to have lower academic outcomes, and thus approach the performance limits of learning disabled students. I therefore argued that such peripheral factors should be considered as part of the assessment for special education placement of minoritized students (Hutchison, 2018). In the context of this article, COVID-19 was just one more factor that buttressed the need to consider these and potentially other peripheral factors that can induce a reduction in student performance.

In essence, potentially all over the world, there are children who have been improperly diagnosed with various forms of learning disabilities, with potentially life-long consequences. The primary aim of this essay is to stimulate readers to consider the fact that, in a natural classroom environment, average, academically functional students who are perceptively successful can easily be-

come destabilized by shifting one of several variables in their learning environments. COVID-19 was one of such variables. In that sense, COVID-19 helped us to realize that the threshold for triggering the classification of average students into special education is lower than generally perceived. In social environments that are replete with social inequities, it is necessary to expand the considerations for alleviating the ongoing disproportionality in special education, because it “strongly indicates systemic problems of inequity, prejudice, and marginalization within the education system” (Sullivan, 2011).

REFERENCES

- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Buchanan, L., Bui, Q., & Patel, J.K. (2020, July 3). *Black Lives Matter may be the largest movement in U.S. History*. New York Times. Retrieved September 27, 2021 from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>
- Hutchison, C. B. (Ed.). (2009). *What happens when students are in the minority: Experiences that impact human performance*. Rowman and Littlefield.
- Hutchison, C.B. (2018). Re-thinking disproportionality in special education as a self-fulfilling Ppophesy. *Insights on Learning Disabilities*, 15(2), 113–116.
- Klingner, J. K., Artiles, A. J., Kozleski, E., Harry, B., Zion, S., Täte, W, . . . Riley, D. (2005). Addressing the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education through culturally responsive educational systems. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 73(38), 1–38.
- Kuhfeld, M., Soland, J., Tarasawa, B., Johnson, A., Ruzek, E., & Liu, J. (2020). Projecting the Potential Impacts of COVID-19 School Closures on Academic Achievement. *Educational Researcher*, 49(8), 549–565. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X20965918>
- Kuhn, T.S. (1962). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. University of Chicago Press.
- Ogawa, M. (1989). Beyond the tacit framework of “science” and “science education” among science educators. In W. W. Cobern. *Worldview theory and conceptual change in science education*. *Science Education*, 80(5), 579–610.
- Skiba, R. J., Michael, R. S., Nardo, A. C., & Peterson, R. L. (2002). The color of discipline: Sources of racial and gender disproportionality in school punishment. *Urban Review*, 34(4), 317–342. doi: 10.1023/A: 1021320817372
- Sullivan, A. (2011). Disproportionality in Special Education Identification and Placement of English Language Learners. *Exceptional Children*, 77(3), 317–334.
- U.S. Department of Education (2021). *Education in a Pandemic: The Disparate Impacts of COVID-19 on America's Students*. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights. Retrieved September 26, 2021 from <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/20210608-impacts-of-covid19.pdf>

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Charles B. Hutchison, Ph.D., The University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Department of Middle, Secondary, and K12 Education, 9201 University City Boulevard, Charlotte, NC 28223, USA, Email: chutchis@unc.edu.