Why Bother? They Are Not Capable of This Level of Work: Manifestations of Teacher Attitudes in an Urban High School Self-Contained Special Education Classroom with Majority Blacks and Latinos

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Abstract

Using an ethnographic approach the study describes the curricula that veteran urban high school special educators use in self-contained special education classrooms with majority Blacks and Latinos. The findings show that the teachers routinely exposed students to elementary level curricula and to material that was rife with racist images of Blacks and Latinos. The findings raise questions about the types of texts, supplementary resources, and professional development opportunities that special educators receive and bear implications for the ways in which special education teacher preparation programs account for widely-held societal viewpoints that shape teachers' beliefs and attitudes and drive their everyday practice.

INTRODUCTION

Access, progress, and high quality education are ideas that carry much weight in the U.S. Yet, the quality of education for Blacks and Latinos is in peril. Almost 50 percent of Blacks and Latinos attend high schools with minimal graduation and soaring poverty rates (Balfanz & Letgers, 2006; Books, 2007). In large urban high schools the rate decreases to 30- 40 percent (Wald & Losen, 2007). Previous research shows a disproportionately high number of Blacks and Latinos are in self-contained, urban special education classrooms where the failure and imprisonment rate far exceeds that of their White peers (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar & Higareda, 2002; Balfanz & Letgers, 2006; Fierros & Conroy, 2002; Harry & Klingner, 2005; Harry, B. Klingner, J., Cramer, E. Sturges, K.M. & Moore, R.F. 2007; Harry, Klingner, Sturges & Moore, 2002; Losen, 2005; Losen & Orfield, 2002; Oswald, Coutinho & Best, 2002). Close to 80 percent of 9th grade students in city schools are underprepared for the rigors of high school and are in need of special education services. While educators and policymakers in particular are familiar with the trend of negative outcomes for Blacks and Latinos in such settings, not enough is known about the ways in which special education teachers facilitate learning in self-contained settings.

Using an ethnographic approach (Miles & Huberman, 1995) I embarked on a study which was guided by the following research question: How are veteran urban high school special education teachers' beliefs manifested in their lesson planning and execution in self-contained classrooms with majority Black and Latino students? I asked questions about how they planned their lessons and about the curricular materials they used. I also observed how they acted while teaching in self-contained classrooms primarily because understanding of any behavior remains

obscured unless situated within a specific context (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983). I examined how veteran teachers' beliefs about Blacks and Latinos manifested in their curricula for two key reasons: First, I believe that all children, if given the appropriate support, can learn. Second, it is important for teacher educators to ground their thinking and pedagogical approach in an understanding of the deleterious outcomes of the students whom the current U.S. system of education continually fails, Blacks and Latinos. For instance, Blacks and Latinos are three times as likely as their white counterparts to attend high schools where graduation is not the norm (Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2005).

I found that teachers routinely utilized elementary level curricula and regularly drew on ready explanations (Gee, 2002) that reflected deficit views of disability and race. Particularly problematic was that their students were expected to take and pass several high stakes[1] standardized examinations based on curricular content to which they had no access. In this paper I argue that efforts to change the outcomes of students in the self-contained classrooms would continue to fail if special education teacher educators do not simultaneously provide teachers with opportunities to gain current grade-level content *and* ways to responsibly account for how widely-held societal viewpoints shape their beliefs and attitudes and drive everyday practice (Bartolomé, 2004).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK/METHOD

The study rests on Mannheim's (1936) overarching theory of ideology, or system of ideas, which posits that as people, our subjective interpretations of others are negotiated by pre-determined thought patterns (or mental steps), which are rooted in our inherited ideas, and our social circumstances. According to Mannheim, inherited ideas and predetermined thought patterns are tacit. We only become aware of them when confronted by radically different modes of thinking that cast doubt on that which we hold to be true. Then, depending on our group affiliation, we respond collectively to either maintain the status quo or work for change. In either case Mannheim's theory strongly supports the notion that we can only fully understand how we interpret an issue, situation, or others by critically evaluating that which we take for granted. Further we are influenced by events that occur and are responsible for shaping how they turn out. Often, that which we value is unconscious and invisible unless questioned. It is these unconscious ideas (with attendant beliefs and attitudes) that become the windows through which we apply meaning in any situation (Mannheim, 1936).

If one were to consider the social conditions under which ideology manifests, one might find situations that advantage some and disadvantage others. Yeboah (1988), for example, contends that ideology manifests in three different types of social practices: cultural, economic and political – each influential and distinguishable by their outcomes. For instance, although schooling began in pre-colonial America as a cultural practice to sustain societal beliefs and values, it has since become a system associated with accumulating and maintaining political and economic dominance. To witness the political and economic manifestations one needs only look at the disparate curricular offerings that prepare some high school students for leadership

[1] The term high stakes here refers to an examination for which the results determines whether or not a high school student is eligible for graduation.

positions and others for low-paying jobs by channeling them into vocational classes where they learn to prepare for factory work (Kozol, 2005).

That ideology (which manifests in one's cultural, economic, and political life) should connect with any examination of curriculum comes, in part, from scholars, such as Apple 1990; Bobbitt, (1924); and Snedden (1921); whose work reminds us that curriculum intersects with conflicts about race, class, gender and religion, to name a few. Apple, for example, states that curriculum is "inherently ideological and political" (p. xix) and that it has always reflected the aforementioned social struggles. Furthermore, I suggest *because* of the far-reaching impact of our ideology on our individual and collective lives, it is not inconceivable that teachers' normative ideas – both conscious and unconscious – govern how they prepare students in special education classes. Finally, more compelling is that recent research identifies a disturbing nexus of race, disability, special education (Conner & Ferri, 2005).

Race, Disability and Special Education

Racially segregated classrooms and over-representation of Black and Latinos in the categories of special education that involve students' cognitive and social development are among the many deleterious consequences of the intersection of race, disability and special education (Conner & Ferri, 2005). Despite the now more than 50 year-old Supreme Court ruling in *Board of Education v Brown* (1954) – which declared that separating students by race was unequal and therefore unacceptable practice – school systems are more segregated than in years past. In fact, since *Brown* there has been a rise in identification of Black and Latino students in subjective categories such as Mental Retardation and Emotional Disturbance[2] (Harry & Klingner, 2005). When juxtaposed with research on teacher expectations, it is evident that subjective categorizations place emphasis on what students are unable to do while masking other probable environmental or contextual factors that shape students' performance (Conner & Ferri, 2005). When left up to those in a position, such as teacher educators, the results may well reflect inadvertently mistaken viewpoints.

Teachers' Expectations

Some of the most disconcerting indicators of teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards students come from a well-established field of research on teacher expectations (Good & Brophy, 2003). For almost four decades the debate in this field has been focused either on the degree to which teachers' expectations are founded on negative beliefs, or the degree to which students are impacted by same. For the remainder of this section I will discuss two different types of expectancy theories: the self-fulfilling prophecy and the sustaining effect. Both these types of studies indicate that what teachers believe have a powerful impact on how they plan and interact with students. In fact, a number of studies show that teachers either work to meet their

[2] Title 34, Section 300.7 (c) (4) (i) of the Code of Federal Regulations define Emotional Disturbance as "a condition exhibiting one or more of the characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance: An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors; (b) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers; (c) Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances; (d) A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression; (e) A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems. The term includes schizophrenia. The term does not apply to children who are socially maladjusted, unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance." (47).

predictions or else work to sustain that which already exists (Good & Borphy, 2003; Rist, 1970; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Weinstein & McKown, 1998).

Classic research on the self-fulfilling prophecy by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968), and Rist, (1970) shows teachers formulating academic expectations of students based on their interpretations of students' attributes and characteristics. Rosenthal and Jacobson manipulated teachers' expectations by predicting student outcome for teachers. Specifically, Rosenthal and Jacobson identified several students to be on the verge of blooming intellectually. At the end of the year the same students who were identified as potential bloomers showed greater gains on achievement tests than others. Rosenthal and Jacobson interpreted the result to mean that teachers' actions precipitated students' outcomes because they identified and acted on their predictions. Although shrouded in controversy regarding the soundness of their methodology, Rosenthal and Jacobson's research nonetheless brought to the fore the power of teacher expectations on academic achievement for the first time. Rosenthal and Jacobson proposed that teachers, through their expectations help to shape students' outcomes.

In a later qualitative observational study Rist (1970) attempted to show how school helps to reinforce the class structures in society. The study, which began in a class of kindergarteners and continued on through to their second grade year, shows that the teacher's initial expectations of students had significant bearing on how the teacher behaved towards, and taught, each group of students. This, in turn, influenced the opportunities they were given to succeed in school. Rist's central position was that the teacher developed differential academic expectations of students based on subjective perceptions of student attributes and characteristics. For example, students in Rist's study were assigned to low, medium and high groups based on their dress, socioeconomic status, and skin color. Rist found that students in each group were treated differently. By utilizing control-oriented behavior, the teacher was instrumental in creating a group of "slow learners" (p.293), thus maintaining the social class system in the classroom.

Although both studies reveal that teachers' expectations weigh heavily on student outcomes, Rosenthal and Jacobson's research does not shed light on how such differential expectations are formed. Rist, in his study, begins to close this gap by proposing that teachers' expectations are based on individual teachers' perceptions of successful people in the larger society.

The second type of expectation studies which Good and Brophy (2003) discuss is the "sustaining expectation effect" (p.68). In the "sustaining expectation effect" the teacher maintains fixed conclusions about a student's academic potential, and continues to preserve patterns of behavior to reinforce this stance, thus leaving little room for students to change. Good and Brophy (2003) suggest that this type of expectancy effect is more prevalent than one might expect. For example, Good and Brophy propose that teachers convey their expectations in a variety of subtle, yet discernable ways, which include less wait time for students deemed less capable; giving, rather than probing students to develop their own understandings; criticizing low achievers for failing to give public feedback to low achievers; calling on low achievers less often; seating low achievers furthest away from them; giving deference to uncertain responses to high achievers only; engaging in less social interactions with low achieving students; providing less informative feedback to low achieving students; fewer amenable non-verbal responses,

including less eye contact with low achievers; greater resistance to listening to ideas from low achievers; and providing inadequate curricular materials and methods to low achievers.

Weinstein and McKown (1998) were also major contributors to research on the self-sustaining effect. In their work they sought to find out the conditions under which expectancy effects are magnified, minimized or changed. Their work highlights the "role of contextual factors in magnifying or diminishing expectancy effects are critical characteristics of teachers and the classroom environments they create" (p. 216). These researchers asked, "How do classrooms that children identify as highly differentiated in teacher treatment toward high and low achievers differ from classrooms in which children perceive more equitable treatment?" (pp. 200 –221). They administered a "Teacher treatment Inventory "(p.221) and conducted semi-structured interviews with 133 high and low achieving fourth graders. They found that students' "awareness of teachers' expectations rests on subtle distinctions in teacher behavior" (p. 221). Weinstein and McKown concluded that school environments, teacher philosophies, individual student characteristics are key to determining what, and how teachers communicate and set the classroom context.

The strengths of the study reside in the fact that they were able to pinpoint the non-verbal cues that provided insight into what teachers expected of students. These include the ways in which teachers group students for instruction; the tasks and materials they utilize; the motivational devices they use during instruction; the latitude they accord students to monitor learning; the vocal inflections when providing feedback – soft tone indicate that the student is doing well; the opportunities they are given to improve their responses; the assessments they provide; and the relationships they establish.

The problem with the aforementioned studies is that the authors did not locate teachers' behavioral patterns in any specific setting nor did they identify students beyond their perceived academic ability and socioeconomic status. This is significant, given that there is much historical evidence that shows that students of color have been accorded inferior intellectual status in schools. Further, in light of Good and Brophy's (2003) recognition that behaviors do not uniformly occur in every classroom and that teachers are often unaware that they have differential expectations of students, this study investigates how teachers plan, teach, and then reflect on their work with Black and Latino students self-contained special education settings.

THE STUDY

I interviewed and observed four (n=4) veteran special education teachers in classrooms with majority Black and Latino students over a seven week period. Data sets included transcripts from 12 interviews; 10 observation protocols; document review; 12 entries of field notes from observations and interviews; and daily reflective memos done throughout the data collection period (minimum 49 entries). The goal according to Miles and Huberman (1994) was to make "multiple comparisons" (p.175) across data sets to derive responses that converged and gave strength to the explanations I provided.

Research Design and Methodology

The central concept that I examined was how teachers implemented curricula and to assert how their attitudes, or audible and visible expressions of how they thought, felt and behaved

towards Black and Latino students impacted their curricular design. To do so, I reviewed teacher and state curricular materials; interviewed veteran teachers; observed and analyzed their verbal and non-verbal communication patterns for themes and provided an interpretation of the meaning I derived from the data I collected (Maxwell, 1996). Using an ethnographic design meant that it was more important to collect data in a manner that yielded maximum "contextual understanding" (p. 64), for it was the lessons rather than the ability to generalize the information to other situations that was important (Creswell, 1998).

Reflexivity

It was appropriate that I acknowledge that, as people, we speak in conversations from a particular vantage point (DeVault, 1995). Therefore, as a researcher from an oppressed group in a racialized society I ran the risk of misinterpreting, misunderstanding, or making participants vulnerable to biases that arose from assuming that Blacks and Latinos function in an educational system that oppresses and under-educates them on account of their race. I counteracted the aforementioned potential threats to the study's usefulness (dependability) by stating my assumptions and by appointing a White colleague to conduct the first interviews with special education teachers. I chose to have my colleague conduct the first interviews because it was in these interviews that I solicited personal information from special education teachers – information that I assumed would have emerged much easier in situations where both the interviewer and interviewee shared similar racial backgrounds.

Third, I engaged in weekly classroom observation to build trust with each participant and minimize distortions in the data collection. Fourth, I engaged two colleagues who were not connected to the study to ask questions that challenged my approach to the research (Isaac & Michael, 1997). Fifth, in an effort to guard against bias I gave the coded transcripts to another individual, who was unfamiliar with the topic, to read for patterns and themes in the data.

Data Analysis

I analyzed four sets of data, which included transcripts from 12 interviews; 10 observation protocols; document review; 12 entries of field notes from observations and interviews; and 49 reflective memos done throughout the data collection period. Central to the plan for analysis was the search for alternative explanations to deepen my understanding and strengthen the explanations I provided (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Specifically I looked across information derived from Strauss and Corbin's (1998) three- tiered system of coding, Gee's (2002) Discourse Analysis Technique, the literature, and the theoretical framework of the study for points of convergence. Further, I applied additional procedures for ensuring the validity of the study.

Validity. My process progressed from identifying the story line, to writing a descriptive passage about what I thought I found, followed by a systematic sorting of the memos I wrote. Further, integrating my understanding was a recursive process that involved constant consultation with the raw data, and the open and axial codes. During each iteration, I asked the following questions: What is happening here? "How do the two data sets relate, or not?" and; "What keeps striking me repeatedly as I read through the transcripts and the codes?" I then repeated the line by line process again, this time coding for the sequences in participants' actions and interactions that occurred over time (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Further, using Denzin's (1978) distinctions, I triangulated data by method, theory, and data source. Next, I used the questions derived from Gee's Discourse Analysis Technique to triangulate the data to analyze portions of the transcribed interviews and field notes. Finally, I corroborated these two data analysis methods and then cross-analyzed it with the literature and theoretical frame I applied to the study.

RESULTS

Myler High;[3] a comprehensive public school in a working class industrial city in Massachusetts, had a population of students with disabilities that grew by 46 percent between 2001 and 2004. . Founded in the 1800s on the principle of preparing youth for the responsibilities of life, Myler High served an ever-growing population of immigrants who, until the early 1980s, came mostly from Europe. By 2004, with a student/ teacher ratio of approximately 20:1, Myler High served 1680 students in an urban multicultural environment in which approximately 55 percent students came from diverse racial, cultural groups that collectively spoke close to fifty different languages. Of that number, 92.3 percent were categorized with mild learning disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Like their counterparts in regular education classrooms, students with disabilities in self-contained special education classrooms were expected to take and pass the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) in English and Math (as part of their graduation requirement). Although not yet a requirement on the MCAS, students in Special Education were also expected to be prepared for Science and Technology/Engineering and History using the statewide curricula.

The Participants

Four veteran special educators – Joy, Tracy, Justin and Denise – amassed close to 112 years of teaching experience. They began teaching between 22 and 30 years prior and shared similar characteristics and professional credentials. For instance, all of the teachers were White, in their late forties to mid fifties. Three out of four acquired a Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education and one (Esme), a Master's Degree in Elementary Education. All were initially licensed as elementary school teachers and became special educators because of the abundance of jobs at the time they were hired. Each was subsequently licensed in special education when the changes in reform mandated that all teachers be licensed in the subjects they taught. Consequently, all of the teachers were "grandfathered" into the field of special education based solely on the number of years of experience in a special education classroom. None of the teachers held specific credentials for the subjects they taught at the high school level. None pursued additional college courses after receiving their respective degrees. All expressed frustration at infrequent professional development, which, when available, were mostly geared towards compliance with state and federal laws governing special education.

The Curricula

In each case, the four teachers consistently utilized elementary level curricular material instead of the requisite state-mandated high school curricula. For example, Denise, the History teacher, used a 367 page textbook that was designed for 4^{th}-8^{th} grade by Bernstein (1997) in

[3] The names of the school and city and other identifying names were changed to protect the confidentiality of participants

which the pictures were bold and the text was typeset in 18 point font with 24, 3-page chapters with assignments that required students to "Fill in the blanks;" "Match Column A with column B;" and "put a check next to each sentence…" (p. 20). When compared to the state's expectations for the depth of knowledge and understanding of 9th grade History, Denise's curriculum fell short. While students did gain some information about ancient civilizations, there were never any exercises that promoted the study of pivotal political, economic or social events that shaped the specific period.

Language, according to Gee (2002) "reflects and constructs the situation or context in which it is used" (p. 82). The visual and syntactic simplicity of the foregoing passage construed an elementary school reality in a high school classroom. Further, Nagin (2003), a researcher on literacy development identifies assignments such as those given by the teachers as "writing without composing" (p.39), a practice that promotes skill-based instruction and negates opportunities for students to engage in higher order cognitive processes, such as reflecting and analyzing are essential aspects of critical thinking.

Another, more disturbing sample of materials was used in Tracy's English class and came from a series entitled, *Power English 1: Basic Language Skills for Adults* by Dorothy Rubin (1999). This brightly covered text featured pictures of culturally and linguistically diverse people. Inside, characters were named José and Maria. Below is a sample of one of the exercises Rubin's text:

> ***Fill in the blank with a word from this list. Use each word only once. Be sure the completed sentences make sense.***
> *how when jail police shelter*
> *what husband where who why*
> *1. _____is she so frightened?*
> *2. Her _____ beat her yesterday.*
> *3. My friend called the _____.*
> *4. _____told you all this?*
> *5. _____did they take him?*
> *6. They took him to _____.*
> *7. _____ happened next?*
> *8. She slept in a _____.*
> *9. _____ is she coming home?*
> *10. _____long have they been married?* (p.43)

The state mandates that teachers engender values and attitudes that appreciate differences, and show a sense of responsibility for operating in the interest of their communities. Unfortunately, the discourse in this particular assignment instead reveals racist images of Latinos. Justin's Science curriculum was no different. Below is one excerpt from a text *Introduction to Human Biology* (Author):

> *Can you think of a machine that burns fuel for heat and energy and has such a strong pump that it works for years and years without stopping? A car? No! It is your own body! In this book you will learn about how to plan balanced meals*

[and]… how the body deals with foreign substances, such as drugs, alcohol and tobacco.

Not only was the stereotypical reference apparent, but the syntactical structure was similarly unsophisticated. When compared to the state Science curriculum the materials to which students had access again fell way below the state's expectations for students at this level. For example, the state expected these students to have opportunities to engage in scientific investigations using "a range of skills, habits" and "discipline-specific assessment options based on the core standards in earth and space science, biology, chemistry, physics and technology engineering."

Looking back on each teacher's curriculum two key themes emerged. First, each was embedded with unexamined beliefs and expectations – a claim that many scholars (see Tyack, 1976, 1996; Tyack & Cuban1997 for example) make. Tyack and Cuban (1996) contend that the role of the school extends beyond teaching verbal and written communication to include that of a socializing agency. Although more focused on skill-based instruction, the teachers nonetheless engaged in social practices that reproduced the status quo.

Second, students did not have ample opportunities to develop the higher order skills required for meeting high school competencies nor was there a match between their high school personas and the elementary level curricular materials they were given. The incongruence between the two remind me of Delpit's (1995) assertion that skill based instruction leads to teachers teaching down to students and to Gee's (2002) contention that as people, we communicate with others in a manner that we believe "fits" (Gee, 2002, p.11) the context within which we speak. If, as Gee suggests, we use language in a way that mirrors our circumstances, then the curricular materials that teachers used had significant bearing on the linguistic context they created for students. Further, the four teachers' rationale for selecting the curricula material they utilized highlighted their beliefs about their students and shows how these shaped their curricular choices.

Teachers' Beliefs Guide Curricular Choices

The four teachers did not feel it was necessary to create lesson plans; in fact, they grounded much of their curricular selections in their beliefs about their students' intellectual capacity. For instance, Denise believed that her students' potential was largely "driven by who they are and to a certain extent, how much they can absorb." Similarly, Tracy said, "I go by their innate ability and what I can get from them." Justin's comments further justified why he thought it was necessary to use elementary level material:

I try to find material that is on their level. Obviously you can't use a book that look like it belongs in elementary 'cause you will embarrass the kids and that's not the point – we are trying to have them feel comfortable with their learning but also make it so it's more palatable to them…now obviously when you teach you can use more sophisticated vocabulary but we don't.

Similarly, during one of our pre-lesson conversations Denise said:

I think this may be too hard for them – the kings and queens who ruled nations. They should know people who did not agree with the church doctrine… I would

never expect them to express it in those terms…. So…I was thinking of starting really new stuff with them.

Joy's rationale for minimizing students' opportunities for engaging in independent work also echoed similarly low expectations of their intellectual capability:

I have a worksheet that they do half together and half on their own. This is a very low-functioning group ... So what we do with a quiz like this is work through it together step by step – they read the question together, look for where to find the answer, they find the answers, write them in….

Focusing as narrowly on making sure that students followed each step forestalled opportunities for them to exercise problem solving skills. Working from the same belief about students' intellectual deficit, Justin similarly believed that his students lacked basic information and did not have the sophistication for complex information:

We are doing some work on the ear…by the end of the class the kids will know some function of the ear: how it functions…and also the different parts of the ear and how it works. This is very complicated information. So we will color it instead…

Mannheim's (1936) theory reminds us, as people, we are influenced by inherited ideas. It seemed apparent that these teachers' ideas could have been precipitated by prevailing societal views about Blacks and Latinos and or the culture of special education, both of which were set up to locate failure first (see, for example, Eder, 1982; Meehan, Hartwick & Meihls, 1986; McDermott, 1976; Harry et al., 2002; & Rist, 1970). This next comment by one of the teachers (Justin), however, shows an explicit connection between students' racial background and the teachers' curricular decisions:

In general I think that their ability to retain some of the concepts is minimal. The student that sits in the back – José, is a good example of what I am talking about. José is just starting to see that the earth is round, you know! All those things that are considered basic facts are hard for him to grasp*…so I work off that.*

When asked what he would have done differently Justin said, "I think I would probably open the windows sooner."

IMPLICATIONS/CONCLUSION

Expecting less intellectually became one of several breaches that resulted in materials that diverged sharply from the state curricula. In fact, although all of the students with whom the teachers worked were identified with mild learning disabilities, the teachers' comments and materials nonetheless reflected the assumption that students suffered from acute cognitive impairments. The teachers' tacit acceptance of the same ready explanation about their students' cognitive impairments precipitated their abdication of the responsibility to teach students in a manner that was befitting of the state-mandated grade level expectations.

The teachers' comments also revealed that they did not plan their lessons. Instead, they relied on deeply-held beliefs that rendered the traits they perceived in students,

irrevocable. It was from this perspective that they justified their repeated use of elementary level material, thereby negating the strong models of writing and higher order processing skills. Problematic, too, was that the state allowed these teachers to work unchecked for most of their careers in special education classrooms without the appropriate professional development opportunities. Not only were these slips in administrative oversight unjust, they were illegal because the teachers were not adequately equipped to comply with the mandates of the laws that ensured the rights of students with disabilities to a free and appropriate education. Were these teachers to continue teaching without the knowledge and skills to engage their students with disabilities at the appropriate grade level in the general curriculum, one can expect that their students will likely continue to be under-taught.

As I contemplate the influence of prevailing ideas I am reminded of Mannheim's (1936) theory which states, as people, we are shaped by a myriad of elements including our history, social experiences, daily interactions and the mental steps we take to think through any situation. The same is true for these teachers who repeatedly referenced long-inherited societal deficit beliefs about Blacks, Latinos and students with disabilities. The problem was that their beliefs guided the curricular material they selected as well as their instructional practices. Any effort to move these teachers towards change would have necessitated providing them with appropriate professional development experiences *and* multiple opportunities to reflect on and account for how their beliefs, attitudes, and subsequent actions maintain the status quo and shape the social and academic possibilities of their students.

The findings raise questions about the oversight of the system of special education. First, on what grounds are states making decisions about the qualifications of veteran teachers who move from one field of expertise to another? Second, who determines and reviews the types of texts and curricular resources that special education teachers receive? Third, whose responsibility is it to ensure that teachers have ample opportunities to participate in high quality professional development programs that focus on pedagogy?

In order to ensure the success of students who are served in special education programs nationwide, researchers might consider investigating other special education classrooms nationwide to uncover any discernable patterns in the treatment of Black and Latino students with disabilities in urban settings. Secondly, given that this study raised questions about but did not account for how administrative issues shape urban special educators' experiences, it would be appropriate for researchers to also explore how teacher preparation programs and K-12 special education administrators might work together to create and sustain exemplary professional development programs that help *both* constituencies account for how prevailing societal views shape their beliefs, structural and instructional decisions. To do otherwise would be tantamount to maintaining the current dreadful outcomes for Blacks and Latinos in urban special education classrooms.

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