Chapter 1

Intersectionality and the Construction of Inclusive Schools

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the educational experiences of an African American woman labeled with a disability and from a low socioeconomic group. Grounded in a social and historical context, this chapter uses qualitative research and intersectional theory to understand her experiences in a holistic manner. Subsequent implications for educators are discussed, including the need to: 1) understand students through the social model, 2) acknowledge the intersection of multiple marginalized identities, and 3) assist students in advocacy and empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

Delgado (2000) defines intersectionality as the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation and how the combination of one or more discourse plays out in different settings. This perspective holds that individuals’ lives cannot be understood through examining only one aspect of an identity, albeit gender, race, disability, or class. Rather, a more complete understanding of one’s experiences is gained only through a thorough inquiry into the multiple dimensions of one’s identity. If we desire to create inclusive and equitable learning communities, we must understand how the lived experiences of individuals within one or more marginalized discourses play out within educational settings. How one’s race, gender, class, or ability impacts one’s educational opportunities are, perhaps, the most important question that we, as educators, must ask.

The literature on intersectionality and how best to articulate the experiences of individuals who identify within marginalized and intersecting identities is growing. In recent literature, Connor (2006, 2008) traces the experiences of young African American students labeled with learning disabilities within urban education settings. This work takes an intersectional approach employing the work of Collins (2000).
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to examine how power circulates and is interdependent in what is described as a matrix of domination. Connor’s work acknowledges the complexities of structural barriers with the minuet of lived and individual experiences while examining the interplay of power across historical, cultural, institutional, and interpersonal domains (Connor, 2006). These experiences are difficult to theorize and this most recent literature suggests that we, as researchers and educators, must avoid the urge to de-compartmentalize or assign meaning to any one experience in relation to one aspect of an individual’s identity. Rather, in order to fully understand how identity shapes, informs, or intersects with other identities to influence one’s schooling experiences, we must work to understand the nuances as holistic so as not to lose the whole of the experience or person.

It is from this stance that this chapter seeks to extend upon the current literature by exploring the experiences of one woman located at the marginalized positions of woman, disabled, economically disadvantaged, and African American. The intent is to understand how life at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities inform an individual’s educational opportunities and how we, as educators, may learn from these experiences to create inclusive classrooms for all students.

To situate this exploration, this chapter begins with a critique and challenge of the concept of normal. Because the notion of normal is often taken for granted and ingrained in how we, as a society, understand and thus, interact with one another, a discussion that challenges this assumption is necessary. Perhaps just as important, a discussion of the historical context within the United States surrounding race, ability, gender, and class follows. Grounded in these social and historical contexts, I then share the story of one woman located at the intersection of African American, woman, disabled, and economically disadvantaged. Last, I offer discussion and implications as to how we, as educators, can create inclusive communities to support all students.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF NORMAL

Underlying our assumptions of difference is the notion of normalcy. One of the most prevalent assumptions about difference is that the concept of normal has always existed and that it is stable, neutral, and natural. However, Davis (1995) pointed out that words such as “normal” and “average” did not enter our European language until the mid nineteenth century and it is a construct that continues to evolve as a result of social, political, and historical forces.

The concept of normal emerges from three intricately linked and widely, albeit problematic, held assumptions. The first assumption holds that a particular quality or trait can be operationally defined and thus, measured. This assumption is problematic in that while certain traits may be measured such as height, others traits, such as anger or attentiveness are more difficult to objectively measure (Lewotin, Rose, & Kamin, 1993). Second, the concept of normal relies on the assumption that qualities are fixed and inherent to the individual. Given this assumption, anger is not seen as a reaction to a particular set of circumstances, but rather is of biological origin. This assumption is of particular importance because if we, as educators, are to believe that such traits are the inherent and the result of biology, what hope do we have to educate? Last, if we are to assume individual traits are real and can be measured, then we must also assume there exists a scale on which to measure such traits. That scale, as we know it, is the normal curve.

Widely accepted as constituting real and objective science, the normal curve served and continues to serve as the mechanism to legitimize and justify the concept of normal. When analyzed through histori-