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Critical Disabilities Studies: Theory and Practice

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An Ethnographic Introspection on Disabilities in the Public School System

Acquiring Academic accommodations from schools is a difficult task to succeed in. The faculty and staff of schools always state that their goal is to see every student succeed. Often, however, students with disabilities do not succeed due to the lack of support the education system gives to children with disabilities. I wanted to construct an ethnographic study with an individual who has gone through the experience of diagnosis and the process of acquiring accessibilities in the public school system. In the following pages, I will recount, in an ethnography¹, the journey the ego² has gone through as well as provided research on the topic of types of accessibilities available in the public school system.

“In the second grade my teacher sent a note home with me for my parents. The note contained a request for a parent-teacher conference with my parents.”

The teacher informed the parents that their child was having trouble with organization and completing assignments in a timely manner. In the conference the teacher explained to the parents that their son was extremely smart but was falling behind in class due to the fact that he was often unable to finish his assignments or forgot to turn them in. The teacher recommended that the student be evaluated by a psychologist.

1. **Ethnography** a scientific research technique that tells the story of a person's life or culture used in anthropology
2. **Ego** is the person who is being interviewed within an ethnography

The parents took their child to get evaluated by a psychologist. The test was long, with many different parts such as using blocks to fill a square as well as math and language questions. The child was diagnosed with ADHD. The next major hurdle was deciding whether the young boy should be medicated for his ADHD or not.

“My father was against putting me on any medication, but my mother believed that medication was the best way to give me a chance to succeed. My parents decided to ask me how I felt on the matter. With tear-filled eyes, I explained that I truly love school and was trying my hardest.”

The problem, he explained, was that every little noise or movement around the classroom would completely distract him from his work.

He told his parents that “whenever a pencil hits the floor I am completely distracted and need to look around the room to see where it happened. I can’t do my work until I have looked around and identified the cause of the noise.”

The boy told his parents that he wished that he could have an easier time trying to concentrate. After a long argument it was decided that the boy would start medication.

The next major hurdle in the boy’s life was working out what form of assistance he would need in the classroom. A meeting of the teacher, guidance counselor, parents, and vice principle was held. It was decided that the boy would have a 504 with extended time for testing.

Years past and the family moved to a new state. Now, the boy was in middle school. Moving to a new school district in a new state meant another meeting with the

school to acquire academic accommodations for the boy. Attending this meeting was the boy's mother, his father no longer took part in the boy's accommodation process. During this time the boy had a psychological reevaluation. In this evaluation it was revealed that the boy's original ADHD diagnosis was not the complete picture. The boy was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder comorbid with ADHD and OCD. In light of this new diagnosis and being aware of the limitations of a 504 the boy and his mother felt that the boy should receive an IEP from the school rather than simply a 504. The school district did not agree with this proposal. They felt that due to the boy's high grades an IEP was unnecessary. The school personnel explained that if they gave the boy an IEP that would take resources away from students that needed the resources and were struggling academically.

In the United States one in five children have some form of learning or attention differences according to the National Center for Learning Disabilities (Mangal 2019). With so many students requiring some form of learning accommodation how does the US school system handle the needs of these students? There are two main forms in which educational assistance is provided. These two forms are the IEP (Individualized Education Program) and the 504. The IEP is a form of learning support program created under the authority of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a piece of federal legislation that provides a framework for creating personalized education programs (US Department of Education). The 504 is administered under the jurisdiction of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (US Department of Education). These federal guidelines are then further elaborated upon by the individual states. According to the State Performance Plan / Annual Performance Report: Part B of 2020 for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania there were approximately 1.7 million students

enrolled in Pennsylvania public schools with 18.1% receiving special education (US Department of Education). This percentage is only accounting for students receiving special education under the IDEA and does not include individuals receiving educational assistance through the means of a 504.

In Pennsylvania the IEP is divided into two separate categories, the IEP and the gIEP or gifted IEP. The requirements for a gifted IEP laid out by Title 22 Chapter 16 of Pennsylvania State Code are, in addition to the requirements necessary for a student to acquire an IEP, that the student possesses an IQ score of 130 or higher or meet multiple criteria listed in the text of the code. These alternative criteria include that the student performs above grade achievement level for their age group in multiple subjects for a year or longer, that the student have early measured levels of critical and analytical thinking skills, or that the student demonstrates expertise in one or more academic areas as displayed in projects, portfolios, or research. Students cannot be deemed ineligible from a gifted IEP based solely upon deficits in memory or processing speed (PA State Title 22 Chapter 16).

While the special education system is very beneficial to students with a variety of needs, there are still many problems with IDEA and Section 504 that need to be addressed. The most pressing issue in relation to special education is funding. IDEA used the belief that a student with disabilities required twice as much money to educate as a child in the standard school program. This figure was decided upon by Congress. The IDEA stated that the federal government would pay up to 40% of the additional cost. While IDEA on paper allocates funds to provide for 40% of the extra cost in reality this never happened. Congress did not and has not allocated anywhere near the 40% set out in the act (Samuels 2019). The rest of the bill, the remaining funding for special education programs, was left to be footed by the individual states and school districts. In

reality the state does very little in providing the necessary funding for special education programs. Since 2008 local school districts were required to provide \$20 for every \$1 of State funding. The formula with which Pennsylvania calculates how to allocate funding for special education is also highly biased towards schools with changing populations. Schools with decreasing populations receive more money per student than schools with increasing populations (*Shortchanging Children with Disabilities*, 2018).

The lack of budget is not the only issue that is facing special education. With the increase in student population and what is essentially decreasing funding the field of special education is lacking sufficient specialized teachers. This and the increased emphasis on inclusion leads to many students with disabilities spending a majority of their school time in general education classrooms (Samuels 2019). This can result in unfair disciplinary actions against students with disabilities.

While the current state of special education and academic accommodations in public schools are in a dire position, there are ways in which we can work to improve the situation. With the primary issue relating to special education being funding there are several ways in which this can be improved. The best way to improve the system would be for Congress to propose and pass new legislation that is better adapted for our current system. Schooling has vastly changed since the IDEA was passed in the 1970s, technology has become far more essential to classroom learning. New legislation that addresses these needs and better calculates the funding required for schools to have and maintain adequate resources to educate all students. A similar, however more basic, improvement would be for Congress to increase the amount allocated for the current legislation that exists. The best way to achieve this goal is political activism. Assisting in the campaigning for your local house representative and senator, writing

letters or giving phone calls to currently seated members of Congress, and spreading awareness about the issue are all great ways in which an individual can help make a change.

Another angle from which the issue can be addressed is by changing the requirements for general education teachers to be better equipped for assisting students with disabilities in their classrooms. Syracuse University requires that undergraduates who aim to pursue careers as elementary school teachers take courses in special education (Samuels 2019). Having teachers be qualified for the education of students with different needs would also assist in early identifying of students who will need assistance.

Although disabilities in public education have made some advances, there is still so much to work on. Students deserve better support in all forms throughout their education. This starts with education about disabilities in school. The government and public school system also require improvements. As scholastic education increases in scope, the need for support needs to be supplemented. With the many possibilities to advance scholastic accommodation and the large community that brings people with disabilities together, there is a chance to challenge the norms of academic accommodations and help students with disabilities thrive.

Works Cited

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