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*Teaching for Equity and Openness Philosophy*

I find it interesting that our society sets up the celebration of diversity as one of its main modern beliefs and yet our practices as a society tend toward blatant hypocrisy. Especially in the field of education, success is painted in the form scores and normalcy as compared to a contrived “standard.” Education today reflects an assumed standard of “normal” that has now been passed from generation to generation without any real challenge.

I think it says something very unflattering about our society that our current methods of testing and classifying students can be so easily traced back to the time of eugenics’ popularity. Why is our concept of normal still defined by a time in history when those who did not fit the ideal paradigm were sterilized and/or institutionalized? We may scoff at the idea of relating our current practices to the institutionalization or sterilization of those with disabilities, but when our entire system of education is set up to limit the possibilities of those who do not meet the minimum standard, how truly different is it? Right now our education system follows this pattern: if you score well on tests, get along well with and make good impressions on your teachers, get good grades on your assignments, and participate in extra activities in addition to your schoolwork, then you will be awarded with the grades, scores, and recommendations you need to get into a “good” higher institution of learning, which will enable you access to more opportunities and probably higher pay. This will mean you have succeeded in the “normal” world. The expectation is the same for everyone.

The definition of “success” is in many ways just as limited as the definition of “normal.” Because both of these definitions are so narrow, only a selection of students fit them in some way. It could easily be argued that no student fits the definition of “normal” because it was

invented to describe something that does not exist. And yet every student finds themselves compared to the unattainable “normal,” whether they come into contact with special education or not! “Normal” is unattainable because of that diversity we claim to celebrate as a society. Every human being is different and unique, which means that so is every student. Every student comes with a unique set of experiences and dispositions, as well as a unique set of strengths and weaknesses. Instead of celebrating everyone’s strengths, education has honed in on the strengths it has deemed “normal” and let those students with different strengths slip through the cracks.

I feel that the first and biggest contribution I can make toward changing our current system is through not just “redefining normal,” but eliminating it from the vocabulary. In doing so I can help students understand and truly celebrate diversity by seeing one another’s many strengths, not just the strengths that our traditional focus on normalcy led us to highlight. Doing so may not be easy, but it may help students feel more keenly the value of inclusion.

As a child, I participated in separate “pull-out” classes for gifted and talented students. At the time it seemed great. Once a week I got to leave my regular class and climb on a bus with other students who were rapidly becoming my closest peers and ride over to a different elementary school where we worked on a curriculum that was much more challenging and fun. We learned a bit of basic Latin, computer programming, and constantly participated in logic puzzles. When we moved on to middle school, we were placed together in a different English class and the most advanced math class. We began to realize the price we paid socially, and by high school it was quite apparent to us that we could never quite “fit back in” with our peers. My best friend and I graduated early, partially due to this phenomenon. We just did not feel at home in our own class.

Because it was the only experience I had (you can only have one experience growing up), I have very mixed feelings about my gifted and talented classes. I loved the more challenging curriculum and I thrived on being around peers who challenged me intellectually. Would we have found each other anyway? Possibly. Maybe not. But my main question has always been, how would our social experience have been different if these challenging opportunities had somehow been offered to us without separating us from our peers; without sending the message to both me and them that I was different enough to warrant separation? I cannot answer this question because I cannot go back in time and have a different experience.

My experience did not deal with a disability, but it made me reflect on the consequences of separating students and placing labels on them. Our separation and our label defined my fellow “gifted and talented” classmates and me. We clung to our label when we did not know how to interact with our peers. If that is true for the “gifted” students, surely it must be true for at least some of the students with disabilities.

As prepare to enter the education field as a teacher, I feel entirely unprepared to teach in diverse settings. This class is the only formal training I have had regarding students with exceptionalities, and I have had little in the way of informal training. Unfortunately, my degree does not provide any further options for classes that could help me learn and practice skills to work in a diverse classroom. In order to better prepare myself, I will have to lead my own education. I think one of the best ways to educate myself is to observe classrooms; especially classrooms with experienced teachers who have practiced multiple strategies to helping students succeed in a diverse classroom. In doing so I can not only learn about strategies but also I can actually see them in practice and know how to better implement them. I feel that I would also have to learn more about common disabilities in order to better understand the children I might

have in my classroom. Other than reading about them, I do not know where to turn in order to understand these disabilities better, unless I wait for a child to walk into my classroom with one. Even then, I feel that it is hard for me to understand them because as a music specialist, I typically only see the same child once or twice a week.

I think the reading material that most influenced my thinking so far this semester was the chapter about challenging normalcy. The way it delved into our education's historical roots in eugenics deeply resonated with me. For a long time I have felt a distaste for the term "normal" and for our society's inclination to place everyone on the same scale. Reading that chapter made so much sense to me. It hit my sensitive spot regarding standardized testing, which I feel is killing true educational experiences. I feel that our society has confused equality with uniformity, and this chapter made me wonder how much of that confusion comes from the days of eugenics.

In my own career, I hope to challenge the idea that equality means uniformity. I want to champion the idea that equality means everyone has the opportunity to develop his or her unique strengths and in doing so also strengthen his or her unique weaknesses. I am only one person and I suspect that my sphere of influence will be small. However, my sphere of influence will include young minds and potentially other educators. As I live my own beliefs regarding equality, inclusion, and the need to celebrate diversity instead of normalcy, I can encourage that in my own classroom. The positive thing about being an elementary music specialist is that my classroom will usually include every student from the school at some point during the week. My influence is limited in the time that I have, but it is vast in the number of students I can reach. Music is also one of the subjects that tend to be integrated even if other subjects are not – a circumstance I can use to my advantage to help students recognize the value of everyone's

contributions. I hope to create a classroom environment where everyone participates together in creating music and musical experiences. Because every child is musical in some way, every child has some type of musical strength. As we highlight different strengths, I would hope that students come to expect to find different strengths in all of their peers and to enjoy discovering their own and those of others.

In a more broad sense, I hope we as a society can someday rid ourselves of the goal to achieve the unattainable “normal.” I feel that awareness is the key to this goal. Special educators can play a key role by educating other teachers and helping parents to think in this new way. Whenever possible, I would hope that special educators focus on the strengths of students with special needs and highlight those instead of the skills have yet to be learned and “checked off the list.” If we spread awareness and create small paradigm shifts, I think we will eventually see a greater change in our system, or at least the opportunity to call for that change. The more people who are made aware, the more support we will have when that opportunity comes.