

Soft Disability in Schools: Assisting or Confining At Risk Children and Youth?

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ABSTRACT: The aim in this article is to examine the institutional construction of soft or mild disability by special education as a process of pre-incarceration in schools. Soft disability includes the categories of specific learning disabilities (LD), speech and language impairments (SLI), emotional and behavioural disorders (EBD), and mild mental retardation (MMR). Based on Foucault's (1975/1977) view of the link between prison and delinquency and Skrtic's (1995) critical-pragmatic perspective of disability and special education, I argue that labels of soft disability reflect a process of suspending the educational and citizenship participation of disadvantaged students. Similarly to what Foucault described as the production of delinquency by the prison, special education, by applying inconsistent identification criteria, increases the occurrence of soft disability. Variation and inquiry are outlined as alternative concepts whose implementation may reverse the negative school dynamic between soft disability and (pre)incarceration.

RÉSUMÉ: Le but de cet article est d'examiner si l'éducation spécialisée serait une construction institutionnelle des difficultés légères et favoriserait un processus de pré-incarcération dans les écoles. Les cas de légère incapacité incluent les catégories suivantes: les difficultés spécifiques d'apprentissage (LD), la parole et les troubles du langage (SLI), les désordres émotionnels et comportementaux (EBD), le retard mental léger (MMR). Se basant sur la vision de Foucault (1975/1977) portant sur le lien entre la prison et la délinquance, de même que sur la perspective critique et pragmatique de Skrtic (1995) portant sur les difficultés et l'éducation spécialisée, je soutiens que l'étiquette «difficultés légères» reflète un processus de suspension de la

participation à l'éducation et à la citoyenneté de la part des enfants en difficulté. De la même façon que Foucault a décrit la production d'une délinquance par le biais de la prison, l'éducation spécialisée, en appliquant des critères d'identification inconsistants, augmente l'apparition de difficultés légères. La variation et l'investigation sont retenues comme des concepts alternatifs dont la mise en oeuvre peut renverser la dynamique négative de l'école prise entre les difficultés légères et la (pré)incarcération.

***Confining Soft Disability:
Operation "Identify Young Thugs"***

The penitentiary technique and the delinquent are in a sense twin brothers They appeared together, the one extending from the other ... it is this delinquency that must be known, assessed, measured, diagnosed, treated Delinquency is the vengeance of the prison on justice. It is a revenge formidable enough to leave the judge speechless. (Foucault, 1975/1977, p. 255)

I will call her Judy. She teaches in a regular elementary school with a large population of *at-risk* students in the greater Montreal area. Judy strongly believes that all children, given the opportunity, can accomplish things. Recently, the school psychologist asked teachers in Judy's school to provide information on some forms about students who appeared to have problems. Judy later found out that these children were subsequently coded, that is labeled, in a vaguely defined category of students with mild problems. None of the parents of these children were asked for permission to assess or label their children, merely receiving a letter from the school board, after the fact, stating that their child "is receiving learning support in the school." Judy has noticed how an emphasis on labeling is often coupled with a view that even mild disability poses a permanent obstacle to learning. In her mind, this permanent obstacle lends itself as a justification for limited or no access to resource help, leaving frustrated teachers to swim or sink and often blame the parents for their children's predicament. Her perception of the

situation seems unsettling: "If teachers complain to [the] union, they are told to complain to [the] school board. When [teachers] complain to [the] school board, they [school board personnel] ... speak of budget cuts or ... that [teachers] are being inefficient or have unrealistic expectations for these children."

Judy's experience is far from unique. It forms part of a wider social trend of redistributing wealth into fewer hands, deskilling, and disenfranchizing members of disadvantaged social groups. In schools, this deskilling takes the mold of labels of *soft* disability whose alleged characteristics increasingly resemble conditions of biological defect. According to Gould (1996), "resurgences of biological determinism correlate with episodes of political retrenchment, particularly with campaigns for reduced government spending on social programs, or at times of fear among ruling elites, when disadvantaged groups sow serious social unrest or even threaten to usurp power" (p. 28). Elsewhere, I elaborated the concept of "kallikakization" as the "creation and perpetuation of a split between comfortably endowed and deprived citizens through the use ... of public schools" (p. 12). Fuelled by cyclical unemployment and underemployment and widespread paranoia about crime, kallikakization places disadvantaged students and their families under intense bureaucratic surveillance and control (Karagiannis, 1999). In this paper, I examine how the overidentification of soft disability plays a central role in the process of transforming many public schools into places of pre-incarceration for disadvantaged students. I outline variation and inquiry as alternative concepts whose implementation may reverse the negative school dynamic between soft disability and (pre)incarceration. Variation can advance practices that validate student differences and divergences. Inquiry provides the process through which educators perpetually seek to approximate the goal of variation practices and improvement of student skills.

Currently, the incarceration rate ranges its highest point of any time in North America and continues to climb. Canada has the second highest rate of imprisonment in the western industrialized world – 133 inmates for every 100,000 people. In provincial jurisdictions, the rate of aboriginal people in prison surpasses by three to nine times their proportion in the respective

general provincial populations. In the United States, which possesses the highest incarceration rate in the western industrialized world, the prison population now exceeds by half a million the prison population in communist China whose general population is five times that of the United States general population. Until the mid-1970s, the American rate of incarceration remained relatively fixed at approximately 110 prisoners per 100,000 people. In the last three decades, the rate escalated and now hovers at 445 prison inmates for every 100,000 people. About half of the inmates are African-American, four times higher than their proportion in the general population of the United States (First Report on Progress for Federal/Provincial/Territorial Ministers for Justice, 1997; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, pp. 26-81; Schlosser, 1998).

This disproportionate increase in the incarceration rates of disadvantaged populations coincides with an explosion of soft disability in schools. Today's link of soft disability with criminality revisits old clinical arguments about paupers, deviants, and *idiots* in the 19th century and about undesirable *moron* immigrants in the 20th century. Others have written extensively and eloquently on the historical phenomenon of clinically linking disability with criminality in North America (Chapman, 1988; Davies, 1930; Gould, 1996; Hawes, 1971; Mennel, 1973; Pickett, 1969; Rothman, 1971; Schlossman, 1977). Here, I will focus on how the inconsistencies in identifying soft disability contribute to the process of recasting many public schools into places of pre-incarceration for at-risk students. Ysseldyke, Algozzine, and Epps (1983) have pointed out that classification practices for the categories of learning disabilities (LD), speech and language impairments (SLI), emotional and behavioural disorders (EBD), and mild mental retardation (MMR) "are plagued with major conceptual and practical problems" (pp. 165-166). Although special educators disagree about identifiable biological causes of soft disability, there is general agreement that social and familial factors have significant bearing. Most authors of current special education textbooks place in the class of soft disability the categories of LD, EBD, SLI, and MMR – 75% of the occurrence of mental retardation falls in the subcategory of

MMR (Bender, 1996; Hallahan & Kauffman, 1997, chap. 3, 7; Haring, McCormick, & Haring, 1994, chap. 2, 9; Henley, Ramsey, & Algozzine, 1996; Heward, 1996, chap. 3, 7; Lewis & Doorlag, 1995, chap. 12, 16, 17; Meese, 1994; Smith, Finn, & Dowdy, 1993; Smith, Luckasson, & Crealock, 1995, chap. 3, 5; Smith, Polloway, Patton, & Dowdy, 1995, chap. 9, 11; Winzer, 1996, p. 111, chap. 6, 8).

Netting Soft Disability

In Canada, 1.43% of the total elementary and secondary school population was receiving special education in 1953-1954. Today, as many as 15.5% of school-age students are classified as disabled, representing an increase of 1,370% in comparison to 1953-1954. In the United States, in 1932 only 0.62% of the total school population was enrolled in special programs for the disabled in contrast to more than 11% in 1994-1995, a whopping increase of 2,999 percent. In the early 1970s, the swelling in the class of soft disability accelerated with the addition of LD that now encompasses half of the students in special education. Applying the classification scheme of soft and hard disabilities on United States national data, the class of hard disability – severe and profound mental retardation, multiple disabilities, hearing and visual impairments, orthopedic impairments, other health impairments, autism and traumatic brain injury – accounted for 563,500 students or 11.2% of all disabilities in the school-age population during the 1995-1996 year. In the same year, the class of soft disability accounted for 4,446,500 students or 88.8% of the special education population (Crealock & Bachor, 1995, pp. 1-2; Dominion Bureau of Statistics, 1959a, p. 32; 1959b, p. 92; Smith, Luckasson, & Crealock, 1995, pp. 13-14; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1975, pp. 368, 372; U.S. Department of Education, 1997, pp. 50, 65, 67; Winzer, 1996, pp. 15-19).

Historically, disadvantaged students have been the primary target of labels of disability. Now, special education casts a wider net to catch students at risk – having behavioural problems or depressive symptomatology, dropping or potentially dropping out of school, belonging to a minority group, coming from poor or single parent homes, living in divorced or remarried families, and being pregnant or a parent in adolescence (Campbell, 1996;

Cosden, 1990; Derevensky, 1995; Greer, 1991; Heath, Humphries, & Mieзитis, 1995; Hill, 1991; Pagani, 1995; Vitaro, De Civita, & Pagani, 1995). Weighing overlaps among all these groups, the portion of students with special needs supposedly lies anywhere between 30% to 50% of the total student population in public schools. Several explanations may account for this phenomenon.

As public education expanded to enroll a wider range of students, the number of disabled students increased, necessitating the establishment of special education classes. The coming of age of diagnostic and assessment instruments incrementally enabled educators to identify disability more accurately, a trend reflected in larger numbers in special education statistics. A less popular interpretation evolved from the theory of eugenics. *Lower* classes and *inferior* immigration corrupted the genetic pool. A larger number of disabled students enrolled in schools, *contaminating* other students and procreating the next generation of *morons* and deviants. The increase in disability corresponded with a decrease in genetically inherited intelligence. A third explanation focused on the social and familial environment of disabled students. Growing up in impoverished environments, these students lacked in academic, social, and moral skills. Many disabled students parented children as early as adolescence, repeating the cycle of poverty and destitution.

I will focus on a different perspective deriving from critical pragmatism (Skrtic, 1995) and postmodern theory (Foucault, 1975/1977). According to this perspective, the dismal rehabilitation results of special education are a consequence of treating soft disability as an outcome of biological, genetic, or familial circumstances. Skrtic points out that disability manifests organizational rather than student pathology in schools that fail to educate in the interests of all students. Here, I interpret the institutional construction of soft disability as a process of suspending the educational and citizenship participation of disadvantaged students. Similarly to what Foucault described as the production of delinquency by the prison, special education, by applying inconsistent identification criteria, increases the occurrence of soft disability. The soft categorical disabilities of LD and EBD merit particular attention.

Foucault's work has been criticized for a lack of methodological conventions (Arac, 1988; Ball, 1990; Burke, 1992; Gane, 1986; Goldstein, 1994; Megill, 1985; Merquoir, 1985; Poster, 1984; Privitera, 1995/1990). However, his ideas are useful for critically examining institutional practices (Caputo & Yount, 1993; May, 1993). With particular reference to *Discipline & Punish*, the value of Foucault's (1975/1977) legacy lies in critically exploring the power of normalization over disadvantaged populations – the concept and practices of fixing abnormal physiological, behavioural, or psychological characteristics. In Burke's (1992) estimate, it is “on his new ideas – on micropolitics, the cultural construction of categories, the importance of relating theory to practice and minds to bodies – that [Foucault] will ultimately be judged” (p. 8). In the following section, I recount Foucault's (1975/1977, pp. 257-292) conception of the relationship between modern penitentiaries and delinquency.

Twin Brothers

From the beginning, the modern penitentiary gained knowledge about the prisoners by its architecture, constant surveillance, and employment of medical-psychological staff. Early critics reproached the modern prison for the discrepancy between its stated objectives and actual outcomes. These criticisms, summarized by Foucault, echoed in successive prison reform movements throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Prisons stimulated the increase of the crime rate. Penitentiaries became a revolving door through which delinquents kept coming back, and first-time offenders plugged into a schooling network of crime. The nature of the corrective regime reinforced delinquency by alienating inmates from society. Even after release, the corrective regime followed former offenders by police surveillance and criminal records and by refusal from residents or employers to allow social reintegration.

Invariably, these criticisms employed two interpretations to explain the failure of the prison to diminish delinquency; either that prison techniques needed further refinement or that, in being (compassionately) corrective, the penitentiary undermined its power to punish. Advocates of both interpretations proposed

reforms that always prescribed more prison as its own cure. Despite repeated failure of prison reforms during modernity, the penitentiary succeeded in exercising disciplinary power over inmates, constructing penitentiary knowledge, reintroducing criminality in a controlled fashion, and reinforcing the basic tenets of the prison.

According to Foucault, penitentiaries used delinquency to check and differentiate among “illegalities” – social conduct in the grey area between formally legal and illegal activity. The balance of illegalities among social strata during the premodern era was disturbed by the ascending importance of private property in modernity. The modern illegalities of the “bourgeoisie” – enclosures of communal land, rigid work discipline on the factory floor, paltry worker salaries for often dangerous labour – were threatened by popular illegalities such as strikes, worker coalitions, pilfering and sabotaging at the workplace, looting of shops and goods, and refusal to pay taxes or rents. Popular illegalities, if left unchecked, possessed the potential to shift scrutiny onto the illegalities of the bourgeoisie. The prison-delinquency strategy effectively branded popular illegalities as criminal activity, preventing popular illegalities from evolving into unified political movements.

Consequently, criminal activity became the privilege of the lower social strata whose character and motives came under scrutiny. Prisons transformed the occasional offender into a habitual delinquent, creating a population of delinquents that justified the distrust of the lower strata of the population by the bourgeoisie. While failing to rehabilitate, the intense focus on delinquency fragmented popular illegalities and left the illegalities of the upper social strata for the most part unexamined. Largely by remaining out of sight, the illegalities associated with excessive accumulation of wealth were legitimated by default. Having described the genealogical background of the modern prison and delinquency, I return to the examination of soft disability.

Criminality and Disability Revisited

The menace scare of the first two decades of the 20th century with its morons and their perverted or criminal nature now re-

appears in the humanitarian language about children at risk and "young thugs." Medical-psychiatric assessment can identify more effectively troubled students in school, and psycho-educational intervention should substitute the punishment of youth who break the law (Goldberg, 1995; Johnson, 1995, 1996). In spite of the overwhelming historical evidence that the approach of labeling and rehabilitation functions to reinforce rather than relieve disability and marginalization (Davies, 1930; Haller, 1963; Hawes, 1971; Mennel, 1973; Milofsky, 1989; Pickett, 1969; Rothman, 1971; Schlossman, 1977), *new strategies* persist in what consistently failed over the last 200 years. Take, for example, the proposal for psycho-educational approaches to youth crime:

As we move into the twenty-first century, psycho-educational approaches to youth crime intervention and prevention will serve to shift current emphasis away from punishment for its own sake and towards ultimately more effective and humane programs of behaviour change. (Johnson, 1996, p. 58)

Or consider the case of EBD and the current drive to amplify the employment of psychiatric approaches in public schools:

Diagnoses of conduct disorder and oppositional-defiance are useful for some problems of serious aggression. Children with these disorders are at risk for a chronic course involving multiple serious problems and for suspension and expulsion from school. A formal DSM-IV [psychiatric diagnostic manual] diagnosis may help secure the necessary resources to provide educational and psychological interventions. *It is also important to establish for purposes of differentiating intervention whether an empirical distinction can be made between serious anti-social behaviour which has a basis in psychological dysfunction ... and other overtly similar behaviour which is associated with more rational factors.*

There must be constant vigilance against the misuse and overuse of DSM-IV *Screening methods will have to be developed which can be used by school personnel for identifying problems to be referred for diagnosis with a minimum of false positives. The diagnoses will have to be*

made by persons with mental health training. There are risks in embarking on this course of action [italics added] (Goldberg, 1995, p. 16)

What are the risks of this course of action, in light of the historical experience with over-identification in the category of LD? All operational definitions of LD presume, with little or no evidence, a central nervous system dysfunction and view LD as a condition that lasts throughout the life span. The definitions used in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and by the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities state that LD is not caused by environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. In contrast, another widely used definition by the Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities includes social and environmental influences as fundamental contributors to the formation of LD (Bender, 1995, chap. 1; Hallahan, Kauffman, & Lloyd, 1996, pp. 32-46; Lerner, 1997, pp. 8-17; Mercer, 1997, chap. 1; Smith, Dowdy, Polloway, & Blalock, 1997, chap. 2). These and other glaring inconsistencies are acknowledged, but the standard defense maintains that the concept of LD ought *not* be in doubt, that “fishermen using different nets collect different sizes and numbers of fish. We have made a serious logical error in equating the concept of LD with the ways in which it is operationalized and measured” (Keogh, 1987, p. 6). Now, it seems that another fishing expedition is on the making for EBD.

Psychiatric approaches to disability rely heavily on assumptions of biological and familial causes. The use of DSM-IV may accurately point out cases of true-positive EBD – consistent maladaptive behaviour over a long period of time in several settings. However, in the situation of the more numerous, superfluous, and temporary emotional and behavioural problems a more informal assessment may become acceptable, resulting in an excess of false positives. School psychologists conduct assessment of disability with one eye on students and the other eye on shrinking resources, fashioning labels out of one-shot assessments. Considering the large number of students who are targeted for special services, efficiency – numbers of labeled students rather than accuracy with which assessment differentiates between true and false positives – takes precedence. Short cuts inevitably will be found to the time-

consuming requirements of observation of students over time and across settings. The false positives of EBD may become the norm rather than the exception.

Some school jurisdictions already apply short cuts in the identification of soft disability. In Quebec, disabilities are officially grouped in several coding families. Grouped together, some of these coding families resemble the class of soft disability. Within the last two years, several schools in Quebec have begun to identify students in the code of mild learning disability *without* formal diagnostic assessment. In Judy's school, teachers informally identify these students on the forms, sometimes at the *beginning* of the school year, before they have the chance to become thoroughly familiar with their students. She believes that teachers face pressure to cooperate in coding students "because they know that the limited [resource] help they do receive is dependent on these coding numbers." Ironically, once these students are labeled, the school board provides little or no assistance because the "resources are lacking."

There are few effective safeguards against misapplication of standardized diagnostic tests and no precautions against the abuse of informal identification of soft disability. Despite its adverse effects, intelligence testing became accepted practice within 20 years of its initiation (Chapman, 1988; Fass, 1980; Gartner, Greer, & Riessman, 1974; Gould, 1996; Kamin, 1974; Kincheloe, Steinberg, & Gresson, 1996; Mensh & Mensh, 1991; Tucker, 1998). Almost 100 years later, intelligence testing still commands the uninformed respect of many teachers. Similarly, LD became uncritically accepted in less than 20 years. EBD has been an official category of disability much longer than LD, but only recently has EBD become a convenient label to catch problem students early. From a systemic point of view, which undermines the humanitarian intentions of educators, the significance of soft disability lies more in *catching* rather than assisting students.

Suspending Educational and Citizenship Participation

Hard disability is more or less accepted by the public. This acceptance leads many people, including young children, to view

soft disability also as a fact of life. I was recently surprised when the 9-year-old son of a friend benevolently referred to a bright 13-year old girl, whose reading was trembling, as "may be having a learning disability." This dubious acceptance of soft disability permits labeling of students without much thought about consequences. In isolation, the phenomenon of soft disability appears innocently mundane. Coupled with skyrocketing numbers of prisoners, public paranoia about young offenders, and the re-emerging claims about links between disability and criminality, soft disability is gradually transforming professional and public attitudes. Hard disability may continue to gain public acceptance, but soft disability has already embarked toward re-stigmatization. As an aging population increasingly views youth through the prism of "young thugs," the link between disability and crime becomes a convenient explanation. Prevention now demands that those at risk are identified as early as possible in school. In this sense, the labels of soft disability reinforce pre-incarceration by labeling in school the most likely candidates for imprisonment in later adult life. By suspending the educational and citizenship participation of disadvantaged students, soft disability forms part of the parcel of kallikakization.

The data conveniently remains too sparse or nonexistent to evaluate whether special education provides any benefits to students. In the United States, the authors of a recent national study examining the outcomes of special education concluded that based on "most state and national data collection programs ... it is currently not possible to extract, on a regular basis, nationally representative policy-relevant information on the educational and quality-of-life outcomes for students with disabilities" (Vanderwood, McGrew, & Ysseldyke, 1998, p. 366). In Canada, the situation with data collection programs on outcomes is in the same boat.

Unlocking Inquiry

The triadic feedback loop among soft disability, pre-incarceration, and incarceration, as depicted in Figure 1, is a manifestation of kallikakization in schools.

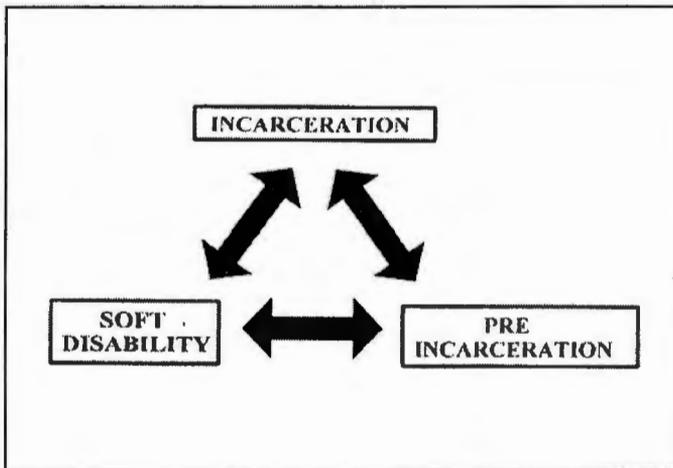


Figure 1. The process of Kallikakization as a function of soft disability and (pre)incarceration.

Undermining kallikakization would require preventing (pre)incarceration which, in turn, would compel impeding soft disability. In the long term, there are several ways to realize this goal. First, wider social restructuring, such as redirecting social and fiscal priorities from building and maintaining prisons to socially constructive projects would make a powerful argument for change. Too many prisons play right into the game of structural fragmentation of society, obstructing interaction among citizens from diverse backgrounds. And, of course, distribution of wealth that segments the economic pie in as small pieces as possible to as many people as possible would be a desirable economic backdrop. Financial stability for all parents and children would minimize the occurrence of soft disability. In contrast to dependence on ossified organizations whose practical engagement ends with labels, disadvantaged parents and students need a financial base of independence to make informed decisions and to face the (dignified) risks of their own choosing.

Second, schools would have to discontinue the categories of LD, EBD, SLI, and MMR. Identifying soft disability should cease as school practice. Soft disability partly emanates from

organizational pathology in schools (Skrtic, 1995), and gradually becomes embedded in the self image of students by a process of self-fulfilling prophecy. However, funding and support for hard disabilities ought to remain intact. We know what environmental adjustments and training most people with hard disabilities require to become independent and that these adjustments and training work reasonably well.

Third, schools owe it to all students to provide radically different arrangements that minimize organizational pathology. The amalgamated school model of the little red house as manufactory has remained inert for more than a century and a half. Societal evolution keeps accelerating while schools largely linger stalling. The factory ingredient of the model served its purpose in the past, but is now dysfunctional and would rather be retired. We can keep what works from the element of the little red house – the teacher-student familiarity factor – and infuse it within a newly blended model that combines the concepts of public work, variation, and inquiry. I have discussed the concept of public work elsewhere (Karagiannis, 1999).

Variation stands in relative contrast to normalization – the latter being closely related to factory approaches to schooling. Normalization connotes commonality, ordinariness, regularity, typicality, usuality – existence within a narrow band of social-educational acceptability, whether in terms of individual interests, ability, culture, ethnicity, or language. The assumption is that whatever or whoever are uncommon, extraordinary, irregular, atypical, or unusual must be ab-normal. We can no longer justify this sweeping use of normalization as a central educational concept. Even a cursory look in today's schools reveals that students manifest differences, divergences, dissimilarities, in other words, variation. We need to open up the restricted band of social-educational admissibility to reflect the situation on the ground. The current rule of normalizing manufactures soft disability by labeling certain dissimilarities or divergences as being out of the norm. Student differences are transformed into soft disability that is kept under lock and key. If all students have special needs, as the rhetoric goes, then schooling is better off adapting to student variability by eclectic as opposed to one-size-fits-all practices. A note of caution here is

necessary. Variation is *not* about turning back the clock from inclusion to streaming and segregation. Rather, variation is about flexible schooling that recognizes and validates difference in student interests and stages of development in miscellaneous areas of learning.

School-wide enrichment, if expanded to incorporate closer connections to the community and democratic leadership, can provide some of the practices of variation. Traditionally, enrichment was conceived for gifted students as a way to amplify the challenge of the curriculum or extend it to optional subject areas or physical locations, although different levels of enrichment have been proposed for all students depending on interest, motivation, and ability (Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994; Maker, 1993; Renzulli & Reis, 1991). As space does not allow elaboration here, I will briefly touch on extending the definition of school-wide enrichment. In addition to a core curriculum of reading, writing, and arithmetic, schools can embellish a broad optional curriculum, leisure activities, and links with the community that allow students to pursue their individual interests. The teacher functions as a mentor and facilitator rather than instructor of students. Students operate as inquirers, not as empty vessels that need filling. The need for a physical space called the classroom remains, but learning space reaches out to and unlocks the genuine interests of students and the abundance of knowledge in the community. In addition, schools would accomplish their educational mission more effectively if leadership theory and practice were grown in schools and relied more on the legacy of democratic rather than corporate values. According to Sergiovanni (1990, 1992, 1994, 1995, 1996) the existing theories of school leadership – mainly imports from management and business, corporations, sports, military, and transportation organizations – inadequately serve educational goals. Instead of an obedience culture, schools can adopt cultures of inquiry and self management.

Inquiry provides the glue in bonding students and educators to shape their own learning and school environments. While activating inquiry-driven curricula to impart the skills of inquiry to students, schools organizationally also need to become inquiry driven by perpetually seeking to improve the skills of educators.

Blachowicz (1998) has proposed a reflexive, general theory of inquiry. This theory of inquiry incorporates three principles. The first principle states that “no intelligent inquiry is possible without simultaneously knowing and not knowing the object into which we are inquiring” (p. 3). Knowledge and practice are never flawless, and the first step in improving them is to be aware of what we know and do not know about specific situations. The second principle states that “no intelligent inquiry is possible without determining the degree of proximity to the desired object of inquiry” (p. 3). Once the general goal is established, it becomes a matter of navigating and mapping the direction to approximate this goal. The third principle states that “where inquiry is directed toward attaining some more adequate level of representation of the object, the object is really dual, determined by two independent epistemic criteria – one material and one formal” (p. 3). In other words, there are two outcomes to be reached by inquiry; to form knowledge-practice that embodies our experience; and to strive for well-constructed representations of this knowledge-practice through revisable models, analogies, and metaphors. Inquirers incessantly travel on the road to better articulations of their experience.

Placing these three principles of inquiry within the context of this paper, educators can benefit by becoming aware of how conceptions and practices associated with soft disability have become destructive for students and schools; by exploring alternatives in which we could get out of this predicament; and by recognizing the paradox that we are likely to reach (imperfect) solutions that in turn will need further improvement or even discarding. If it makes sense to adopt variation practices in schools, what would some of these practices resemble and how can they be implemented? What are the limits to variation or, to put it differently, should we jettison all or maintain some normalization practices?

Fundamental rethinking of direction in schools poses more questions than answers, and changing course will not be easy. There will be setbacks. But, at least, we need to widen the debate about disability and school reform beyond the logic of peripheral tinkering.

Releasing Voices

In an age of fiscal restraint, more services for students in categories of soft disability evaporate in new rounds of budget slashing. Informal methods replace formal diagnostic procedures, not because of recognizing the inconsistencies in formal assessment of soft disability but because informal approaches cost less money. When it comes to learning support, disabled students are either ignored or under serviced, acquiring minimal skills for work and citizenship. Instead, these students internalize an image of disabled self through what Ferguson (1996) calls the "velcro" phenomenon – professionals attaching themselves on students with disabilities, transforming these students into a breed apart from other students.

At the end of the second millennium, soft disability operates as a pillar of the renewed illegality of limitless accumulation of wealth. By distracting attention from the economic basis of poverty and disadvantage, soft disability allows the explosion of the population in special education and levies upon students from disadvantaged backgrounds a whole economy of suspended educational rights. While education professionals try to diminish the gap between disability and normalcy, it is the gap between pre-incarceration – confining soft disability in schools – and adult incarceration that is reduced. Employing the sledge hammer of soft disability and normalization in schools accomplishes little but wrecking the engagement of large numbers of students.

Soft disability, far from assisting students, tends to confine at risk children and youth. The sprawling labels of soft disability proliferate stigma and harvest crime. Those whose voices are disabled often resort to violence. To extend Foucault's (1975/1977) introductory words, (special) education and soft disability are in a way twin sisters. They materialized together, the one augmenting the other. It is soft disability that must be known, assessed, measured, diagnosed, treated. Soft disability is the vengeance of (special) education on schools, a revenge awesome enough to leave students, parents, and educators speechless. It is time for release from silence. It is time to unlock the inquiry potential of students and educators into enriching public schools.

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