

The identity formation of youth with disabilities across academic disciplines and social contexts

Abstract: The learning identities of high school students are shaped by their participation within institutional and social contexts. In school settings, however, disability labels do not reflect the context-specific nature of "ability" and "potential". By documenting daily experiences of 14 high school students with diagnosed disabilities across regular classrooms, project-based programs, and everyday life, this study investigates the complex nature of youth identity and what shapes their motivation and positioning within social communities.

Major Issues and Research Questions

This study is centrally concerned with how positioning dynamics influence learning identity formation for students with disabilities across social interactions. For many of these students, daily lived experiences in school are not associated with a positive sense of identity or self-worth (Burden, 2008), while nonacademic accomplishments help them experience a sense of pride (Murtaugh, 1988). Thus, if "learning disability" serves more as a category based on institutional arrangements as opposed to a fixed condition (McDermott, Goldman, & Varenne, 2006), it is important to understand their experiences across a variety of social contexts. These experiences help shape their identities as learners, as they participate in sociocultural contexts and move between "socially generated, culturally figured worlds" (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). How individuals are positioned by others and by themselves as they move between these worlds influences how they participate and what opportunities shape their future goals and pursuits. By following youth in traditional high school classrooms, project-based programs in a variety of disciplines, after-school activities, and everyday life, this project aims to answer the following research questions:

How do positioning dynamics influence learning identity formation for students with disabilities across social interactions? How does the social context and important relationships shape their opportunities to participate and subsequent perceptions of their abilities?

Potential Significance of the Work

This study has the potential to inform how we think about special education services, since it looks at youth with disabilities across contexts, rather than only using the classroom lens to determine whether a student is meeting academic standards. This also contributes to special education literature by making the social processes of participation and learning more concrete and visible to educators, particularly in the context of "disability".

Additionally, this research adds to both the study of identity development as well as the field of anthropology, because it is grounded in a sociocultural framework which engages questions about how the social and institutional contexts of learning shape individual identities. In particular, this study focuses primarily on the youth perspective as a way to understand how different experiences shape their identity around ability, as well as their developing identities as scientists, artists, or debaters. The focus on "disability" offers a clear context in which social and institutional processes often become most visible.

Theoretical Approaches

Current special education literature focused on students with disabilities in out-of-school settings tends to look at rates of student involvement rather than examining their actual lived experiences in a variety of contexts (e.g. Wagner, et al, 2002; Simeonsson, et al, 2001). Instead, I argue it is important to look how youth with disabilities participate, with attention to interpersonal relationships built within communities (Cousin, Diaz, Flores, Hernandez, 1995). In accordance with Dreier's (2002) framework, I conceptualize this participation to be continuous interaction in social practice, which can be shaped by perceptions of others, available opportunities, past experiences, and personal agency. How an individual participates in a range of social experiences has the potential to influence their future trajectories or "cultural learning pathways" (Bell, et al, 2006).

This cultural learning pathway model accounts for how a series of situated actions are discursively accomplished (Ochs, 2002) through actions and social positions (Harré, 2008) that influence the developing interests, practices, and identities of learners. In particular, disability labels can influence people's perceptions of where these youth are "able" to participate as well as the opportunities made available for them to demonstrate expertise (Vygotsky, 1993). Being limited in their opportunities to participate also restricts the types of experiences they are permitted to have (Dreier, 2002), which not only shape future trajectories of participation, but also their own self-understandings about potential and what it means to be "able" or "expert".

Study Procedures and Methods

In this two-year team ethnography, we collected video and audio-recorded observations and interviews of 14 students with diagnosed disabilities across a variety of contexts, including regular academic classes, project-

based program environments, and home life. This poster focuses on three of these students, who represent the three project-based program environments (debate, music, and outdoor environmental science). We began our observations in the programs, in hopes of observing settings that emphasized student strengths, and then briefly observed these students in all of their regular academic classes (before finally deciding which of these classes to focus our attention). In March of Year 1, we began our monthly home visits to the focal students' homes, to interview their families and understand their everyday lives. Data collection is currently ongoing.

Using social interaction/video analysis, we attempted to understand how students interacted with one another, as well as how and whether their disability label played a role in how they participated in school. We played particular attention to how teachers interacted with these students, and interviewed both the teachers and students about how they perceived the students' performance. In the out-of-school informal settings (i.e. debate tournaments, music performances, science symposiums), we also recorded how the focal students participated in activities with their peers, and whether they felt like a valued member of a community.

Preliminary Findings

At this point in the analysis, we find that the space for social participation is restricted or expanded through social positioning and that identities can vary dramatically across formal and informal settings and evolve over time. These results suggest that disabilities are not fixed and may be influenced by institutional processes involving stereotypes and the marginalization of minority youth, which in turn influence their domain-related interests and learning. On the other hand, participation can be protected when expert reputations are reinforced by a trusted member of the community (such as when the focal student is seen as an "expert" by other "advanced" or "expert" students in that community).

Interactions and relationships with adults in the different learning environments also shape participation, and thus, students' disability labels appear to manifest themselves differently (at times, not at all) depending on the context. At this point in the study, how students are perceived and positioned by themselves and by others shapes the opportunities and situations in which they are invited to participate and consequently whether they feel like a member of the learning community. The notion that participation both shapes and is shaped by social perceptions implies that the inclusion of students with disabilities must address more than just whether these students attend or are involved in classes with their non-disabled peers.

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