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STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

Mystery or Typical Teen? The Social Construction of Academic Engagement and Disability

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ABSTRACT *A qualitative study of academic engagement of five high school students labelled mentally retarded describes strategies of student participation and non-participation, and teacher perceptions. These students were non-verbal or inarticulate, and functioned in an environment of competing formal and informal assessments of their participation and understanding in the academic environment. Teachers' informal assessments of student participation revealed how the students challenged the conventional categories employed by teachers. The examples show the power of educators' perceptions to reveal or obscure student engagement.*

Introduction

Tyrone, an 18-year-old student with autism, wrote poetry in middle school. However, he had no written expressive language goals on record in his high school Individualized Education Plan (IEP). In middle school he expressed interest in science and knowledge of meiosis, spelling it correctly during a typed conversation with his speech therapist who spelled it wrong; but for 5 years in a row, his high school IEPs showed the same science goal regarding knowing the difference between a pint, a quart and a gallon. Tyrone's regular education teachers had varied perceptions of his academic competence. His high school Biology teacher said he was doing better than most of his classmates on tests. In contrast, Tyrone's Social Studies teacher found him a 'mystery' and had few grades for him. His special education teacher said he was 'smart', but considered his class participation only in the context of social skills.

Tyrone's situation provides an example of how a paradigm of student incompetence can reign even in the face of evidence to the contrary. Although recent research has asserted competence of people of people with labels of mental retardation (Biklen *et al.*, 1989; Goode, 1989; Biklen & Duchan, 1994), it is rare to find such analysis focusing on students in secondary academic settings. Attention to academics with regards to students labeled mentally retarded has attended to

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advocacy and high school curricular design issues (Falvey *et al.*, 1995; Jorgensen, 1996), elementary school children (Kliewer, 1998), or focused on participation of young students from a compliance or behaviour management oriented perspective (McDonnell *et al.*, 1997).

In this paper I describe strategies of student participation and non-participation, and teacher perceptions observed during a qualitative study of academic engagement of five high school students; the students were non-verbal or inarticulate, and labelled mentally retarded. These students functioned in an environment of competing formal and informal assessments of their participation and understanding in the academic environment. I then describe teachers informal assessments of their participation, showing how the students challenge the conventional categories employed by teachers. The examples show the power of educators' perceptions to reveal or obscure student engagement.

Competence and Deficit Orientation

I conducted the study from the perspective of disability as sociology (Bogdan & Knoll, 1995). This perspective describes disability as constructed by the meanings people make of it. Students with disabilities are defined and impacted by the environment, and the meanings people make of the students' situation (Abberley, 1987). Thus, rather than looking at the academic engagement of students to see if inclusion is an effective 'treatment', my study explored the meanings the participants made of key aspects of disability, education and the high school experience. Findings are framed with regard to the impact of the patterns of meaning and educator behaviour upon all the participants. How educators assess students relates to and reflects the cultures of acceptance and non/acceptance for people with disabilities (Bogdan & Taylor, 1987, 1989; Taylor & Bogdan, 1989). I conducted the study with concerns regarding the perspectives of the students, as well as the adults involved (Fine, 1993; Maher & Tetrault, 1993).

Special education research has tended to be characterized by a medical discourse that reinforces individual deficits (Fulcher, 1989; Oliver, 1996) and emphasises technical skills on the part of teachers (Skrtic, 1995). My own awareness of this discourse increased as the study progressed and remains important to the reading of this paper. I came to think of the medical model as a deficit-orientated approach as it has considered students in light of what they cannot do. Deficit-orientated educators tend to rank, sort and diagnose the students' limitations, and to frame possible remedies as treatments. I came to think of its opposite as the strength-orientated or competence-orientated approach to describing and understanding students. The competence-orientated approach has been used by educators and parents to consider students in light of what they can do, their interests, their other skills' and the settings and adaptations that will enable the students to learn and maximise abilities.

Two insightful parents (Strully & Strully, 1985) made this distinction clear when they described their 'two' teenaged daughters. One of them, a socially active teenager who liked to talk on the phone and 'hang out' at the mall with friends,

participated in Girl Scouts and the school newspaper. They described the other as severely or profoundly mentally retarded with cerebral palsy, hearing and visual impairments, not toilet trained and as loving Fisher Price toys. The two girls were really two opposite perspectives of their same daughter, Shawntell. Each perspective was likely to yield different social and curricular expectations in school. The Strullys chose an inclusion model for classes and fostered a strong school-based friendship network for their daughter. These two contrasting approaches, competence- and deficit-orientated, also lead to differing perspectives on the intellectual abilities of students like Shawntell. Biklen and Duchan (1994) labelled these two opposing perspectives as normative and competence. Each perspective informs evaluation, relationships, programming and education processes with people labelled retarded. Biklen emphasised finding 'ways of focusing on the abilities of those previously regarded as incompetent and discover ways to help them express their abilities' (p. 182).

These two perspectives co-exist not only in society, but also within the same school district, within individual schools and within classrooms. The underlying assumptions contrast and compete in the lives of certain students with so-called enduring disabilities. For example, many educators consider that those labelled mentally retarded cannot profit from the regular academic curriculum (Lieberman, 1985; Kauffman, 1993) and would recommend technical support in the form of 'treatments' and 'interventions' for their deficits by special education teachers (Fuchs *et al.*, 1994; Jenkins & Pious, 1991). Others assume that all students can profit from the academic curriculum in meaningful ways (Biklen, 1992; Biklen & Duchan, 1994; Falvey, 1995; Jorgensen, 1997; Kliewer, 1998).

Methods

This was a qualitative study in the tradition of symbolic interactionism (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). I observed in four urban high schools in the northeastern United States over the course of 15 months, where I studied five teenaged students labelled mentally retarded in regular class settings throughout the school year. Gerard, a student labelled with Down syndrome had limited verbal communication. His teachers considered him illiterate and included him in general education classes for social goals. Among three students with autism, one spoke fluently, one spokes in short phrases and one could not speak. Abe, a fluent speaker who had been assessed both as 'retarded' and of 'normal' intelligence over the years, had teachers who demanded and received academic work, and other teachers who expected very little and questioned if he should even be in class. Of these three students, Trish was was non-verbal. Her inconsistent non-verbal responses, such as pointing and nodding, were attributed to Rhett syndrome. Trish had a full regular high school academic schedule similar to that of her non-disabled classmates. Her regular and special education teachers expected or insisted on academic productivity. Tyrone had academic classes in the morning and a 'community placement' in a library shelving books in the afternoon. His Science and Math teachers considered him a competent student. His Social Studies teachers regarded him as a 'mystery' One student, Nick,

was multiply handicapped and could not speak as a result of an early head injury. His teachers thought his understanding was very limited in spite of the fact that in middle school he communicated through typing and had some successful academic interactions in Science class. Teaching assistants usually accompanied four of the students to regular class; Abe independently attended classes that usually had a resource teacher or assistant for several students.

My observations averaged once a week per student, usually for a 40- or 80-minute class period. I interviewed their parents, their special education teachers, their individual teaching assistants and two to four regular education teachers per student. I observed one student for 3 weeks during summer school. I met with experienced mentors and colleagues to debrief my data, and discuss findings, dilemmas, and analyses. Findings from in-depth interviews and classroom observations were supplemented and triangulated by school records, member checks' and conversations with mentors and colleagues. Data were coded in stages using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). During this process I produced analytic memos accounting for researcher bias and exploring possible coding categories. In addition, I conducted multiple informal interviews with participants in staff lunchrooms and during visits involving other university-related activities such as pre-service teacher supervision. I gained further data from semi-structured in depth interviews of key people involved with the students and from documentation such as student records and student work. I generated further data on two students during my student teaching internship where more direct involvement with the students was available.

Students Strategies of Participation and Non-participation

The students flourished more in enabling competence-orientated opportunity structures. When teachers were academically demanding, but also welcoming, the students did assignments, attended to tests, some passed tests and acted like their non-disabled peers in class. Teachers expected participation and, even if they did not expect academic engagement, had class discussions and activities in which the student could participate. When students with disabilities were considered incompetent to engage, they had less opportunity to participate, but often showed interest in the class, even when educators ignored them. Thus, whether or not they were in regular classes, they did not act like passive recipients of their administrative fates. Students responded to their teachers and the styles of teacher support. They flourished more or less within various opportunity structures to the extent that their teachers were able to interpret and respond to their communication. Each student had ways of communicating his or her preferences, wants, and needs. For example, all had preferences and strategies they invoked when interested, and when they were bored.

The following kinds of strategies might also apply to non-disabled high school students. However, the students in the study often had unique styles of proactive and reactive response to convey their understanding of given situations. Teachers' understanding of the student was enhanced by their knowledge of the student.

Teachers' expectancy patterns regarding student competence, and their own skills in opening opportunity to participate, enabled them to understand how and what the students were communicating about understanding, learning, needs, feelings and interests. The strategies described below include examples that could fit under more than one of these headings, making evident and adding insight into the complexity of interpreting inarticulate student response.

Direct Communication

All the students had ways of making their needs and wants known. For example, some time before I met her, Trish, a non-verbal student labelled mentally retarded, made sure she would not take a high school Math class. Her parents said that she had made it clear to them she could do the math, but hated it, by performing math problems and then refusing to do the math problems again once she had proved herself. She made sure math would not be in her 9th grade schedule. She also communicated to her teachers when she was unwilling to do an assignment and answered questions to determine the reasons. The reasons ranged from illness and fatigue to dislike for the assignment. Teachers had learned that Trish hated the play *Romeo and Juliette* and refused to attend the play with her English class. She consented, however, to write an essay on why she hated it.

I also noticed she would not work with a particular adult whom she did not feel respected her. Her special education teacher and parents confirmed this conclusion. Trish responded, in contrast (my interpretation would be that she was forgiving), to other well-meaning adults who talked down to her, but seemed to appreciate her or respect her as a student. In class she completed assignments by choosing answers and by confirming with head nods if that was her final choice. Sometimes, she had unexpected 'No' answers that were definite choices. After a particularly productive typing session, the teacher wanted to record something in a notebook used for communication with Trish's parents. Trish shook her head—'no'.

The students' direct response strategies included verbal and non-verbal seeking help, responses to offers of help, accepting the help that was available, and seeking support on social and academic goals. Abe and other students in the study, participated and responded in general education classes when a teacher or assistant redirected their attention to the classroom task and expected them to complete it. Abe's reading teacher said that Abe had 'improved over two years in increasing his attention span when taking tests and for writing longer paragraphs'. Abe could work independently and, according to his teachers, sought supervision and reassurance that he was doing it right. His special education teacher wrote an observation of Abe working independently to indicate his progress and interest in his work:

> Abe announced he had Algebra to do, and took what he needed out of his backpack. He began working independently on the assignment at a table by himself across the room. After a suggestion by a student that he 'come over and sit near everyone else' he said, 'Sure', and moved his things closer. 'How do you do number 15? I need help' [he said] after a few minutes. Abe

> has worked much more patiently this year through academic work that he doesn't immediately understand. He will 'study' and attempt to work through the steps of a process. A fairly new skill. He was anxious to work independently on his Algebra assignment as soon as he understood what to do. (Special education teacher's written observation, May 1996.)

In this passage, asking for help and responding to the invitation to sit next to the student were also new skills, along with working through the steps of an Algebra problem.

A related skill is to let people know when you do not need help. One day when I went to observe Tyrone in Biology he was not in class, he was in the bathroom of the special education room. His special education teacher told me:

> He went off today. He was hitting people and banging his head. When he does that, he stays here to cool off. He's alone in there splashing water on his face. We checked on him a couple of times and he said through the door, 'I know. I know.' So we let him stay there until he is ready to come out. When he is ready he will go back to class.

Tyrone had made progress in handling himself when he got upset. In past years he had been restrained when upset. That day he was practicing self-restraint and the teachers said they now 'considered frequency' of upset, rather than the degree of his acting upset, and said, 'he does this [acting out physically by hitting] rarely now'. Tyrone was accepting support at the same time as reassuring his teachers by calling through the door that he did not need more help at the time. In this case, Tyrone determined the level of help he needed as part of his process of calming down and preparing to return to class. In some instances, teachers misinterpret the students' direct, but inarticulate communications, as well as their indirect communications relating to attention and responsiveness.

Attention and Responsiveness

Some of the following examples might also serve in the 'direct communication' category. What sets them apart is that teachers often overlook these inarticulate responses as lack of interest or understanding. The students in the study responded with attention to teacher questions when they were interested or willing. Trish responded when working on assignments, though sometimes took longer to complete them. Taking longer was sometimes due to other factors (processing delays, fatigue, illness) besides desire or interest. In the following example, Gerard responded when interested and when the pace of the conversation was slower, perhaps giving him more time to think. This exchange took place during a special education lesson on nutrition:

> The teacher addressed his six special education students, their desks in a semicircle facing the board, 'Who can tell me what perishable is? Gerard?' Gerard said, 'Raviolis.' The teacher asked, 'What does perishable mean?'

> Another student said, 'Cake … it means it spoils easily.' 'What is perishable? Do you put the milk back in the cupboard?' asked the teacher. Gerard answered, 'In the refrigerator.'

In this example, Gerard, who often had word finding difficulties, was responding to the discussion that he could relate to his experience. He came up with an imprecise, but relevant one-word answer and responded with concrete examples. In other classes and discussions he also responded if the teacher related the discussion to his experience. He responded 'yes' or 'I don't know' during Health class to rhetorical questions during interactive lectures on nutrition and on drugs. His timing and tone were appropriate. During a special education History lecture on the Roman Empire, Gerard turned his attention to unrelated pictures in his textbook. However, when the teacher related Roman games to football games, Gerard added 'hockey'.

Gerard's special education History class was not demanding. In general education classes that were socially welcoming, but less academically demanding classes for the students in the study, the students responded to teacher questions and sometimes entertained themselves. For example, during a Social Studies class, the teacher (welcoming and inviting, but not expecting academic understanding) sprinkled repartee into his interactive lectures, and Tyrone responded in kind:

> Tyrone's Social Studies teacher was questioning the students about a worksheet they had done on the early 1900s, asking them about historic people and events.
>
> 'John Jacob Astor?' A student replied, 'American Fur Company.' The teacher talked about the Broadway musical about the Astor family, asking for the title. Tyrone called out, 'Scrooge.' The teacher laughed, 'Good guess.'

In this case, the adults did not then decide that Tyrone might be following the academic content of the discussion and attempt to include him further. They did not consider that Tyrone's joke only worked because Astor was a wealthy man. Rather than interpret Tyrone's response as academic engagement or evidence of sophisticated thinking, they responded to him socially and ignored him academically. He was a 'mystery' to both social studies teachers. Several of the teachers had a repartee lecture or support style to which students responded positively and appropriately. Some teachers thought the student was thinking and some did not.

The students each had a sense of humour that went beyond appreciating teachers' jokes, or entertaining himself or herself in class. Gerard seemed to laugh the most at teachers' jokes that included slapstick imagery like 'loser cholesterol' during a nutrition lecture. He often smiled when he added one-word replies to teachers' rhetorical questions and added something from his experience to a teacher's point. Students showed their sense of humour, which they used interactively in various ways. Tyrone thought it was fun to call people by their wrong names (even though it annoyed them), but Tyrone's humour was sometimes more sophisticated such as when he joked about Scrooge. One day his teaching assistant yawned

while helping Tyrone with an assignment and said, 'Excuse me.' Tyrone replied, 'You need a blanket.'

Other means of showing attention that sometimes went unnoticed by teachers were through body language such as eye contact and ceasing to fidget when a discussion was interesting to all members of the class.

Using Body Language

Non-verbal students used sounds, head nodding, pointing and the use of preferred activities and postures as key communication strategies. Students expressed a full range of responses such as enthusiasm, interest, physical discomfort and resistance. Nick, who frequently had painful bone fractures, made particular sounds that caused teachers to ask him if he hurt or was feeling sick. He stopped tearing paper when he was particularly interested in a discussion or activity. He told his mother that he tore paper because he liked to do it; it felt good. (I tried it and it felt good to me also because of the sound, the texture and the rhythmic movement.) During a lesson using his communication symbols, Nick pointed to the picture-symbol in his notebook as the teacher called it out. During the time when the teacher was answering the phone or walking across the room to retrieve the lunch menu, Nick tore strips of paper. He nodded vigorously, yes or no, to any question about food. For example, Nick chose a chicken sandwich from the menu that the teacher read, and pointed to salad and milk in his communication symbol book. Yet the teacher ignored possible skills during a 'menu math' class where students were asked to chose menu items and add the totals. The teacher told him how much his chosen items cost and added them up. However, I had been supporting him during that class and he had already pointed to the correct prices from among choices for each item.

Students who could not talk or could not talk fluently resorted to some conspicuous non-verbal strategies to vary from the expected classroom activity. For example, classroom demands on Nick focused mostly on socially 'appropriate' behaviour and he appeared to be skilled in testing the extent to which he could ignore the demands of adults. I observed this several times. One day, the special education students were watching a Social Studies video about the Saxons, which I found very hard to follow and which did not hold the students' attention:

> Men on horses were speaking in English accents about punishing Saxons for killing Charlemagne's Christians. The dialogue was fast paced and referred to military and political events not shown. The video showed a battle and lots of Saxons died; the victors required the survivors to become Christians and build churches. (O.C.: Without the narrator I would have been lost. The whole class was tuned out.) Two students were resting. Another was shuffling paper money, another was looking at the ceiling, and yet another was looking in the general direction of the video without leaning into it as he usually did when watching videos. Nick was making sounds, and the sign for eat. Bob, the teaching assistant, said, 'Be quiet and

> watch the movie, Nick.' He flapped his hands hard and bounced his head and upper body vigorously in his wheelchair for quite a while. He stopped for a moment, then he quietly resumed bouncing. (O.C.: I never saw him do that behavior before or since.)

In this passage Nick made it clear he wanted to be doing something else and when he could not, settled for occupying or perhaps entertaining himself until the video was over. I was frequently struck by Nick's refusal to participate in several activities and by his acute sense of timing of beginning and ceasing certain 'disruptive' behaviours; this pursuit of his own agenda would otherwise provoke exile to 'time-out'. He did things during special education classes such as wheeling around the room in search of paper to tear (his favourite activity), waving strips of paper in people's faces during class, or touching his neighbors and getting them to say, 'Stop it!' He never got sent to time out when I was observing. He did not do those things in his one general education class. During certain special education activities such as a role-play about ordering at a local restaurant, he participated with enthusiasm during his turn and watched during others' turns.

Gerard had a slightly different approach to communicating dissatisfaction with an activity. During the video about the Saxons, Gerard watched intently at first, sitting forward. After a while he leaned back in the sofa and slid down to a slouch. He said something that I could not hear:

> Bob, the teaching assistant, said, 'You'll have time-out if you keep being disruptive.' He said nothing. Then he put his feet on the table. Bob said, 'Put your feet down off the table.' He slouched further down, put his feet on the floor, and then from his new position raised his legs high in the air, feet toward the ceiling. A classmate, Eileen, said in a stern tone, 'Gerard. Put your shirt down.' 'O.K.,' he said. Gerard then did something else. I couldn't tell what it was besides looking at another classmate who was to his right. Bob sent Gerard to 'time-out,' for an infraction I did not see.

Gerard got sent to time-out several times in special education class, but I couldn't always tell why. Sometimes I concluded that he did not want to participate. I wondered if he rejected activities that he had a hard time following, like the Saxon video or that otherwise bored him. For a period of time, he went to his job in the morning and, returning at noontime, he just laid down on the floor of the special education room. When he went to Health class he was more fidgety than usual and frequently missed 5th period Biology due to his behaviour, according to his assistant. His teachers concluded it was best to schedule classes in the morning and work in the afternoon. Biology was an 8th period class. 'He isn't in Biology anymore because he got tired. It showed in his behavior at school and at home. That was his way of telling us the day was too long.'

In general education class, if Gerard did not want to participate, his assistant would try to figure out why. If he was tired, she encouraged him to stay with it. One day he didn't want to do an assignment and demonstrated it by looking at a magazine and looking around the room. The assistant figured out it was because the

teacher was absent and the other students were resting, conversing or reading. Gerard responded, 'Yes', when she asked him about it.

Students looked around the room as a way of taking breaks from attention to classroom tasks as well as from boredom. In addition to looking around, Tyrone often left the room for a short time to go to the bathroom or be in the hall for a few minutes. When I asked his assistant about it, he said that sometimes Tyrone needed to relax. I noticed that this happened the most during his last class of the morning, fourth period. Earlier in the day Tyrone wanted to leave, and his assistant said no and redirected him back to the assignment.

Trish sat and looked down, refusing to respond to questions, when she needed a rest. Sometimes she didn't even respond to the question, 'Do you need a break?' She was already resting. Her special education teachers were sensitive to this message, particularly after a physical education or physical therapy workout, and after or during two or three periods of sustained academic work.

Evasive action was a strategy that students used to get what they wanted and included both direct and indirect statements from the students who could speak. Tyrone attempted to avoid finishing a Science lab sheet, saying he had to go to the bathroom; then he said it was too hot in the room. His assistant, competence-orientated and academically demanding, told him to 'hold it', 'open your collar' and finish the page. Abe, the most fluent of the students responded to my request to see the letter he was working on during English, 'You can see it later'. The he disappeared faster than I could follow him in my wheelchair and did not reappear where he said I could find him 4th period.

The students got themselves kicked out of lessons in special education class or just rested during general education class. They decided in which classes to simply sit or nap (as did their non-disabled peers), and which ones to disrupt or otherwise get some different kind of attention (rebuke, exile). I never saw them interrupt a general education class in a way that would get them removed. Incidents that I heard about seemed to have causes outside of the class agenda such as illness or upset.

Informal Assessments Constructing Students

Educators skilled in interpreting the students' response strategies knew that the students were engaging in meaningful and purposeful behavior. The teacher's perspective appeared to enhance or obscure the assessment of student competence and participation. These assessments can be summarised in two categories reflecting deficit- and competence-orientation with examples from field notes:

Student as Mystery

Teachers who thought the student was 'mentally retarded' did not seem skilled in reading the non-verbal and inarticulate response strategies of the students. As described above, a response such as 'I don't know' was accepted as fact and an inarticulate, but relevant response was taken as not understanding or low level ('functional') understanding. Each student had at least one teacher who said they

could not tell what the student understood, wondered if the student was 'in there' (able to think) or if the student understood at all. A history teacher said, 'I don't know how much Tyrone is getting of the content, I hope he is, but I haven't delved deeply into it yet. But he seems to enjoy himself here. The special ed teachers seem to send a lot of their kids here.' Another history teacher said, 'Tyrone is a mystery to me. For the most part, it's hard for me to understand what he knows, what he is comprehending.'

The teachers were often surprised by student academic performance or by new information about students' abilities. Abe's English teacher, who felt 'he would be better off in [a class like] Art,' was surprised when I told her that he was a musician and wrote new verses to a folk song. Tyrone's aide said, 'He's [Tyrone] becoming more independent … taking notes and tests by himself, taking the initiative in Math. He passes out the calculators. Last week he did his own Math problem on the board with no help at all which was totally amazing on my part. He surprised both the Math teachers and myself.'

Student as Typical Teen

Competence-orientated teachers described the students in the same terms as the non-disabled students, usually in contexts that included the academic participation. I asked a teacher how Trish was doing in school. 'Fine, she [Trish] knows what's going on, she turns things in, takes care of business.' Later in the year this Social Studies teacher had not only said, 'she's getting a lot out of it,' but added strong opinions indicating she had gotten to know Trish better. 'She is getting a lot out of it and putting a lot into it. To put her in a separate classroom with just special education would be a sin! She is delightful, funny, the kids accepted her; she has accepted them. With the grouping [work in small groups], she feels included, there is Diane and Harriet (two friends in the class) …'

Students who were 'doing fine' were also constructed as 'doing the same thing' as the non-disabled students. One teacher said, 'My philosophy of teaching is not that I teach English in isolation. I teach English because I want students to be successful adults. They need to learn how to communicate verbally, and written, in order to be successful. They need to be able to develop their own philosophy of life that they live by, and much of that comes from literature. Trish can do those same things. At her own pace she can do those same things.'

In some cases, the 'same thing' was an insistence that the student get the same experience as the classmates. Abe's Foods teacher made sure he took the final exams including the state exam although the grade was not recorded. She also expressed his participation as an accomplishment, '… you should have come two days ago. Abe made snowball cookies all by himself. He followed a recipe.'

Another expressed a lack of accomplishment in terms of some of the student's peers. Tyrone's health teacher found that he was doing more academically two years ago in middle school. She said, 'Two years ago he [Tyrone] typed the notes off the board. I [Health teacher] told him he couldn't play with markers until he did it. He

manipulates the system so he doesn't have to do much work. He's a typical teenager.'

Discussion

The findings of my study contradict the simplified versions of disabled students' experiences that many educators attached to the students and their disability labels. Examples of simplifying experiences might be to label unexpected, unwanted or misunderstood student interactions with terms associated with disability and misbehaviour, such as 'not understanding', 'non-complaint', 'acting out', or 'manipulation'. For example, rather than consider that a particular student behaviour may have purpose and meaning, teachers were often surprised by achievement or mystified as to the level of student understanding.

Sometimes teachers understood students' acts of resistance as 'manipulation' or 'acting out' such as in the incident with Gerard during the Saxon video; other times they understood similar behaviour as communication regarding interests or needs, such as when Gerard needed his schedule changed. As a result, the students seemed to cope as well as they could, often creatively, in an environment that infrequently acknowledged their minds.

Similarly, the findings contradict the notion that the problems of disability reside in the student. Students engaged or not, and participated or not, within a complex web of images and interpretations of themselves and their disabilities. Different images and representations of the student were supported by attitudes, activities and assistance which, when combined, enabled or disabled the student in terms of participation and acknowledgment of engagement. Each student had teachers who expected competence or incompetence. These perception differences occurred over time, such as expectations of literacy for Nick and Tyrone in middle school, but less or not at all in high school. Each also had such contrasting and competing expectations during the school year, the school day, and even within a class. The result was that a student could be engaged and eager to participate without the notice of the classroom teacher. Nick, who teachers perceived to understand very little, ceased his fidgeting and paper tearing, and like his classmates, closely followed a discussion of the Occupations teacher's former students who had been caught stealing from their employers. No one called on him even though he predictably responded to yes/no questions in other classes. Even Tyrone's competence-orientated and enthusiastic assistant was insufficient to overcome the deficit-orientation of his history teachers, both of whom welcomed Tyrone in their classes. A student could resist the disrespectful perceptions of some teachers. Trish confirmed one teacher's notion of her incompetence ('She probably doesn't know her letters', said in her presence) by going on strike during a typing practice session. Yet, with another teacher, she took a Biology test, then she typed her feelings about a fellow student who had recently died during school.

It is important to note that the deficit-orientated teachers should not be blamed as carriers of a pervasive cultural assumption of disability incompetence. Each of these teachers did their best within this paradigm without support of alternative

viewpoints. My own competence-orientated perspective developed during the study and enabled me to understand the students sooner than I might have and to interpret their responses differently than some of their teachers. Some personal interactions with fellow disability advocates labeled mentally retarded had helped me stretch my own boundaries of how to 'assume competence'. Yet I did not at first think of including Nick in the study (he only had one general education class and spent the remainder of his school day in special education.) In the course of observing him and Gerard for another study, I came to realise the complexity of his responses and the contrast of my own interpretations with those of his teachers. I came to understand the need for the considerable support needed to cross previously respected barriers to understanding and reciprocal relationships with people with significant disabilities. In fact, when students both engaged and actively participated, they were supported by individuals who understood their responses and could interpret them to other teachers and students.

This study reinforces to the need to pay attention to how students engage in academics and the need to clarify how teachers come to recognise the students' interest and engagement. It is a reminder to promote broader understanding of the student's purposeful actions, the subtitles of their frequently atypical communications strategies, and the necessary supports to students' meaningful participation. Students with significant disabilities often have idiosyncratic responses that, with the help of a knowledgeable interpreter, translate into responses of interest, disinterest, engagement and resistance.

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