

Forum Research Article

Wounding: Individual and Cultural Marginalization of a Student and Parent “Too Difficult to Serve”

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Abstract: The bounded entity in this case study is the educational team (parent, teacher, administrator and paraprofessional) surrounding a Native American student with Emotional Disturbance. Data analysis involved repeated coding of narratives developed from open-ended interviews of team members. This case study reveals an individual and cultural wounding of the student and parent.

Keywords: Wounding; Marginalization; (Dis)ability

“I have to try and focus on my own story and how it gives me hope. There has always been hope. Even at my most desperate, most frustrated, most overwhelmed, there was still hope. With each new setback I suffered, I reveled in the novelty of it- of hope, of the possibility of success, of validation, of being heard” (Fassett & Morella, 2008, p. 154).

Being heard is inextricably linked to identity and can provide continual hope. However, there are students, parents, and families who receive special education services but are not heard or validated and do not have hope. In the United States, students who qualify for services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) category of Emotional Disturbance (ED) are often placed in separate, segregated classrooms from their general education peers. As a result, students and families feel powerless and marginalized. Educational placement decisions create a form of social discourse that “constructs an identity of ‘disability’ which constitutes certain student types that general education ‘finds too difficult to serve’” (Harry & Klingner, 2006, p. 9). The lack of control over where students receive their special education services, and how parents, teachers, administrators and others discuss students during meetings about these determinations permanently and negatively affect students’ self-perception and identity.

Introduction

Societal norms and negative discourses surrounding disability create spaces where marginalized populations in special education are being wounded. In this research, I critically analyze the experience of a young man who is both a member of a Native American tribe and a student with ED who receives education services in a segregated, self-contained behavior support classroom. Many aspects of this student’s identity reveal the effects of repeated and continuous forms of individual and cultural wounding. I explore and define what this wounding looks like and how students experience it throughout my discussion in the framework and analysis of the research.

Current Disability Studies in Education (DSE) scholars and Irving Goffman's work on stigma informed this research and situates my discussion of students' experiences of wounding. Three distinct threads emerge from this body of scholarship. First, this research highlights the need for critical analysis of the processes through which students who receive special education services are Othered after removal from general education classrooms. Second, this scholarship reflects the structural oppression that Native American students experienced in both the past and the present when educators segregate them and remove them to special education classrooms. The third and final thread focuses on how one student with the special education label of "Emotional Disturbance" (ED) coped with the negative stigma that came with this categorization.

Critical Analysis of Other

Reutlinger (2015) explains the experience of being "Othered" as separate from the experience of being regarded as "in the norm":

"The discourse of Othering becomes an exertion of heinous, subconscious, and invisible power over cultural groups considered different-from-the-norm. That is, the Othering of 'abnormal' groups occurs without anyone of-the-norm mindfully recognizing that the process is occurring because it has become commonplace to view someone 'different' in a negative way" (p. 25).

Goffman (1963) presented this example: when a stranger enters a room possessing an attribute that sets him or her apart from the norm embraced by society (i.e., a difference in what is expected or allowable) then that individual is reduced from a whole person to a tainted or discounted one. Applying this idea to entire groups of people who experienced negative societal stigmatization throughout history illuminates how the marginalization of populations continues to perpetuate a social stigma that pervades the identities of those viewed as abnormal "social outcasts" (Goffman, 1963).

When students qualify for special education services in the United States, they often experience marginalization and are viewed as "fundamentally different from general education students" (Brantlinger, 2004, p. 20). Qualification for special education services, and the subsequent labels that come with it, are part of a system of othering that creates divisions between students considered normal and regular and those seen as deficient and disordered (Slee, 2004). Othering is denoted by the separate label received under special education classifications and professionals understand this labeling is required "in order to provide students with services" (Apple, 2001, p. 261). However, although this categorization is necessary to receive special education services, it conveys a "less-than" status. This less-than status is often times exacerbated by the disability categorization of ED because emotional dis-regulation can manifest in a variety of physical and verbal manners. When physical or verbal violence characterizes these manifestations, the othering that occurs in the educational setting begins to take on a cultural judgement and perception of the student as too far outside of "normal" expected classroom behavior. This ultimately marginalizes the student even further, placing students at even greater risk for removal into a separate, segregated space.

Structural Oppressions Facing Native American Students

Education is a system that institutionalizes and perpetuates individual, cultural, and structural oppression by favoring the dominant groups at the expense of those who are excluded- such as Native American peoples (Freire, 1990, 1994). The exploitation and marginalization of Native American peoples is well documented (Jimmy, Allen & Anderson, 2015, Squires, 2016). The educational system fails to see the interactions within the school context as the major component of marginalization of students and, instead, legitimizes the problem as an issue located with the students themselves (Gritmacher & Gritmacher, 2010). Scholars have researched the impact of cultural differences on learning and the co-existence of disability-related factors and cultural characteristics for over two decades (Garcia & Malkin, 1993; Garcia & Ortiz, 1988; Gritmacher & Gritmacher, 2010). However, educators have yet to recognize these discrepancies and take actions to repair them.

Squires (2016) explains that any discrepancy between a student's home culture and the school culture can disadvantage the learner if the culture of the school does not recognize the impact of difference in the student's life. Her study examined one school's process of referring students to special education that funneled only Native American students into the program due to dissonance between teachers' perceptions and actions as well as complicated understandings of tribal cultures' influences on the referral process (Squires, 2016).

Segregation of Students Labeled with Emotional Disturbance

The stigmatization and marginalization of students associated with the ED label is concerning because the potential for participation is limited when "dealing with non-physical impairments, such as intellectual disabilities, mental illness, traumatization or (eventually resulting) disruptive behavior" (Kiuppis & Soorenian, 2016, p. 5). This explanation of non-apparent disabilities (those that are not immediately physically discernable) includes the special education category ED and, many times, educators place students with this label into more restrictive educational settings. These settings may include separate self-contained behavior programs or separate schools focused entirely on students with emotional and behavioral needs. The separation from the general population of students and the experiences of these individual students carry very powerful messages (Bradley, Doolittle, & Bartolotta, 2008; National Education Association, 2010) because they give voice to the Othering that special education labels produces and the ultimate wounding inflicted on individuals and cultures.

There are personal, social, and educational costs when students are labeled and segregated. "Rejected by peers and diminished by teachers, students who are labeled must learn to cope with a stigmatized identity" (Ferri, 2009, p. 425). The following discussion of an individual and cultural wounding that occurred in a segregated special education classroom explores how an individual student learned to cope, deal with, and ultimately internalize the ED label as part of their educational identity.

Theoretical Framework

Wounding

Populations of students labeled with ED and who are physically separated from their general education peers are the exact students whose “bodies and histories ‘bear the weight’ of segregation” (Ferri, 2009, p. 426). Their voices and stories need to be at the forefront of social justice movements in education to make the experience of school more equitable and just.

The idea of a wounded learner has been minimally explored in a study by Lange, Chovanec, Cardinal, Kajner & Smith (2010). They describe socially and economically marginalized adult learners who experience wounding as shame, depression, and despondency in their educational careers that made it difficult for them to return to the classroom. To continue developing the concept of a wounded learner, I propose an expanded definition of “wounding.” Wounding is internal emotional turmoil created when violent influences and stigmatizing perceptions lay blame on an individual and their cultural identity because their lived experience is viewed as too far outside the societal norm and the disconnect is too great between home (marginalized) and school (dominant) cultures. If the student and parent hold another identity descriptor of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD), they may also experience a cultural wounding.

Mertens, Sullivan, & Stace (2011) describe the strength and possible transformative power that can guide the bridging of lived experiences of individuals with and without disabilities to continue walking the path toward social justice for all (p. 238). A transformative paradigm intersects with critical disability studies (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009) in a broader manner that includes discrimination based on disability, gender, race, ethnicity, age, religion, national origin, Native American tribal membership, immigration, and other dimensions of diversity typically employed to discriminate and oppress (Mertens, et al., 2011, p. 230). Recognizing disability as a critical category of identity deeply intertwined with the many other facets that comprise identity incorporates a new perspective of (dis)ability that calls into question the processes that dehumanize and marginalize individuals.

Hindman (2011) explains that individuals within marginalized groups can be silenced or their identity overlooked. There is a need for discourses that do not emphasize demographics and descriptors, but encourage “us all to rethink the forms of citizenship invoked by the prevailing signifiers of group identity” (p. 210). Rethinking how individuals are identified within various groups can allow for a more transformative discourse instead of continuing to fracture individual identities within fractured groups.

Little available research includes the experiences, voices, and perceptions of those students marginalized and othered twice over through the processes of both historical and systemic oppression in the educational system and the segregation that the ED label requires in special education. This case study focuses on Ben, a student labeled as ED and receiving special education services, and his mother, Charity. Analysis of Ben and Charity’s narratives

capture their resistance vis-à-vis the dominant groups' oppressive practice of individual and cultural wounding.

Methodology

Weaving together my analysis of the participants' stories and my observations as a researcher with the experiences of a student and parent silenced and marginalized by the educational system is designed to bring the experience of wounding to light so that it can be honored. This case study is a "microscopic approach" that emphasizes an "intensive examination of the 'particular'" (Lapan & Armfield, 2009, p. 166). The main goal of this type of research is to present an authentic portrayal of the case with observations, participant dialogues, and other first-hand accounts to reflect on everyday activities (Lapan & Armfield, 2009).

Within this case study, the bound entity consisted of narrations of those individuals who surround and directly affect the educational experience of Ben, a student who is Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) with multiple special education labels (Emotional Disturbance, Specific Learning Disability, Speech and Language Impairment). The individuals involved in Ben's life and education who contributed to this case study include: Ben's mother, Charity; his special education Behavior Support Program teacher, Mr. Jonah; his paraprofessional, Mr. Terrance; and his administrator, Ms. Chase.

Researcher Positionality

As both a researcher and practitioner during the time of my data collection, I found myself in a unique situation. I was, simultaneously, both an insider and outsider, a contributing factor and a judgmental observer, and a part of the problem, while also hoping to be a microphone for Ben and Charity's stories.

As the research progressed, my position within what was being studied became clearer and the insider role, as well as role of other, came into play. Adams, Holman-Jones, & Ellis (2015) explain this back-and-forth as being able to "look inward - into our identities, thoughts, feelings, experiences - and outward - into our relationships, communities, and cultures. As researchers, we try to take readers/audiences through the same process, back and forth, inside and out" (p. 46). Chang (2008) explains this interpretation and meaning-making process as a shifting back and forth between self and others, as well as within the personal and social context.

Findings: Bodies Bearing the Weight of Segregation

Ben and Charity

The observation began at immediately after Ben had pushed his desk over and thrown a chair at Mr. Jonah and the 4th grade student Jerry. The chair struck Jerry in the back of the leg and the side of the arm. Ben attempted to run at Jerry with fists raised and

Mr. Jonah, the lead Behavior Support Program (BSP) teacher, called for a team restraint with Mr. Terrance, the paraprofessional. Ben was restrained for 40 seconds during which he yelled obscenities and tried to get out of the restraint hold. Ben quickly stopped screaming and fighting the restraint. When Mr. Jonah asked him if he was ready to be released, Ben replied affirmatively with a nod. Ben was released from the restraint and walked to a chair where he and Mr. Terrance sit.

These episodes of entire loss of control happened so often that they grew defeating to all involved, particularly given the violence of a restraint situation. The teachers call for a restraint in a calm, automatic manner and the student appears to know how long to attempt to break the restraint hold before calming himself down to the required point where he can verbalize that he is ready to be released. This normalization of violence not only results in the wounding of Ben as a student, but fractures the relationship between student and teacher.

Immediately after Ben threw the chair the remaining seven students were escorted next door and Jerry was sent to the nurse to be checked for bruising and/or scrapes. After releasing Ben from the restraint, Mr. Jonah calls Mrs. Chase, the principal, and informs her that she will need to call the officers and file an assault charge. Ben's mother, Charity, is then called and informed that Ben will be suspended from school the remainder of the school day and the following day. Charity will also need to come and pick Ben up.

After the phone calls, Mr. Jonah sits at his desk and begins to talk to Ben about what happened and why Ben became so upset about not bringing his homework back and needing to complete his morning work. Ben sits in the chair with his head down, breathing hard. Ben does not reply until Mr. Jonah starts talking about how Jerry was waiting to turn in his morning work and that it was unfair Jerry got hurt while he was doing what he was supposed to.

Ben: "I don't care that Jerry's hurt."

Mr. Terrance (to Mr. Jonah): "He means it."

Mr. Jonah: "He doesn't care."

Ben replies (to both): "Fuck you. I don't care."

Mr. Terrance and Mr. Jonah continue to sit silently with Ben while they wait for the arrival of Charity and the police officers. The rest of the class remains next door. Charity arrives before the officers and takes Ben in the hallway to talk.

Ben's body language conveyed his sense of feeling trapped and held within a physical space long after the physical restraint ended. His words, "I don't care" are believed to be a half-hearted attempt to push back on his lack of control in his current physical and emotional situation. However, his verbal push back is met with a reaffirmation by both his male educators that is simultaneously reassuring and instigating. This prompts Ben to again

verbally lash out and try to add a more intense expletive to regain any sense of control as he and the teachers wait for the inevitable. This scenario has occurred before so the players know their expected roles. However, there is such a tone of resignation in the dialogue offered by both Mr. Jonah and Mr. Terrance that their words take on a provoking aspect.

Charity arrives before the officers and takes Ben in the hallway to talk.

Charity: “You have to do homework! You have to! It’s never gonna stop. Home or jail? You’re gonna get it real bad at home. You worry about your damn self. Why, why, why?!”

As the rest of the class and the teachers remained in the classroom, Charity and Ben are physically isolated in the hallway, which is in on the first floor in the school and strategically placed at the very end of the hallway to be as far away from the general education students. Their conversation is emotionally charged and full of blame and fear. When Charity is yelling about “It’s never gonna stop. Home or jail?” her response is fueled by her own educational and personal experiences that wounded her.

Ben (beginning to sniff and cry): “I don’t know.”

Charity: “You are the one doing it to yourself. You like it when you’re bad? Well, it’s not cool. You look stupid when you do that.”

Charity attempts to console and bridge the divide between mother and son when she explains “it’s not cool.” She knows that her experience and the experience of her son are linked, and she is also speaking to her memories of being asked if she liked it “when you’re bad?” She is attempting to heal both her wound and her son’s without even knowing the depth of her own.

Through interactions with Charity, Ben’s identity is further shaped and the positions of power and culture within the school and district became clearer. Through each participant’s individual narratives, Charity becomes viewed as the reason behind Ben’s own actions. For instance, when she came to the BSP classroom to pick him up after the police were called, there was little to no interaction with her beyond a brief description of what had occurred and the need to talk to the officers. Or, when Ben was restrained by Mr. Jonah and Mr. Terrance, the blame was leveled on Charity with the “apple doesn’t fall far from the tree” mentality.

Pieces of Power

Judgement of Home Life

Mr. Terrance, the paraprofessional, describes his perceived experiences with a lack of support from home:

“Yes, I would just like to do the support, like when we send homework home, make sure they get on it. Maybe even sit down with him, not do it for him, but sit down and maybe help him. You know what I’m saying? And make sure he brings it back and

stay up on it.”

This description of a perceived lack of parental involvement and support directly targets Charity as a root of the “problem” that Ben has in returning homework. Mr. Terrance is laying the expected norm of school behaviors on top of the cultural norms of Charity and her family structure and background. This assumption of the superiority of school and societal expectations of compliant, consistent routines at home is housed in the systemically oppressive educational system:

“Um, I wouldn’t even mind, uh, looking into Ben getting a Big Brother. Show him, show parents how to mentor him, you know what I’m saying? How to deal with him and stuff. I believe, between me and you, I believe Ben, at the house, is around a lot of cussing cause when he gets mad, that’s words I’ve never even heard before.”

Mr. Terrance makes the point that the Big Brother program might be able to show Ben’s mom and other family members how to mentor him and work with him in a manner that will give Ben some success. This perspective on the need for mentoring and discipline is also a direct attack on the culture at home, on Charity, and on Ben himself. It is a triple wounding for this family and it happens because of the widespread view that cultures outside the established school culture are not acceptable and/or are inferior.

The dominant expectation of submissive student actions is clear in the critique Mr. Terrance makes about the aggressiveness of the swear words Ben chooses to use when he is angry. The appropriate level of anger is also supposed to remain contained within the dominant cultural norms. Therefore, the comment made about a Big Brother program showing Charity “how to deal with him” shames Charity and Ben in multiple ways. The lack of people first language in the phrase “deal with him” paints Ben as more animal than human. Instead of working with a student, paraprofessionals and educators frame Ben as a thing they have to “deal with.” This is dehumanizing. Again, Charity’s inability to parent her son and the lack of cultural support for the needs that Ben expresses are at the center of this individual and cultural wounding.

It’s Your Fault

Mrs. Chase, the school administrator, describes Ben and her perception of why Ben acts in a verbally or physically aggressive manner:

“I think when he’s on his good days – he’s as sweet as he can be. But I think he lives with men in his life that give him, that he sees no hope for himself, otherwise than living on the government, off of somebody else.”

This administrator encapsulates the social, historical, and systemically oppressive perception of Native American tribal culture. Her descriptions contain derogatory statements of male Native American tribal members as unable to be self-sustaining individuals. The broad and sweeping stereotypical statement also attacks Ben as “sweet as he can be,” but only on his “good days.” Therefore, if Ben has a “bad” day he is less than, not good enough, and

not able to meet the dominant expectations of appropriate behavior within the school culture.

Charity gives further insight into the male influences in Ben's life. She also notes that Ben is alone or in the presence of adults most of the time he is home:

"Benny's really not exposed to a lot of kids. So I think when he is, he wants to be in charge. He wants to be the alpha man and I have, I have a feeling that this has to do with the fact that his father's not involved. And he's asked me that question. He's like, 'How come my father doesn't see me?'"

She continues to describe the difficulties in establishing a relationship with Ben's biological father:

"I know that he wants to have a relationship because he spoke about him. But it's so hard to even try to get in contact with them. Um, they think I'm still head-over-heels with their son, so even if I tried to contact they would assume that I'm stalking Benny's father. So they're on a way different level than I am which makes it difficult for Benny to have a relationship with his father."

Charity is explaining and giving context to the negative and demeaning stereotype that Mrs. Chase states. She is sharing her experience as a marginalized female navigating through dominant discourses of multiple layers of oppression. The difference in Native American tribal culture and the Mexican-American culture of Ben's father create yet another piece of the story that Charity has to make sense of for herself and for Ben. She is explaining the impact that multiple different cultural norms is having on her and her son. She intensely feels the dominant group's marginalization of her and her son as well as the expectations of a second non-dominant cultural group. She continues to express her pain at being located at the center of these specific expectations that are not her own. Her final thought resonates within her own identity and within Ben's as she layers yet another piece of her story that breaks negative stereotypes and gives further context to who Charity really is:

"I think, I think when you grow up in a household where there's some sort of abuse going on, I think you learn how to manipulate – 'cause I did. And I know I wasn't the best parent with Benny and I think he learned how to manipulate through me."

Her regret, shame and ownership of the blame leveled at her is poignant. Why is she expected to navigate through dominant cultural perceptions when the educators and administrators within these dominant groups fail to even see her to begin with? Why does her wounding have to continually occur as a woman, as a Native American tribal member, as a parent, and as a victim of abuse?

Continued Wounding of Marginalized Bodies

From experiences, interactions and observations with Ben, his behaviors are always a form of communication. Ben does not have any other ability to communicate clearly except through his actions and those actions have become increasingly violent. The most violent

wounding observed was in the manner through which Charity was discussed by, informed, and interacted with the BSP classroom and the school district policies. The blame has consistently been assigned to Charity and, in turn, to Ben's background experiences and culture. They have both been internally and culturally wounded. The dominant school culture consistently created an "us vs. them" scenario. Therefore, within the ED label there also exists a wounding. This wounding occurs as a result of the stigmatizing effects of special education labeling and subsequent segregation into specialized programs. This wounding is most violent for individuals like Ben who carry the ED label more prominently through his actions. His actions, however, are a form of communication and he has consistently been communicating his experiences to "Us." As I am part of the educational communities that continue to fail Ben, it is clear to me that we are not listening because the programs and interventions in place for Ben are only marginalizing and separating him further. Charity's internal emotional turmoil is consistently reinforced through the violent and stigmatizing blame assigned to her by school personnel. Her wounding has conditioned her to think this is as good as it gets and she has to live day-to-day with a fragile hope that Ben will be safe and not hurt someone.

Survival

Ben's avoidance and violent behaviors are a survival strategy and he has learned to manipulate his environments to his benefit. His learning environments replicate these practices, modeling aspects of these survival strategies and implicitly encouraging Ben to continue them. For instance, Ben's education perpetuates violence and avoidance in the form of restraint practices, police involvement, and segregation from peers and curriculum out of fear of other peers not being safe if Ben is in the room. The survival strategies of the BSP classroom perpetuate Ben's own survival strategies. Violence mirrors violence and survival mirrors survival. The wounding of Ben and Charity feeds the continuing cycle of violent and stigmatizing perceptions.

Continued collection, storying, and re-storying of individual voices that continue to be marginalized in violent ways must ask the difficult questions: "How do we engage, understand, and resist the ways words move in, through and upon our bodies? How do we honor the distinctions that matter in ways that respect their roles in forming our identities?" (Fassett & Morella, 2008, p. 141). There is a clear need to break the cycles of systemic failure that have perpetuated Ben's own cycles of failure. It is my hope that conversations begin with paraprofessionals, special and general educators, administrators, district representatives, and policymakers who write special education legislation and that these discussions might ultimately lead to a greater awareness of the many forms of violent wounding that unfold in the classroom and ultimately challenge the social norms that feed into them. Without awareness, there is no beginning ground for change toward a more socially just educational system.

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