Chapter 15
Teaching Safety, Compliance, and Critical Thinking in Special Education Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Special educators are tasked with teaching students with disabilities to understand and adhere to social norms for their own safety and acceptance in society. This chapter explores ways special educators can teach critical thinking alongside these social and cultural norms in order to support student agency. One special educator shares her experiences working with students with disabilities in urban public schools as she grapples with teaching her students what they need to know to be safe, while also teaching to challenge oppressive social and behavioral expectations.

INTRODUCTION

In my first year of teaching, a four-year-old student looked up at me in confusion and pointed to the sign on the bathroom door that had a picture of a person with two legs and the word "BOYS" written beneath it. "This is the boys' bathroom?" he asked me. "Yes," I replied. "I have to use this one?" "Yes," I replied. "Why?" he asked. I had an internal meltdown. I was fresh out of a program at New York University where I studied Social & Cultural Analysis. I spent three years running a women's empowerment group in a New York City high school. I facilitated workshops designed to understand gender as a spectrum and challenge the gender binary. I read David Valentine's Imagining Transgender (2007) in my coursework and grappled my way through a course on Disability and Sexuality in American Culture. Everything I stood for and believed said that this beautiful little boy should not have to confine himself to the box of boyhood to gain bathroom entry. And yet, as I stood there, it took all of three seconds to re-compose myself. As a first-year teacher responsible for the cultural understanding and societal movements of six kindergarten students diagnosed with Autism, I knew my response and my teachings would socialize

this black-skinned Dominican boy who would grow up to be a black-skinned Dominican man who would not be safe walking into a bathroom labeled "WOMEN" or "GIRLS." Visions of police arresting him, tackling him, or worse flashed through my mind. When I opened my mouth to respond, it was to say, "Because that is what the sign says."

The purpose of this chapter is to examine how disability is constructed and understood as something negative in schools and to explore the possibilities for transforming this narrative of disability as a deficit. I offer vignettes of students and teachers grappling with what disability means that highlight the tensions that arise when teachers find themselves torn between feeling the need to teach strict adherence to rules in order to keep kids safe and teaching critical thinking to challenge these rules and norms. This chapter offers personal narratives from experiences teaching students diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, Intellectual Disabilities, and Emotional Behavioral Disorders in a public elementary school in an urban Northeast city. I offer insight rooted in classroom and school-wide practices and an analysis of how institutional special education policies and practices manifest in interpersonal interactions in the school system.

A twelve-year-old Black student on the Autism Spectrum entered my office last year. Tears were streaming down his face. He said, "I'm scared the police will hurt me." Another teacher, a White woman, responded in the moment by saying, "If you listen to the police and do what they tell you, they won't hurt you."

My experiences in the public schools in the Bronx have constantly affirmed the need to prepare educators to support students' development of critical consciousness and realization of agency. This teacher's response, while well-intentioned, missed the mark; it reinforced a narrative that every young person of color who is harmed by the police is harmed because they failed to comply with directions. It lacked a nuanced understanding that sometimes it is the color of a person's skin that makes them unsafe, and their actions cannot ensure their safety. This is a difficult and frightening conversation to have for many adults, let alone with children, but acknowledging these realities is an important component of preparing our students to be critically conscious, engaged, aware citizens. It is essential that educators understand how power dynamics operate. They must be trained in identifying the ways their own relationship to power may blind them from comprehending the realities students experience. If educators do not understand the way that power operates on ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internalized levels, they cannot empower young people to understand and realize their own relationships to power—and how to simultaneously be critical consumers of societal norms and remain physically safe in a society that often renders their bodies dangerous. This is particularly pertinent for teachers in the field of special education; we must teach our students how to be safe and successful in the current culture of power (Delpit, 1995) while simultaneously challenging and reimagining said culture of power.

Rethinking disability calls into question everything we know about special education. As the disability rights movement and disability studies scholarship have flourished, the field of Disability studies in education, commonly referred to as DSE, has emerged (Ware, 2001). Disability Studies in Education offers new paradigms for understanding disability, which pose questions that challenge the very foundation of the field of special education. A growing body of literature is emerging to address this exciting new discourse, including how educators can attend to the intersections of Critical Race Theory and Disability Studies in special education (Connor, Ferri, & Subini, 2016). This chapter connects to the larger theme of the book as it explores the intersections of ability, race, class, gender, and sexuality in special education. My call for a paradigm shift that reimagines special education stems from my time spent working within the public special education system, both as a teacher and as a teacher development coach, my

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