Privilege in the Classroom

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Privilege and discrimination run deeply in our social structures and our mental conceptions. Fighting oppression is not just simply removing some barriers and visible obstacles. Privilege is wrapped up in who we are and how we see ourselves (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Recognition of privilege in educational structures and in our personal mindset as educators is essential to be inclusive in the classroom and to fight oppression.

It is remarkable how privilege manifests itself externally through structures and internally through mindsets. It seems that structures perpetuate mindsets regarding privilege, while individual or group mindsets perpetuate the establishment of structures that serve the privileged (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). The outward and inward manifestations of privilege can be observed in educational institutions, evidenced in building construction, curriculum guides, and classroom environments.

These manifestations most often lead to the distinction of individuals whom these structures serve best – the dominant group. Within the classroom setting, it can be helpful to identify the dominant group and minority groups as described by Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017). The former is most often comprised of students who are comfortable in the classroom environment and are able to carry out tasks and assignments without experiencing significant obstacles or challenges. In many cases, they determine what is deemed "normal." Unfortunately, the by-product of this is that anyone who does not fit that "normal" will be minoritized. Specifically, these will often be students whose physical or cognitive experiences do not fit into the mold of the classroom structure. Applying the social model of disability, when educational structures do not take into consideration impairment, they are exclusive in their structure –

preventing students from being able to join others and participating fully in activities that are enjoyed by individuals without impairment (Shakespeare, 2017). According to Shakespeare, both physical and cognitive disabilities are "inherent problems" (p. 196). Physical impairments will be more likely identified by the teacher, while cognitive impairments can at times remain undiagnosed. Undiagnosed impairments can further cause a student to feel frustrated by their inability to succeed by the standards of the dominant group, resulting in alienation and possibly even behavioural disruptions in an attempt to be heard or understood.

Students in the dominant group will likely be unaware of their privilege. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) discuss how "internal and attitudinal dimensions of privilege" play out in the dominant group (p. 88). A student who is part of the dominant group will believe that their success is primarily a result of hard work, and that those who struggle will need to apply the same work ethic in order to succeed. This mindset undermines the complexity of each individual's physical and cognitive identity. When educators, or anyone who is involved in designing the educational structure, do not address the issue of privilege, this mindset – ableism – is easily perpetuated.

According to the social model of disability, the disabled person should primarily be consulted in order to provide best solutions to issues that they face (Shakespeare, 2017). In educational systems, this can begin with the classroom teacher listening to disabled students. Arguably, that is the first step in creating any change within the structure. While teachers have limited control over the overall educational structure, they do have the primary influence within the classroom. The practice of listening to students and allowing them to discuss their experiences and learning desires can provide insight into classroom set-up and assessments that allow all students, including those with physical and cognitive impairments, to feel heard and

included. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) emphasize that the dominant group has much to learn from the minoritized group. As the teacher models the concept of listening and invites dialogue, students can learn to listen and discuss in a similar manner.

A social model of disability encourages the acceptance of the impairment without seeking to remove the impairment (Shakespeare, 2017). This model transposed to the classroom can help diverse students to feel that they belong and that they have a voice. All students deserve to feel that their experience is valid and worthy of dialogue.

Resources

Sensoy, Ö, & DiAngelo, R. (2017). Chapter 6: Understanding Privilege through Ableism. In *Is*

  everyone really equal?: An introduction to key concepts in social justice education

  / Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo. (Second edition.). Teachers College Press.

Shakespeare, T. (2017). Chapter 13: The Social Model of Disability. In L.J. Davis (author) *The*

  disability studies reader / Lennard J. Davis [electronic resource] (Fifth edition.).

  Routledge.