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Gender bias and imbalance: girls in US special education programmes

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While research has documented the predominance of boys in US special education programmes, similar attention to girls' under-representation has been rare. Recent research suggests that there may be just as many girls in need of these services, but for various reasons they are less likely to be identified through the referral process. Girls who fail to receive services are more likely to become teenage mothers, less likely to become employed and more likely to require public assistance. This article explores this pressing equity issue through a content analysis of recent US studies on gender and disability, examines current reasons for this phenomenon, and what it means for the lived school experiences of girls with disabilities. Suggestions on how theory, policy and practice can better serve this under-represented population are presented.

Keywords: gender; disability; girls; special education; gender bias; boys

Introduction

While the over-representation of boys in US special education programmes has been well documented (McIntyre and Tong 1998; Gregory 1977), research investigating girls' under-representation is rare. The numbers tell us that gender is the largest predictor of a student being identified as having a disability, and yet in the US the gender imbalance remains under-studied and under-theorised.

For example, a wave of writing and research on boys (Weaver-Hightower 2003; Pollack 1998; Kindlon and Thompson 2000), plus studies focusing on racial and language minorities (Hosp and Reschly 2004; Losen and Orfield 2002; National Research Council 2002; Artiles 1998) have focused attention on the race and class issues of this phenomenon. What has not received the same attention is that, across race, ethnicity and class, boys outnumber girls by at least two to one in nearly every US disability category. This fact should not only call into question the processes for identification and evaluation of students – requiring research across multiple intersectionalities – but our very notion of the term disability itself.

How can we better understand and begin to problematise girls' under-representation in special education services? The aim of this article is to examine the nascent US research on the intersection of gender and disability. Specifically, we ask: what are the reasons girls receive disproportionately fewer special education services than boys? What does this mean for the school experiences of young women who receive or fail to receive these services? And, lastly, what are the outcomes for girls as they transition from secondary school to college and/or careers?

We begin with a brief background on pertinent US legislation as well as definitions of key terms from the field, followed by an explanation of our methodology. We then present the major

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categories drawn from the literature, and conclude with the implications for theory, policy and practice.

Background

Pertinent legislation: Title IX and IDEA

Just as the Civil Rights Act (1964) made it illegal to discriminate on the basis of race, two key pieces of US legislation address gender and disability. Title IX of the Education Act (1972)¹ prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender in educational contexts receiving federal funds. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975) – reauthorised in 1990, and most recently again in 2004, as the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) – provides the right to a ‘free and appropriate education’ for all handicapped children. Though these laws are all significant, they reflect separate histories, social movements and, ultimately, research agendas. In fact, these ‘single-issue groups’ (Mertens 2007, 584) may account for the lack of attention to intersectionality, a weakness in the US literature on gender and disability.

Disability and disability theory

In recent years, the notion of disability, as well as the word itself, has become a contested terrain in the US. The traditional definition of disability, referred to as the medical model, considers the problems of people with disability as individual problems that to some degree incapacitate and require medical treatment, cure, or intervention. However, the minority group model suggests that the problems that people with disabilities face are the result of segregation and discrimination and views disability as a category similar to race or gender, inspiring advocacy and political activism (Fiduccia and Wolfe 1999). ‘Disability as defined by the disability rights agenda is framed within notions of structural changes in society in a move towards greater equality for disabled people’ (Keil, Miller, and Cobb 2006, 168).

Related to this model is a theoretical approach, sometimes called disability theory or studies, which sees disability as a social construct, that ‘views the condition of having a disability as a social relationship characterized by discrimination and oppression rather than as a personal misfortune or individual adequacy’ (Garland-Thomson 2001, 1). Thus, disability studies focus on the sociocultural aspect of disability, avoiding labels of deviance, and focusing on the study of power relations that may result in improved conditions for those with disabilities (Garland-Thomson 2001). Our review of the literature revealed that special education research actively pursues the social justice aspect of disability studies, advocating for rights, and acknowledging the potential worth and full participation of persons with disabilities in society. However, it is rare that US scholars of special education eschew the label of ‘disability’, despite the negative connotations suggested by some disability theorists (Fiduccia and Wolfe 1999; Garland-Thomson 2001). Thus, our article uses the terms and the categories from the literature we reviewed.

Special education

It is important to make the distinction between disability and special education needs. Keil, Miller, and Cobb (2006) in the *British Journal of Special Education* discuss the confusion that results when the two terms of ‘disability’ and ‘special education needs’ (SEN) are used interchangeably. These terms represent different ideologies yet the term SEN appears to be the more prevalent term due to the legislative framework that is being used to provide services to individuals. In the US, if a student is referred for assessment and found to be a person with a disability, she or he may then qualify for special education services. These services range from providing

the student with a classroom aid to providing special day classes or schools. The services a child receives depend upon what the student qualifies for. In the US, there are over 13 disability categories including the most prevalent, Learning Disabled (LD). Affecting students' academic skill acquisition, the LD category accounts for over 50% of all students receiving special education services. The majority of the studies we reviewed were on this most populous LD category, though we note when a study includes Mentally Retarded (MR), Emotionally Disabled (ED) or other populations.

Methodology

The process of reviewing literature in a given field is a daunting one. And, while it is impossible to conduct an exhaustive review, there are methodologies that promote a more efficient approach. This study utilised content analysis to conduct a literature review of over 120 articles on gender and disability in the United States. Content analysis was selected because of its usefulness in examining trends and patterns in documents (Stemler 2001). A powerful data reduction technique, content analysis involves coding and classifying data in order to reduce them to fewer content categories. When conducting a content analysis of literature in a particular field, the objective is to organise data into several major categories or themes. In this section we summarise the steps we followed in the analysis of our data.

Using a variety of online academic databases, our first step was to conduct a broad search for all scholarly articles related to gender and disability up to 2005. Second, all relevant article abstracts were printed out and reviewed for the next phase: article retrieval. Over 120 articles were retrieved and reviewed. Next, following the 'emergent coding' approach (as opposed to an '*a priori*' approach), we established over 20 categories drawn from the literature. Then, utilising a coding checklist, each researcher read approximately one third of the articles in a first round review of the literature. This first pass had two objectives: to further refine the coding categories and also to recommend the inclusion/exclusion of the article for the study. At this stage of the process, decisions were made to exclude articles that examined gifted students, homosexual students, and those studies that primarily looked at race. Those studies that looked at gender primarily and race secondarily were included.

Both reliability and validity issues were addressed in several ways. First, reliability was checked by having at least two of the three researchers independently read and code each article. If there was not 100% agreement on the coding of the article, the third researcher was asked to review the article as well. In addition, the research team met regularly to discuss the classification procedure and to refine the coding scheme. Through this process, the initial list of over 20 categories was refined and reduced to 10 and then later to three categories: (1) under-representation and the referral process; (2) school experiences; and (3) outcomes. Validity of the findings was triangulated with other sources including well-regarded (but older) studies or literature reviews on the topics of gender and disability.

All research studies have their limitations and this study was no exception. This review does not explicitly examine race, as previous studies have confirmed the over-representation of racial/ethnic minorities in US special education classes. Nor does it attend to issues of social class or homosexual or transgender students, which – although potentially salient – are beyond the scope of this current review. This study privileges the intersection of gender and disability, though the authors acknowledge that multiple intersectionalities – race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and disability – are critical to understanding issues of over- and under-representation as well as bias in special education services. As stated earlier, the lack of attention to intersectionalities in the literature of this field is a major weakness. In addition, while our final categories were continually refined and ultimately very precise, they are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they overlap quite a bit.

We now examine the major contributions to the US literature on gender and disability. These contributions fall into three major categories: (1) referral and identification; (2) school experiences; and (3) outcomes. Within each category, we assess the strengths and limitations, later concluding with our implications and future directions for research.

Major categories of the gender and disability literature in the US

Referral and identification for special education services

By far, the most prevalent category of literature on gender and disability examines the verifiable absence of girls in US special education classrooms. As indicated previously, statistics from the US Census (2000) reveal that boys outnumber girls two to one in receiving special education services. Anecdotal stories from special education teachers abound about the number and dominance of boys in their classes. But why? Why are there so many more boys in special education classes? Researchers have grappled with this question and posited several theories, though none are mutually exclusive. Rather, it is likely that a combination of factors contribute to the under-representation of girls.

Researchers Sadker and Sadker (1994) in their landmark work, *Failing at Fairness: How Our Schools Cheat Girls*, assert that girls are marginalised in the classroom. Girls are overshadowed by the more assertive, more disruptive behaviour of the boys. Sadker and Sadker suggest that boys are praised for taking risks, and for their intellectual endeavours, while girls are praised for behaving properly and remaining submissive to authority. Disabled girls face a double oppression in this regard. Socialised to please, they rarely speak up if their needs are not being met. If success in the classroom for girls is defined as 'being good', girls with possible disabilities do not want to take the risk and expose their weakness, or their need for special attention. Thus they are not identified, and do not receive the appropriate services.

Further, boys' classroom behaviour, according to Sadker and Sadker (1994), cries out for attention, and this is particularly true of the boy with disabilities. Teachers are the gatekeepers for entrance into special education programmes, and the primary reason for referral is student disruption of the classroom (Anderson 1997; Wehmeyer and Schwartz 2001). The low-achieving girl, who is *not* a behaviour problem, may not be identified because academic under-performance is often not a priority for teachers when referring for special education. Teachers notice boys who act out, who cannot stay in their seat, who disturb their classmates and the homeostasis of the classroom; thus boys become the priority in special education referrals. Girls are identified for special education services only after they begin exhibiting behaviours similar to boys, behaviours that draw attention to them not because of their learning needs, but because of their conspicuous and inappropriate classroom behaviour.

However, referral and identification that rely on behavioural identification unfairly discriminates against both girls and boys, identifying them *not* for their learning needs but for their behaviours (Wehmeyer and Schwartz 2001). Teachers tend to refer students whose behaviours fall 'outside the range of tolerance' (Shinn, Tindal, and Spira 1987, 33). Yet some symptoms of disability that are more prevalent in girls, for example depression or social withdrawal (American Association of University Women 2008), are not disruptive. Thus, girls who exhibit them go largely ignored in special education services. In addition, some theorise that girls mature more quickly (Jans and Stoddard 1999) and may be able to better independently deal with the disability that affects them without causing a disruption to the classroom. Girls' tendency to work hard to mask their disability or negotiate the classroom by hiding their true needs may contribute to their under-representation in special education programmes.

Another problem related to identification and referral for girls in special education is embedded in societal values that place the male in an intellectually and socially superior position.

Froschl, Rubin, and Sprung (1999) assert that 'boys are more likely to be classified as Mentally Retarded (MR), Learning Disabled (LD) and Emotionally Disabled (ED) because society's standards for achievement are higher for males than for females; thus traits similar to those assigned to children with LD or MR are considered 'healthy' for females' (3). Here the issue of teacher expectations looms large. Females cannot be properly identified for special education if teacher expectations are not the same for both males and females. For example, studies have found that girls who *are* identified function at lower levels, and score lower than boys who are identified (Vogel 1990). Vogel asserts that girls who are identified for special education 'are more severely impaired and have a greater aptitude and achievement discrepancy than their male counterparts' (47). And finally, because girls represent a small minority of the identified special education population, the 'generalization of research done on males with learning disabilities' (Anderson 1997, 157) applied to females may also be a cause for improper evaluation and identification. In short, the process for referring students may be gender biased.

About the process of referral and identification in the US

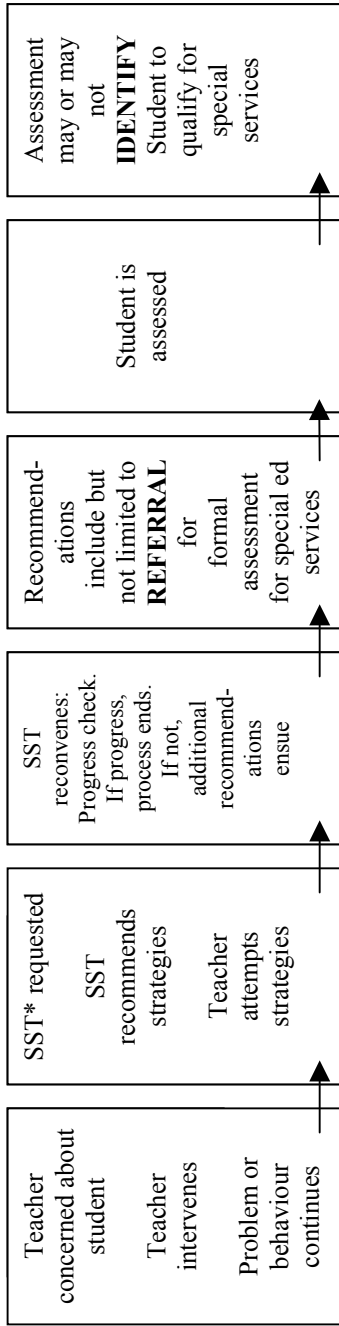
Generally, the special education process for referral and identification begins when the classroom teacher becomes concerned about a student's academic progress or behaviour (please see Figure 1). In the pre-referral stage, the classroom teacher intervenes using strategies to address the child's difficulty, such as 'changes in the physical environment, changes in instructional approaches, short term remedial activities, peer tutoring or behaviour management plans' (LDA no date, 1). These strategies are often implemented in consultation with other colleagues and school support personnel. The Teacher Assistant Team (TAT) is one method of pre-referral problem solving that uses peer-chosen colleagues to develop strategies for students experiencing difficulties (Olson 1991, 1).

If after initial classroom intervention by the teacher, the student's problem or behaviour continues, the teacher will request a meeting of administrators, other general education teachers, a special education teacher, a parent or caregiver, and perhaps a counsellor, psychologist, or social worker. These meetings are known by a variety of names across the United States including Student Study Team, Student Support Team, Child Study Team (CST), placement conferences, or multidisciplinary team meetings. At this meeting the team will suggest strategies for the teacher to try and help the student in the classroom. If the problem is very severe, a referral may be initiated immediately for a formal evaluation for special education placement. After the teacher has attempted the strategies suggested by the team, the team will reconvene for a progress check. If the problem or behaviour has subsided, the referral and identification process ends. If, however, the suggested strategies are not successful, the team may propose other strategies, one of which may be a recommendation for a formal assessment for special education services (Klinger and Harry 2006). Parents must give consent prior to the individual initial evaluation (LDA no date).

The results of the formal assessment may or may not identify the student to qualify for special education services. 'The referral of a student to special education should be an indication that all other avenues have been explored and that a conclusion has been reached that a child's needs cannot be met by the regular education program' (Olson 1991). If the assessment identifies the student as having one of the 13 disabilities, a placement conference is held before the student may begin participating in a special education programme.

The school experiences of girls with disabilities

The second major category of literature on gender and disability examines the lived school experiences of girls – both identified and unidentified – for special education services. A strong theme running throughout this research is the notion that girls' experiences are mediated by their



* SST = Student Study Team, or Student Support Team

Figure 1. Process for referral and identification (adapted from Klingler and Harry 2006).

gender. For example, because of their lack of referral and identification or *late* identification, girls who have special needs do not have access to support and services that may address their needs (Wehmeyer and Schwartz 2001). This can result in an unsuccessful school experience with high rates of academic failure, dropping out of school or teenage pregnancy (AAUW 2004). Girls who *are* identified for services face other obstacles such as sexual harassment in male-dominated classrooms as well as sex-stereotyped education and training.

There is evidence to suggest that because girls are often older when admitted to special education, they go longer without support (Kratovil and Bailey 1986). Follow-up studies are needed to assess the impact of delayed identification on girls though one might predict that the later a student receives services, the more negative the outcomes. Again, this issue is most likely linked to a gender-biased referral and evaluation process.

Once in special education programmes, girls' experiences are mediated by their gender. Often, girls receive gender-biased career counselling and curricular materials, and are placed on courses that prepare girls for sex-stereotyped jobs (Wehmeyer and Schwartz 2001) such as receptionist or cashier. The experiences of girls in special education are further imperilled because of a classroom climate in which boys tend to bully girls (Madigan 2002). In Madigan's 2002 qualitative study of Latina students in special education programmes, she found that girls 'described the distractions from male peers as menacing and a source of frustration' (96). In addition, girls reported that they felt the need to 'defend themselves' against the boys in programmes where they were clearly outnumbered. Madigan's research further suggests that this hostile environment may warrant exploration of single-sex environments for girls identified with disabilities.

Experiences such as these, from sex-stereotyped training to the threat of sexual harassment, are indicators that the plight of the girl in special education is a serious one, exacerbated by her gender, though very little attention is being paid. Neglect to attend to these issues has resulted in significantly negative outcomes for girls who receive special education services as well as for those who should but do not.

Outcomes for girls

This third major category of literature examines the outcomes for girls, in particular those not identified (or identified later as young adults) for special education services. As indicated earlier, an unidentified disability can lead to dire outcomes for girls. Girls with undiagnosed learning disabilities are more likely to drop out of school, face teenage pregnancy, and a lifetime of poverty and public assistance. Indeed, lack of proper identification can have effects that reach far beyond the school-age years of young women and have a lasting impact on society as well. Much of the literature in this category is drawn from research on populations of grown women who were found to have an undiagnosed learning disability.

Two key studies find that women with unidentified disabilities were more likely to become teenage mothers and leave school without graduating. Rauch-Elnekave (1994) in her study of teenage mothers and CAT scores (California Achievement Test) found that 56% of them were one or two years below grade level in Total Reading and Total Language. This finding prompted Rauch-Elnekave to conclude that 'unidentified and untreated learning difficulties may be a factor that is common both to becoming pregnant ... and of dropping out of school' (102). In another study – the Twentieth Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Act – parents reported that 23% of girls with disabilities leave school because of marriage or parenthood, compared with only 1% of male dropouts (US Department of Education 2000).

Further studies highlight the prevalence of women with unidentified and untreated learning disabilities who are more likely to experience unemployment, under-employment and dependence

on state welfare programmes (AAUW 2008; Froschl, Rubin, and Sprung 1999; Young, Kim, and Gerber 1999). In one study of the Washington JOBS programme (Giovengo, Young, and Moore 1997), the rate of previous non-diagnosis of LD for females who were identified *during* the course of the programme was 66%. In other words, two-thirds of women in the study had disabilities that had not been identified while they were in the school system. Moreover, further studies highlight the disparities between women and men with disabilities who attempt to enter the workforce. Reder and Vogel (1997) report that while 50% of men identified with LD were found to be employed, only 25% of females achieved employment. Of those persons with disabilities who were employed, a gender disparity in wages was found, with the mean weekly income of males at \$528 versus \$278 for females (Reder and Vogel 1997). This gender gap in wages may partly explain why women with a disability are more likely to live in poverty than men with a disability (AAUW 2008), and why women identified with LD in particular are linked to a 'far higher rate of use of public assistance and welfare programmes' (Young, Kim, and Gerber 1999, 112).

These studies speak once again to the issue of gender imbalance in students identified with disabilities. They further illustrate the crucial point that rather than being less likely than boys to have disabilities, girls are less likely to be identified in time for successful intervention.

Implications

As stated at the outset, the lack of attention to gender and disability – as well as multiple intersectionalities – is a major weakness of the US literature. As Mertens (2007) notes, 'quite often in research in the [US] disability community, gender is not even included as an important dimension of diversity' (584). This study seems to suggest several implications for theory, policy and practice, as well as avenues for further research.

While the US literature clearly documents a gender imbalance in students identified for special education programmes, there has been a distinct lack of theorising about gender and disability. US researchers would do well to follow the lead of Benjamin (2003, 2002, 2001) in the UK who has begun to theorise femininity, masculinity and disability. This work highlights how disability and gender are socially constructed, and how these two positions may impact on the referral and identification process. Failure to address the theory undergirding this salient intersectionality will perpetuate the gender imbalance in students receiving services.

In addition to gender and disability, more attention to multiple intersectionalities such as race/ethnicity and social class is needed. Though some US studies have attended to one intersection, for example, race and disability, Gerschel argues (2005, 95) 'for the parents and children for whom ethnicity, gender, social class or SEN [special education needs] interact, these factors cannot be separated'. Indeed, one's learning may be influenced by multiple factors. To that end, theoretical frameworks must be developed to address the multiple intersectionalities that students with disabilities may embody.

Intersectionality applies to policy and practice as well. Clearly, there is a need for feminists and disability rights groups to work together. Their mostly separate agendas have resulted in both areas being marginalised as special interest groups. Furthermore, policy-makers need to move beyond simply documenting the low numbers of girls and turn their attention to the gendered referral process and flawed evaluation instruments. The fact that some girls with special education needs are going without much-needed services – which come with federally allocated funds – is a crucial policy issue.

Interrogating the process by which students are identified for special education services will require several things to happen. First, practitioners must acknowledge that the process itself is gendered. As Benjamin (2003) notes, 'the processes of SEN assessment, designation and provision cannot be considered to be gender-neutral' (100). Next, the limitations of a purely behavioural

approach that under-identifies girls must be addressed. Evaluation instruments should be tested for gender – as well as racial or cultural – bias, and recalibrated to capture students who are not exhibiting typically male behaviour. Once new assessments are in place, teacher training on how to better identify and refer girls with potential disabilities is needed. More accurate assessment systems will allow for earlier identification and intervention for girls who may need these programmes and services.

Lastly, the gender climate of special education programmes needs to be further examined for violations of Title IX as the girls who are receiving special education services often face sex-stereotyped vocational training as well as sexual harassment in their male-dominated programmes. Both are illegal. Anecdotal evidence suggests that because of the often aggressive atmosphere of these *de facto* single-sex programmes, some teachers are reluctant to refer girls for special education services. While teachers may feel it is important to protect girls from bullying or harassment, the consequences are severe for girls who are not referred for – and consequently do not receive – the appropriate special education services. As noted earlier, girls who do not receive these services face the possibilities of dropping out of school, poverty and public assistance.

Future research

Clearly, the significant gender imbalance in US special education programmes and the likely bias in referral and evaluation processes call for immediate action. Though the possibilities for research are infinite, we prioritise them into what we see as the most urgent areas of study. Future studies need to address five key areas:

- The multiple intersectionalities of gender, disability, race and social class;
- Gender bias in the referral and evaluation process for students suspected of having disabilities;
- The educational climate for females in male-dominated special education programmes;
- The experiences of homosexual and transgender students in special education programmes; and
- The possibility of single-sex programmes for students with disabilities.

With the modifications to Title IX issued in fall 2006, gender is once again on the national radar in the US. In part, the new regulations now permit single-sex classes in public schools. Though obviously neither a quick fix nor a long-term panacea for gender discrimination in special education programmes, single-sex classes should be explored as one possibility. Will these classes be sites for female emancipation or will they reify sex-stereotyped vocational education? Time and research will tell.

Notes

1. New regulations to Title IX were issued by the Office of Civil Rights in October 2006. In part, they now permit single-sex classrooms in public schools for the purposes of providing diverse educational opportunities and meeting the particular, identified educational needs of its students. The implications of this provision are explored in the ‘Future research’ section of this paper.

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