

Neurological Minorities and the Bigotry of Normal

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BELLOWS FALLS, VERMONT, UNITED STATES, April 8, 2018

/EINPresswire.com/ -- I LIVE IN FEAR. I have learned over 50 years as a neurological minority that my best hope of survival depends on my ability to pretend to be something I am not, to hide my nature, to pass as “normal.”

In first grade I was diagnosed with dyslexia and hyperactivity, and I have lived my life in the shadow of that diagnosis. Even though I have taught at the college level for decades, published articles and books, and even acquired positions of moderate importance in academia, I continually find my work life at the mercy of people who confuse their inherent neurological privilege with superior merit.



I use the term “neurological minority” to describe a collection of people whose processing profile displays significant differences from the neurotypical, such that it would receive a diagnosis — i.e., learning disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism spectrum disorders. The emerging field of neuropsychology suggests that these profiles, traditionally considered disabilities, actually represent the diversity of neurological processing styles.

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Ben Mitchell leads a transition program for “at-risk” high school students

NOW, I WANT to be clear. This is not just a discussion within the “disability vs. difference” debate, for both of those concepts single out the individual as somehow different, not normal. Because we are disabled or different, we are subject to the tolerance and generosity of the neurotypical community. It is true that on a neurological level there is something different going on; nevertheless, each of these subgroups, in

fact, shares its characteristics with large groups of people across the traditional cultural lines of ethnicity, race, class, religion.

Because, these atypical characteristics are genetic, I would suggest the term “neurological minority” is, in fact, a much more accurate description. The Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity states that 20 percent of the population struggles with reading disabilities. The Centers For Disease Control says 11 percent of children are diagnosed with ADHD. Furthermore, The CDC reports that 2 percent of the population falls into the category of autism spectrum disorders - a number that grows as more educators understand the profile.

Furthermore, each Special Ed student cost three times as much to educate in the current system: 30% of the population needs something different from a system under pressure to keep that number below 13%. Nationwide, school budgets are struggling under this antiquated paradigm. I say the problem is not one of budgeting, but one of pedagogical assumption: as a culture, we have wrongly predicted the percentage of students who learn in the traditional manner. As a result we cripple local budgets for a system that irreparably damages the people we claim to help.

Harvard University’s Implicit Association Test (IAT) demonstrates that 75 percent of the population has an implicit bias against people with disabilities. Well meaning educators perpetuate a system of “targeting the weak.” People with reading disabilities are targeted for their reading speed or lack of fluency. People from the ADHD community are targeted for their disorganization and struggles with time management. People from the ASD community, however, are the most likely to be targeted. When you struggle with social pragmatics or processing speed, you’re at the mercy of every fool with even a minimal level of social status.

So we systematically humiliate, degrade and strip children of their humanity. Because neurological minorities have no choice but seek the support of “specialists,” we are subjected to a systematic destruction of our sense of self. Before a student can be helped, it must first acknowledge the need for help. Only after we have accepted our status as “broken,” as “second class,” will teachers shower upon us the benefits of their rudimentary dictionary skills.

FRANKLY, I’m astonished by the prevalence of prejudice in the field of education: how can a well-educated professor who would never tolerate the targeting of individuals based on other minority characteristics — religion, race, ethnicity — feel so comfortable humiliating an ADHD student for being disorganized?

ADD TO THIS the statistical prevalence of innovation and ingenuity within these minority populations, and the plot turns even more sinister. As cited last year in the Harvard Business Review, many atypicals often seek new ways to do things, becoming agents of innovation: indeed, history is shaped by gifted thinkers who struggled in school. Leonardo da Vinci, Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein — all stand as examples of atypicals who, frustrated by traditional systems, sought alternatives and reshaped the world’s understanding. Cleverness, ingenuity, reflection on existing systems — these are also traits that make one more likely to be targeted.

When you construct your sense of self from the ease with which you can master existing systems, people who challenge those systems are terribly inconvenient. Rather than examine the shortcomings of those systems, it becomes existentially necessary to target those agents of change — and we are such easy targets.

AFTER NEARLY 30 years teaching atypical learners, I have come to hold deeply mixed feelings about the field of education. Neurological minorities are seventy percent at risk for addiction, mental illness, incarceration, homelessness. As we systematically disenfranchise 20 to 30 percent of the population, we bolster the ranks of an underclass of thieves, drug dealers, and internet trolls: intelligent, capable people who do not see any point in trying to participate in “normal” society. We have created a system of special education that is, for all intents and purposes, a life sentence.

Just as history has been shaped by the positive accomplishments of atypical people who struggled in school, so, too, is history shaped by smart, charismatic figures who rise to power to exact revenge against a society that could not see their value. How often they are bolstered by large portions of the population who share in their resentment. Until the field of education catches up with the science, neurological minorities will spend their lives either struggling to become, or recoiling in frustration from the futility of trying to become, "normal."

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