

Reflections on Theory and Audience in Doctoral Research

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In this reflection, the author explores the progression through which she incorporated theory into the dissertation writing process. She explains her movement from data gathering to contextualizing dissertation findings via audience reaction to an early draft and the subsequent use of theory. Theory assisted her in crafting recommendations for social justice in educational policy.

The emphasis in my doctoral program on rigorously engaging social theory gradually took root in me and became a part of my research ‘habitus.’ This involved not just theory for theory’s sake, but theory in the service of social change and social justice. We were being prepared to apply theory in ways that helped us analyze some of the most troubling issues in urban education—such as the school-to-prison pipeline, the unfair treatment of immigrant students, and the gross maldistribution of material resources to city schools (Anyon, 2009).

Early on in my doctoral studies, radical critiques of urban education had captured my imagination. Reading Sally Tomlinson (1995) describe that in New York City, “the first special [education] classroom in 1899 was not grounded in any educational theory, but was simply meant to contain ‘the odds and ends of a large school...over-aged children, so-called naughty children, dull and stupid children’” resonated deeply with my own research interests about how special education functions sociologically. Soon I discovered that Lev Vygotsky offered a framework into which I could insert what I intuitively knew, that students with intellectual disabilities have something to share and to teach, when cognition is understood as a social event (John-Steiner and Mahn, 1996). These two examples among many demonstrated how theory could challenge practice and prepare me for my dissertation.

The dissertation research I pursued explored how socioeconomic status and disability shape the academic experience of New York City college students with learning disabilities (LD). Despite laws and policies designed to provide them with reasonable accommodations, college students with disabilities do not attain higher education at rates equal to their nondisabled peers (NCES, 2000). My mixed methods study examined policies, practices and perceptions at four-year institutions in New York City, and explored how the predominant socioeconomic status (SES) of students at each school affects their experience as college students. My research questions were two-fold. First, I asked whether federal policies with regard to students with learning disabilities are implemented differently in institutions of higher education in New York

City with different socioeconomic class populations. If so, how? Second, I asked whether variance in policy implementation and student body social class impacts the college experience of students with learning disabilities. If it did, how?

While I perused various theoretical lenses as I prepared my literature reviews and critiques (e.g., Disability Studies, Bourdieuan habitus, and Queer Legal Theory), I ultimately focused on Political Economy and Meritocracy as theoretical lenses. Political economy provided a compelling context for understanding the socioeconomic and legal boundaries shaping the intersections of social class, higher education, and disability. And Jerome Karabel's (2005) framework of meritocracy took up questions of who belongs in college and whether the onus is on students or institutions to overcome disadvantages. Examining my data with these theories in mind contributed new, critical insights to my analysis.

But while I was confident in my theoretical framework, I was unsure about how and where to bring theory into the writing process. I dove into the more concrete world of data collection. First, I used a federal database to generate descriptive and inferential statistics for my sample of 44 baccalaureate-granting colleges in New York City. Administrative data included enrollment and percentages of students with disabilities, and I used Pell grants held by first-time, full-time students as a key indicator for socioeconomic status. In a city with huge income gaps (Blodget, 2006) the stark disparities within higher education in New York City were not surprising. The range included 94 percent of students receiving Pell monies at the highest-need college, while only 11 percent of students received Pell at the lowest-need college. According to the data for the city, college students with disabilities were more likely to attend the city's *high*-SES schools.

Next, I conducted a survey with Disability Services staff from the 44 colleges and analyzed the data quantitatively and qualitatively. Survey results depicted a disability services system of dedicated staff across the city who provided students with accommodations beyond what is reasonable to the extent they were able, as determined by college funding and resources. Lastly, I interviewed a subset of these staff, and, also students with learning disabilities, from various SES school settings. Staff interviews revealed prominent themes. Parents and parent input were more than five times more likely to be discussed in interviews with staff at higher-SES colleges, for example. It emerged in interviews with students that external stress was a serious barrier for students at low-SES colleges. The experiences low-income students had at low SES colleges were clearly less robust and helpful than at the more affluent schools. I waded through hundreds of pages of figures, transcripts, codes and notes as I sought themes and sub-themes.

About half way through my dissertation writing, I presented some preliminary data from the study at an international disability conference. The audience, a mix of college administrators, disability services staff, self-advocates and parents, seemed interested in the research findings and asked engaging questions during the Q & A period. One mother asked, "So what I hear you saying is that my son is better off going to a private college than a public one?" I winced, knowing that hers was an unfortunate

but fair response to my raw data. As Disability Studies scholar Rosemarie Garland Thomson (2001) reminds us, "All representations have social and political consequences." I thought about my work within, and respect for, public higher education, which provides quality educational and disability services to thousands of students. I also thought of my doctoral advisor and her insistence on the importance of working seriously with theory, which I had momentarily set aside for the context of the conference's largely practitioner audience.

I realized that this response from my audience demanded a rethinking of my analyses. From an academic perspective, it seemed clear to me that my study aimed to describe the texture of *how* things happen for students, of how they actually live their way through college, and how colleges address the needs of students with learning disabilities. In the exchange with this mother, I realized in a new and important way that I owe it to the families who experience disability to be able to communicate my findings effectively and with nuance to a broad audience. The "So what?" question regarding my data loomed.

Around the same time, I read Eve Tuck's 2009 article in the *Harvard Educational Review*, "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities." Tuck, on faculty at the State University of New York at New Paltz, is a graduate of our doctoral program. While Tuck's own work is with indigenous peoples, her call for all social scientists to become accountable for the ways they conduct research, resonated with me. She asks that researchers, even those who operate 'benevolently,' consider that although they attempt to expose ongoing structural inequality, they ultimately leave the research participants in the same condition, with the same needs, as before the research. I feared that my presentation had left the audience with the possible finding that individual students with LD or who were from lower SES backgrounds were characterized by deficits.

In her article, Tuck calls for an epistemological shift to a framework of *desire*. She explains that "desire-based research frameworks are concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives," and emphasize "wisdom and hope" held by research participants (p. 416). I certainly had seen desire in the students I interviewed: desire for a good education, desire for a meaningful career, desire to not be reduced to one's disability label, desire to create a better life for one's children, and desire for a full social life. For these reasons, mixed method research was important to me: the multi-faceted data provided a multiplicity of ways to hear, collect, and share the complex stories of people in even more complicated college and urban environments. For Tuck, a litmus test is found in the question, "What can research really do to improve this situation?" (p.423). I worried whether my own research would make any difference in the lived experience of New York City college students with learning disabilities. And if not, had it been ethical to conduct this research at all? Tuck's challenge— a challenge reiterated by many of the students I interviewed— affects not just the means, but the ends of study. At the conclusion of one of my student interviews, the interviewee thanked me for choosing this topic. Another student asked, "Will it change the way college is?" Marissa, a student from a different

college, emphasized the importance of disseminating information on people with disabilities. She said,

There hasn't been anything out there that educates people and gives them the knowledge of what a learning disability consists of because once you tell somebody you have a learning disability, they think either you're slow or you're retarded, and it's not that. It's just that some people need more time than others to get things, but that does not mean that they can't do everything else normal. (M. Diaz, personal communication, April 13, 2010)

As I reviewed data such as these within the context of Eve Tuck's admonitions, I was humbled. I wanted my research to serve the individuals I chose to engage in this project. Could I imagine that my research might improve the situation of students with disabilities more broadly? I had hoped for it from the beginning. But these moments also reinforced for me that my choice to focus on the institution as my unit of analysis was the right one. In my study, deficits were attributed to systems, not people. I had no interest in stigmatizing students; rather, my research questions aimed to examine the way that colleges' policies and practices impact students' experiences.

I have been a classroom teacher, and interact consistently with college students in my present work as an administrator for The City University of New York. Supporting and interacting with them is a privilege and a thrill. I want all kinds of students to succeed in school and life, and I bristle at policies and rhetoric that seem to create barriers to this success.

Interviewing students for this project was difficult and remaining neutral had seemed daunting. How could I listen to students who were too afraid to request accommodations without coaxing them to advocate for themselves? How could I listen to students' self-doubt and hold back from reaffirming and encouraging them? With hundreds of pages of transcripts in front of me, I endeavored to use Tuck's framework of desire to present an adequately complex picture of subjects' lived lives.

As I grappled with these methodological choices, I attended a lecture by William Bowen about his recent collaboration *Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America's Public Universities*. Dr. Bowen, former President of both Princeton University and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, is a well-respected leader in higher educational circles. But his book's findings did not resonate for me with the experiences of the urban college students with whom I interact daily. While factors such as student employment may increase time-to-degree, a student's need to work isn't typically based on desires for consumptive goods like flat-screen TVs, as Bowen suggests, but on financing her education while supporting self and family. As Bowen advocated for the need to raise expectations so that underrepresented students attend more competitive colleges, I kept thinking about the responsibility of colleges to educate students well and help them persist, regardless of the campus they attend.

This question of access—and the growing belief and practice that higher education can be accessible to everyone—is only viable if all kinds of students are

supported across institutions of higher education. This is especially true for students with disabilities. As Garland Thompson (2001) asserts, "Imagining disability as ordinary, as the typical rather than the atypical human experience, can promote practices of equality and inclusion that begin to fulfill the promise of a democratic order." This democratic order is fundamentally challenged by the socioeconomic realities that face many of the students I interviewed and with whom I work.

So I responded to my data and these voices by writing my way through theory, employing political economy and interrogating meritocracy, to answer my research questions while giving shape to these broader concerns. Political economy was embedded within my findings: the distribution of economic resources impacts every facet of disability service provision and use. In my study, differences in the distribution of material resources affected where students go to college, how long it takes them to finish, the environment in which they live, whether and how they advocate for themselves, and the support services available to them. On an institutional level, these differences also affected tuition costs, university budgets, and the resources available to Disability Services Officers.

But these realities of our political economy are too often disguised and elided by a focus on *meritocracy* (Karabel, 2005). Student achievement or failure is rhetorically attributed to individual attributes—students being prepared (or not) for college, working hard (or not) in college, or deserving to be (or not to be) enrolled in college in the first place. Problematizing the notion of meritocracy created space for conceptualizing institutional shortcomings at the government or college level, instead of assigning deficiencies to individual students. Rosenbaum and colleagues (2006), for example, demonstrate how community colleges hinder student retention through hurdles like bureaucratic complexity, numerous sometimes conflicting options, and lack of counseling.

Indeed, Karabel (2005) challenges us to consider the social admiration we have for those who attend Ivy League institutions, when history demonstrates the bias in admissions for students with social and class advantages. As one recent study of legacy admissions at 30 highly-selective colleges revealed, a high school student applying to a parent's alma mater was seven times more likely to be admitted (Lewin, 2011).

Wrangling with these ideas about alleged meritocracy helped me shift focus from the tired refrain of 'My students aren't college ready' to formulate clear expectations for colleges to meet student needs. The aim of my theory work was to help me to identify and craft recommendations for colleges to better recognize and amend the practices that privilege some groups of students and not others. As Anyon points out, "we are not after theory for theory's sake. We expect social products" (2009, p.5).

In the end, my choice and use of theory felt intensely personal and ethical. Without the audience member who found deficits in my presentation of data about low-SES students, and without my theoretical underpinnings, I would not have moved my research beyond the surface 'failures to succeed' of low-income students. Renewed by Tuck, I was able to grapple with theory in a way that allowed me to meaningfully

contextualize my data in ways that challenged institutions to be more useful to students. The explicit use of my theoretical frameworks enabled me to express values I believe in while illustrating how they were substantiated by data. I had lived with this study for two years, and my theory work seemed as much to me an expression of who I was as a researcher as it did an integral dimension of my dissertation product.

In the last chapter of my dissertation, I provided recommendations for both paradigm and policy shifts as contributions to the efforts toward more democratic schools and communities. My theory influenced these, as each recommendation is framed as the responsibility of the college. Since completing my dissertation, I have been able to pursue these recommendations in my work at CUNY with local colleges. Sound methodology resulted in these findings and recommendations, but it was theory that enabled me to thread these pieces together, give them context, and ultimately, social impact.

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