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Casper the Friendly Student?: A Brief Critical Analysis of Ryan Hourigan's article "The Invisible Student: Understanding Social Identity Construction within Performing Ensembles

In Ryan Hourigan's article "The Invisible Student: Understanding Social Identity Construction within Performing Ensembles" he offers many suggestions to how instructors can improve inclusive learning environments. Out of the many points that Hourigan presents, I think that that the most successful is on page 36 under "First-Day Suggestions." Hourigan suggests introducing something like a big brother, big sister program where a freshman student is paired with a senior student. Speaking from experience, it is beneficial to hear from a mentor who has gone through similar experiences and has a grasp on the expectations of music performance and how to balance these expectations with academic duties, especially someone who is a fellow student.

I like the suggestion of a "buddy-system" on page 37 but its important to consider that the students may feel even more ostracized to be a part of an implemented system that would be more recognizable in primary grades than intermediate ones. What I would suggest instead is doing something that Hourigan has already mentioned regarding travel and rooming arrangements. As an educator seeking to build an inclusive environment, I would assign groups (either duos, trios etc.) rather than having the students have to a) find a partner which could re-introduce anxiety and isolation and b) feel socially displaced by using a system more

practical for younger students. Implementing a buddy system also contradicts a previous point that Hourigan makes in the article where he states that helping an isolated child "should be a team approach" (35) rather than holding their peers accountable.

While I agree with majority of the topics discussed in the article, one that I find lacks crucial dialogue is the section titled "Critical Social Issues." The introduction to this article states that Jason is "[suffering] from the initial stages of depression and is alone and isolated much of the time" (37). What the article is missing, however, is any follow up regarding Jason's budding mental health concerns. It is best to start treatment at the initial sign of illness, physical or mental, in order for the greatest success and recovery of an individual. Whether or not Jason is openly expressing his feelings of depression and seeking help, it is still important to recognize the signs and symptoms of a potential mental illness and to refer the individual to a trained professional as soon as possible (given the willingness of the at risk individual). This can obviously be easier said than done, which is why communication with a student who is constantly alone and isolated is so crucial when ensuring their mental well-being.

My final comment is that I would disagree with labeling a student as "invisible" who is isolated and struggling socially. This type of language does nothing to benefit –in fact it hinders- the student, nor does it offer any clarification to helping the type of student who could be seen as one who is simply isolated and struggling with a social identity. We are initiating the process of social de-construction (our opposite goal) by attributing a student as being "invisible." Its not that the student is invisible and cannot be physically seen, the student is still present regardless of their social presence within the class. Since when did students become ghosts?

Work Cited

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Disability or just a Difference?: Creating an inclusive Environment in Drew Serres'

article Think Everything's "Normal?" Then It's Time to Reconsider and Consider a New

Narrative of Disability

One of the quotes that struck me in the article was under the subtitle "Language" where

Serres quotes Neil Marcus, "Disability is not a brave struggle, or 'courage in the face of

adversity.' Disability is an art. It's an ingenious way to live." After working with individuals

who have a disability for seven years now, it is easy to recognize the refreshingly beautiful

way that these individuals approach life. One could almost compare their worldly views as

philosophy, an art of dealing with life in the most unique way (I am not saying that all people

with a disability think and act in this same artistic way, but that each has their own artistically

beautiful way). I have learned so many different perspectives from people who have

disabilities that throughout my time supporting them, I have changed the way that I approach

things in my own life. I have never met someone with a disability who views themselves as

less or abnormal because of their disability. Many see it as a strength and an advantage being

able to think, act, and function in a different way that the "normal" person might.

That brings me to my next point of what is "normal?" What does it mean to be normal?

What defines normalcy, what does normalcy look like, but most importantly, does normalcy

even exist? I argue that no, there is no such thing as being "normal." Human beings are so

different and are constantly changing with each and every human contact and experience in

life. Every single person has different, hobbies, habits, styles, expressions, languages, impairments, diseases, medical conditions, careers, familial connections, appearances, diets, nationalities, religions and beliefs, sexual orientation etc. the possibilities are eclectic and endless. How are we possibly able to decide as a human race what is considered to be normal and expected? The short answer is, we can't. We are constantly evolving and transitioning from one point to another. The idealized subject that is completely normal does not exist. So why do we continue to view individuals who have a disability as abnormal? If normalcy does not exist, should we even label people as having a disability? These are all critical questions that we should be asking each other, even if they don't make an immediate difference. We should recognize how diverse the human race is and how conscious we should be of supporting rather than excluding these differences.

Work Cited

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