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Trust Me on This

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Abstract

Successful completion of Algebra I is essential for all students in the United States, and is a high-stakes, gatekeeper course. However, a substantial proportion of students from marginalized groups do not gain access to Algebra I until much later in their academic careers than their middle-class, White, English-speaking, fully able peers. This is not only an issue of tracking individual students, but is also indicative of a more profound, institutionalized set of practices. Using a purposive sample, this research highlights the ways middle school mathematics teachers make tracking and student-placement decisions. Teachers in this qualitative research (n=10) reported a heavy reliance on their own omniscience.

Introduction

Is our professional practice as teachers an art, or a science? Is it perhaps some mysterious mix or combination of the two? In what ways might this alchemy have life-long effects upon our students? In this research, I explore this tension between “gut feelings” about a key educational decision and the influence of data in making recommendations related to when middle-level students take Algebra I.

Successful completion Algebra I is of growing importance in the trajectory of any student’s school career, as well as in life beyond K-12 education. Within the U.S. mathematics education community, Algebra I is well understood to be a gatekeeper course, in that successful completion of Algebra I is essential for success in adulthood (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, 1998). This applies not only to students seeking entrance to college (as in the past), but is also true for any high school graduates who wish to enter the workforce (American College Test, 2006). Algebra is not only the foundation for all further study of mathematics, but also an excellent proving ground for abstract thinking and reasoning, skills that are of value in nearly every facet of life.

Access to algebra has even been labeled a civil rights issue. As Moses and Cobb (2001) explained, “...The most urgent social issue affecting poor people and people of color is economic access. In today’s world, economic access and full citizenship depend crucially on math and science literacy” (p. 5). They went on to say, “...People who don’t have it [successful completion of Algebra I] are like the people who couldn’t read and write in the industrial age” (p. 14). The past president of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, Cathy Seeley, built on this idea in one of her newsletters:

“Expecting all students to complete four years of high school mathematics that begins with this gatekeeper course [Algebra] is not only a good idea, but is also our moral and ethical responsibility” (2005, p. 2). Therefore, for school administrators and teachers to counsel students of color, English language learners, students who qualify for free and reduced-price meals, and students identified with learning disabilities away from this goal is to deny them the access to the lifetime of opportunities afforded to middle-class, White, able, heritage speakers of English. This situation further reproduces existing social stratifications in U.S. culture.

In tandem with this rise in the importance of successful completion of Algebra I is the issue of shifting demographics in the United States. The composition of the population of the United States is changing, and this is reflected in our schools. As the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2007a), confirmed, “The U.S. population has become more diverse over the past two decades as minority population groups have increased more rapidly than the White population” (p. 1). Further, the same NCES report stated that, as of 1999, Latinos surpassed African Americans as the largest minority group in the United States, with the U.S. Latino population increasing 192% between 1980 and 2005. During the same 25-year span, the White population in the United States increased by only 10%, and the African American population grew by 39%. The NCES (2007b) predicts the minority population of the U.S. will continue to grow and will increase an additional 32% by the year 2020.

Methodology

We know that some students may enter Algebra I as early as grade 5, while others may not gain access until 9th or 10th grade, and we know that those entering earliest tend to be White, English-speaking, and generally privileged. So this brings us to the question: How are decisions being made as to which students may proceed into Algebra 1, and at what points in their academic careers? What primary tools or criteria are being used to make these life-impacting decisions? These questions lie at the center of this study, and in an effort to begin to articulate some of the nuances around it, I interviewed 10 middle school mathematics teachers, employed in a large, urban public school system, who were involved in making mathematics course placement recommendations (and/ or decisions) for the middle school students in their schools. This research focuses on the ways these teachers explain, defend, and justify their decisions. For the purposes of this article, all names and locations have been fictionalized, and I have limited my description to just three participants.

The Primary Finding: Omniscience or “A gut feeling”

Again, how do the middle school mathematics teachers in this study view their own roles in the process of educating students? All teachers in this research (10 middle-school mathematics teachers) expressed commitment to their students and their professions, and most (8 of 10) expressed a profound desire to continue to learn and grow. However, the most frequently occurring pronounced theme expressed by the secondary mathematics teachers who participated in this study was one of being “all knowing”—or in other words, omniscience. Although seven of the informants suggested that they were “just” teachers, using language to humble themselves, nine chose to

assert their personal senses of enlightened wisdom, awareness, and complete understanding of the students in their care. With varying degrees of concern and regard, participants with this stance of omniscience expressed confidence in their personal, subjective evaluations of each student. As Tyack and Hasnot (as cited in Brantlinger, 2003) suggested, “A tacit consensus exists among educators, scholars, and elites that only expert knowledge is legitimate” (p. 10).

This common theme of omniscience, which includes the shifting of focus away from students outside the mainstream, is not necessarily indicative of inherently weak, unskilled, uncaring, or unsuccessful teachers. Rather, those educators espousing an omniscient perspective believe they are acting in ways that benefit the learners in their care, and see themselves as doing what is in the best interests of each learner. Through their individual cultural conditioning and the development of their unique perspectives on education (shaped by their individual life experiences as White English speakers), those teachers with an omniscient sense believe they are acting as advocates rather than as oppressors. In writing about teachers who hold limited or limiting beliefs about their students, Delpit (1995) pointed out that these educators “probably are not bad people. They do not wish to damage children; indeed, they likely see themselves as wanting to help. Yet they are totally unable to perceive those different from themselves except through their own culturally clouded vision” (p. xxiv).

I posit that omniscience, when exercised by middle schools mathematics teachers who abide by the traditional teaching philosophy of making course placement recommendations for their students, may be considered a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991) when teachers place students into the lowest mathematics tracks available. In relying upon a sense of omniscience, secondary mathematics teachers, with their positions of power, use this authority to change the educational paths (and by extension, change the lives) of their students.

For several of the middle school mathematics educators in this study, the idea that particular students—students from outside the mainstream—should be in more advanced mathematics classes was an idea that was viewed as “seemingly irreconcilable.” Bruner (1990) made connections to this idea of omniscience in his discussion of the ways narratives within cultures are constructed. He stated, “An obvious premise of our folk psychology ... is that people have beliefs and desires: we *believe* that the world is organized in certain ways, that we *want* certain things, that some things *matter* more than others, and so on” (p. 39). Building on this idea, he went on to posit, “We believe, moreover, that our beliefs should cohere in some way, that people should not believe (or want) seemingly irreconcilable things” (p. 39). In this way, participants worked to “preserve the core”—that is, they worked to maintain the status quo by keeping students the least privileged statuses (students of color, English learners, students receiving special education services) in the lowest level mathematics courses.

In developing these omniscient teaching views, participants typically expounded at length about examples of their views of what they considered “normal” students—that is, students fitting into the mainstream majority--sometimes including their own

biological children. For example, their stories frequently began with words like, “this one student” or “my daughter” or “this really bright kid.” These stories fit into what Bruner (1990) described as the way “human beings, in interacting with one another, form a sense of the canonical and ordinary as a background against which to interpret and give narrative meaning to breaches in and deviations from ‘normal’ states of the human condition” (p. 67). These stories of “normal” students emerged as participants were asked about students from outside the mainstream. It was challenging to keep the focus on marginalized students, because the participants tended to shift the conversation back to descriptions and tales of “normal” students.

The nine secondary mathematics teachers in this study who expressed a sense of omniscience assigned power for all decision making with themselves or with other school-based teachers. The omniscient beliefs of traditional middle school mathematics teachers seem to lead them to believe they were able to see and evaluate situations from an objective standpoint, as the situations truly exist, with no admission or acknowledgement of other ways of seeing, knowing, or believing. This stance is most typified by educators with an unwavering sense of certainty in their own opinions about students—with the attitude that these opinions were, in fact, facts.

The middle school mathematics teachers in this study expressed, described, and qualified their omniscient teaching philosophies and views in several ways, two of which I will describe here: (a) the “gut feeling”; (b) idiosyncratic and unwritten “rules” for students.

The Omniscient’s “Gut Feeling”

Nine of ten participants, using assertive language and convincing tone, explicitly expressed that they experienced or knew of other teachers who had a “gut feeling” or a sense “in [their] heart” about which mathematics courses were most appropriate for each student and which students were best suited for each course. These participants strongly believed that their intuition and professional background qualified them to make these critical student placement decisions without needing to see test scores or grades.

When explaining their thinking using these idioms, the mathematics teachers in this study frequently supplemented their assertions with body language by pressing their abdomens when mentioning a gut feeling, or tapping their chests when speaking of a sense in their hearts. However, when expressing this intuitive form of knowing, this bodily omniscience, participants rarely offered quantifiable evidence to support their assertions. The simple act of “intuitive knowledge,” buoyed by each individual’s position of power as a teacher, was offered as enough of a solid basis for making course and placement recommendations, and it did not require additional documentation, evidence, or proof. The existence of this allegedly keen intuition was sufficient evidence for participants to speak with great conviction about which courses were most appropriate for each student.

Randall. The participant most strongly expressing omniscience through a “gut feeling” was Randall. After several decades of working in a field unrelated to education, Randall earned a Master of Science in education and entered the teaching profession

relatively late in life. At the time of these interviews, Randall had been a middle school mathematics teacher for eight years.

Randall's strong conviction that his own ideas and intuitions about student course recommendations were right and correct was the most extreme among the participants in this research. He strongly emphasized his use of student assessment and grading during our conversations. In addition, as supporting evidence to his commitment to just and objective teaching, he commented that he had developed an innovative grading system that is both "accurate" and "fair." In discussing the grading system, he also expressed, at great length, how much his own grading is based on what he referred to as an intuitive "understanding" of his students. Randall summed it up by saying, "You just *know*," and expanded this sentiment further in stating, "I know the students better than any test can tell." As it turned out, those recommended by Randall to proceed to Algebra I were disproportionately White and monolingual-English.

This perspective, this idea that "you just know" what is "best" for students, is echoed in the work of Brantlinger (2003), when discussing how those with elevated status (i.e., those with historically privileged identities, like teachers) construct "ideological tales" to mask or "divert attention" from their own complicit roles in maintaining institutionalized hierarchies. Brantlinger stated, "Subordinates are not asked how they feel about segregated or lesser status nor are they seriously included in decisions that affect them. It is implied that remedies benefit them or the whole society" (p. 9).

Randall, with his strong reliance on his gut feeling, frequently linked his impressions of observed classroom behavior to his beliefs on the students' academic readiness for more difficult course work. In talking about his decision-making process in making course recommendations for students, Randall said,

I'm also, in the back of my mind, thinking behavior as part of that, attendance as part of that, and ah, that's ... that's ... ah ... where it's more of an art than a science. But, ah, if I know I have a kid that's screwing around in class and doesn't get his homework done

This trailing off, which was followed by a shrug, was a strong statement about the unbreakable link, to Randall, between his interpretation of student behavior and readiness for academic challenges. In his thinking, activities considered to be "screwing around," (meaning "to waste time") were not afforded careful scrutiny, and failure to complete homework was not probed, but rather simply taken as sufficient evidence of lower ability or deserving of few opportunities. Randall's personal, intuitive, gut feeling led the way.

Christine. Like Randall, Christine also followed her "omniscient gut feeling" in making crucial placement recommendations for her students. When asked about how she makes her course placement recommendations, Christine offered this example, wherein she described a student's reaction to getting a poor grade. Christine explained that she offered all students an opportunity to do "test corrections." This means that

after each test, the students may choose to review their errors and make corrections for partial credit. She said,

A kid who does test corrections is saying, “Hey, I have some incentive to do better. I can still improve.” Whereas a kid who sees that grade and says, “I’m done!” may, so... It’s sort of those kinds of things, and that’s, sort of the gut instinct that, that goes into it a lot of times. It’s, you know.

Christine took this willingness to complete test corrections at face value and did not probe further into why a student may or may not have chosen to participate. No acknowledgement of other factors (fatigue, frustration, lack of interest, distraction, etc.) that might cause students to avoid or decline participation in test corrections was mentioned.

Christine built on this initial example, explaining how she incorporated it (and similar anecdotal examples) into making mathematics course recommendations for her students. She explained, “I almost can’t even say, for some kids, why I make the decision. I just, when I think about them, I say, ‘Yeah, that’s somebody who should be going to Algebra.’” Similar to Randall, the students she recommended for Algebra I were disproportionately White and monolingual-English speaking.

Taking this “omniscient gut feeling” further, Christine explained that when considering students for promotion to the more advanced levels of mathematics, she strongly considers,

..their interest in math and so that, that I think probably really sort of plays into the gut instinct. You know, there are kids who get excited; like the other day, we were doing angle relationships, and there were kids who looked at the two parallel lines cut by a transversal, and they were all excited about the fact that it was really a puzzle, you know? So I look at those kinds of activities, you know? Does this kid get excited about that, or are they like, “Oh, really? When am I gonna be done?”

Here, Christine seems to equate her perception of enthusiasm for the subject matter with a readiness for further study. Because she is a mathematician, perhaps she places additional value on students who express a similar eagerness for the content. Those students who express apparent boredom, disinterest, or a lackadaisical attitude are not considered ready for promotion, regardless of their demonstrated mastery of the content.

Idiosyncratic and Unwritten “Rules”

Another common theme emerged among the participants in the study, which was reference to a privileged style of discourse and a preferential way of “being.” Although each participant had a unique way of describing this, it was clearly the same general idea in each case, with those students deemed “not worthy” for promotion to be riddled with various undesirable characteristics, sometimes labeled as “attitude.” The middle school mathematics teachers in this study who expressed this form of omniscient thinking had a defined “good” and “bad” list of attributes, characteristics, and “objective”

indicators in mind, which, although consistent among all participants, were neither stated nor included in any school district policies or formal documents. In this way, using arbitrary, idiosyncratic, and unwritten “rules,” these educators expressing these perspectives used their positions of power in what could be described as tools of oppression. As Eagleton (as cited in Brantlinger, 2003) pointed out, “It is the oppressor’s privilege to decide what the oppressed should be” (p. 11).

Delpit (1995) has voiced perspectives on this idea, too, with regard to a privileged “way” of participating in the culture of power. She stated, “The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power” (p. 25). She continued, “This means that success in institutions—schools, workplaces, and so on—is predicated upon acquisition of the culture of those who are in power” (p. 25). These meshes neatly with the narratives constructed by the participants, who, in sum, said to students: Be like me.

Scott. Although Scott did not explicitly embrace or espouse the idea of omniscience, he indicated that he had a clear understanding of how an educator who espoused an omniscient philosophy could lend itself neatly to an idealized style of discourse or a preferred way of being among teachers. Although he did not use the words “omniscience” or “symbolic violence,” Scott described some ways secondary mathematics teachers enacted these ideas by, for example, retaining students simply because, in their opinion, these students either did not have or did not display the “preferred characteristics” of being able to learn or communicate in a certain way.

I asked Scott why teachers would want to hold students back or why they would want to limit opportunities for their students, and he explained that among teachers in his school district,

There are some long-held beliefs that some students aren’t ready for certain courses, even if they want to take them. They’re not cognitively ready, um, that they haven’t matured enough to reach such a high level of mathematics at that point.

I asked, “Do you think that’s true?”

Scott continued, “And that they need more time. I don’t. I do not. I think that, given the right situation and a teacher who understands different ways that students learn, any student can progress, and can reach a challenge.”

In continuing the conversation with Scott, I shared that some mathematics classroom teachers participating in this study had indicated that student behavior was a key factor in deciding whether to promote or slow down the progress of students. Scott replied,

You know, I think that’s a perfect example of what I was just talking about. They’re making decisions based on, I think, very faulty logic. A student may be disruptive and a behavior problem because they are bored, and if they got into a class where they were learning new material at a faster pace, many of those things would disappear. Or maybe if they were with a teacher who created a relationship with them, or could see past the occasional acting out, and understood that they

are eighth-graders, and they still have qualities of children, they could be very successful.

Scott built on this idea, giving an example from his own experience as a classroom teacher:

So, I think that's, you know, I, just in my own experience, the thing that I would hate the most is the teachers at the first day of school who would grab your class lists and say, "Oh, this one, oh he's a pain in the neck. Oh, she's terrible, she just, she, she just wants to sleep all the time." Don't—no. Don't tell me those things, 'cause they're probably not true. They might be true; they might have been true in your class, but I doubt I'm gonna have those issue in my class. Oftentimes the students that I would have the more difficulty being with would be, uh, in my classes, would be the ones who were very compliant and who were very quiet, who thought that they could just, as long as they stayed quiet, and compliant, then they would make it through somehow. Those are the ones that I would tend to disrupt and shake them up a little bit so that they would push themselves to achieve higher.

Unlike Christine and Randall, Scott promoted students to Algebra I in proportions that reflected the overall population of the school, with students of color and English learners appropriately represented.

Randall. Although the majority of participants, when speaking about their students, were careful in choosing their words, and seemed to exert great effort to avoid using language or sharing ideas that could be construed as biased in any way, Randall offered a different view. When asked for his thoughts as to why the highest tracks were primarily composed of White and Asian students, Randall replied,

How do you go about educating a student who will refuse to do all the work? And who will not listen to what's going on in class? You know, that is the age-old question—how do you educate them? I don't know. Well, it, but, I mean, there is, there is a secret code. It, if they do what White middle upper class and Asian students will do, chances are they will do much better in school! But if they are don't do it, or incapable of doing that, then, then it becomes a problem in the school. Um, and, how to get around that, I don't know.

What Randall expressed in this conversation was that for him, there is something that could be described as a "secret code," and in his thinking, this secret code is something students must learn, which involves learning to "act White." To paraphrase Randall, he said that if students would just learn to "act White," then they would be successful in his class. This blatant assimilationist agenda falls into the category Kubota (2004) would term *conservative multiculturalism*, in that Randall "overtly defends Eurocentric modes of thinking and educational practices" (p. 31). Randall affirms this, stating,

You have to understand the kind of person they are. Not just the person, but the student that she is. We do look at [state standardized test] scores, but I would place much more weight on what I know of the student.

In this research, I argue that conservative and traditional secondary mathematics teachers such as Randall, who are White, middle class, and English speaking, see the world from a position of power. Apfelbaum (as cited in Brantlinger, 2003) suggested that “dominant groups develop standards based on their own characteristics and customs and expect others to emulate their styles and assimilate to their customs whether it is feasible for them or productive to society” (p. 3). Randall, inspired by and based on his rigid views, has clearly decided which students are the “right kinds of kids” for the upper-level classes, and for him, it is those with the preferred (White) style of discourse and behavior.

These descriptions of effort, as perceived by some mathematics teachers, point toward a preferred “way of being” for students. In other words, students who appear to demonstrate specific behaviors—compliance, tenacity, willingness to review previous material—increase their chances of being viewed as showing good effort. Randall captures the subjectivity of this idea in his interpretation of the state standardized mathematics assessment.

One of the key strategies Randall described using when making his secondary mathematics placement recommendations involved an arbitrary score on the state standardized assessment for middle school students, which has a maximum score of 100. Although the official minimum passing score is 65 (which the state considered indicative of readiness for Algebra I), Randall chose to create his own interpretation of the assessment for these mathematics test scores. With the approval of his school-based mathematics department chair, Randall made the decision that only those secondary mathematics students who scored 80 or higher on the state standardized mathematics assessment would be enrolled in Algebra I—since he deemed these students “worthy” or “ready” in his opinion and in alignment with his “gut feeling.” As a result, any student with a score below 80 would be placed in the lower-level, Pre-Algebra course. This means that students with scores between 65 and 80—who had demonstrated mastery of the requisite eighth-grade mathematics content, but did not meet Randall’s elevated standard supported by his supervisor—would be denied access to Algebra I.

However, in spite of Randall’s stated confidence in his own personal “cut-off” score, he admitted there were times he bent his own rules. He described an example, explaining,

Now, I deviated from that because I know the students. For instance, I had one girl who doesn’t do real, real well on tests, but is very, very bright and ... and works her rear-end off ... is ... I mean ... the ideal student.

In probing further about this White, monolingual English-speaking, female eighth-grade mathematics student who fell below his arbitrary criteria for promotion, Randall revealed that he felt she should have been identified and that, according to his gut feeling, she should be promoted. Although Randall had attempted to establish some form of subjective measure of student mastery of content matter, this, too, was influenced by his omniscient interpretation of information.

Conclusion: The Problem of Omniscience in Middle-School Educators

The terms *omniscience* and *omniscient*, or rather, all-knowing, have traditionally been used within the context of theology, specifically in reference to a deity or deities. Many faith traditions hold that a higher power (God) is all-seeing and all-knowing, or omniscient. When used in the context of theology, the concept of omniscience evokes a sense of the absolute, and an omniscient deity is one that enjoys unconditional and unlimited access to universal truths, along with an infinite knowledge of past, present, and future. No domain or era is excluded, but rather, every knowable detail is included. Bourdieu (1991) speaks to this as well, calling it “the Oracle Effect” (p. 211).

In a parallel way, some contemporary, traditional, middle-school mathematics educators, too, may have the sense that they embody omniscience and are all-seeing and all-knowing with regard to the students in their care. Asserting great confidence and minimal modesty, these educators may embrace a traditional interpretation of schools and schooling, in that the teacher knows what is “best” for each learner. Dewey, as quoted in Chall (2002), highlighted this sense of omniscience in traditional teachers, stating, “The center of gravity is outside the child. It is in the teacher, the textbooks, anywhere and everywhere you please except in the immediate instincts and activities of the child himself” (p. 16). Chall quoted Dewey further, explaining a “traditional” model of education as “one of imposition from above and outside” (Chall, 2002, p. 17). While this may have been Dewey’s lament in 1900, this traditional, teacher-centered, rote-memorization model of imposition—and the imposition of omniscience—persists, particularly for those students from outside the mainstream, and is as exclusionary and silencing today as it was in Dewey’s time.

Freire (2002), too, alluded to this sense of omniscience in teachers in his description of the “pedagogy of the oppressed,” where the teacher is an uncritical performer, engaging in “banking education.” Freire described banking education as a system wherein “the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing” (p. 73). Freire went on to explain that the teacher who expresses loyalty to the banking model of education also “chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply,” (p. 73) and “chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it” (p. 73). The teacher, in other words, holds ultimate knowledge, and ultimate power to make decisions. The voices and perspectives of students are not considered, because in the view of an omniscient teacher, this would serve no purpose. An omniscient teacher does not require the input of students.

Within this teacher-centered, “all-knowing” framework of traditional banking education and symbolic violence, in this research I posit that the concept of omniscience may help to explain some of the attitudes and decisions made by secondary mathematics teachers in the United States, which I contend are problematic in that they may privilege some students while marginalizing others.

Omniscience is defined as being all-seeing and all-knowing, or having infinite awareness, understanding, and insight. In making mathematics placement recommendations for students moving into high school, my findings in this study build upon the work of Bourdieu (1999) and Freire (2002) in their descriptions of omniscient

perspectives. The very act of tracking students is an embodiment of omniscience. Most teachers in this study expressed at least some degree of this kind of omniscience in terms of knowing which courses were most appropriate for each learner in their care. Educators who expressed this idea sent the implicit message that they, as teachers, held ultimate power in making placement recommendations, and furthermore, their decisions, as educators, were correct and should override decisions of others. Although this stance may, at first pass, sound extreme, the frequency with which it was invoked made it quite commonplace, particularly in discussions about placement recommendations for students with historically marginalized identities.

The existence of this perspective of omniscience is problematic in two primary ways. First, there is a mismatch between the demographics of those with power (the teachers) and those without (the students and their families), which has implications for cultural reproduction of achievement and opportunity gaps. Second, the omniscient stance lends itself easily to symbolic violence, with those in power perpetrating aggression upon those with less status.

Thus, as a way to counteract or perhaps neutralize the effects of omniscient teachers, I suggest that school districts increase efforts to require coursework and/or some form of "disposition assessment" to ensure all educators hold at least minimally acceptable levels of regard and respect for all students. Although this is clearly not something easily measured or attained, I believe that for the benefit of all U.S. students, teachers must be imbued with some form of this willingness to listen to and learn from students and their families. Lacking this, the status quo may continue, unimpeded.

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