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## Seeing in Color: How Are Teachers Perceiving Our Diverse Autistic Students?

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## Seeing in Color: How Are Teachers Perceiving Our Diverse Autistic Students?

### Cover Page Footnote

Many thanks to Dr. Peter Smagorinsky for his generous feedback on this piece.

# Seeing in Color: How Are Teachers Perceiving Our Diverse Autistic Students?

Merida Lang

**A**s a former middle and high school English teacher, I would not consider myself an expert on autism. However, as a teacher of Integrated Co-Teaching Classes (ICT) for all of my eight years of teaching in New York City, I taught students with a diversity of learning needs and styles. ICT classes in New York City are classes in which two teachers, a general education and a subject teacher, teach a class in which a maximum of 40% of students are designated as having special education needs (UFT, 2019), or have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). What qualifies a student for an IEP is far-ranging, and can include diagnosed learning disabilities, speech and language, vision, hearing, emotional, or physical needs, and neuro-atypicality, like Autism Spectrum Disorder. Teachers approach getting to know their students with special education needs in different ways; some start by reading the IEPs, or talking with the special education teacher, or by working to get to know the students directly.

And, just as I wouldn't consider myself an expert on autism, as a White woman, I would not consider myself an expert on racism, or at least not the extent that a person of color would be. But as a scholar I am concerned with issues of equity in the classroom, specifically in terms of how White teachers, who make up 80% of the teaching force in the United States (NCES, 2018) interact and affect their students, the majority of whom are non-White (27.1 million non-White compared to 23.7 million White) (NCES, 2019). Implicit bias, or the ways that people unconsciously exhibit prejudice, is well documented and exists in the classroom as it does in all other spheres of life (NEA, n. d.; Yale Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning, 2019).

Even with well-meaning teachers, this unconscious bias can (and will) come through. I believe there is just no avoiding some degree of preferential or discriminatory feelings, even among the most conscientious

of teachers. For instance, both my daughter and I have red hair, and I cannot help but feel extra tenderness towards students with red hair (especially those that are mixed race like my daughter). Similarly, I grew up in Brooklyn among Italians and Dominicans and am especially fond of both cultures and so I tend to feel fondness for students from those cultural backgrounds. On a less personal level, we live in a hierarchal society that situates Whiteness at the top of the social ladder which means that the members of that society are both implicitly and explicitly taught to uphold and value White norms, both inside and outside of school (Diangelo, 2018; Tatum, 1997). As teachers, White norms permeate the interactions we have with our students; what behavior we uphold and what we punish, what kind of talk we value, what sort of discussions and play we expect.

Although this line of thought can have a myriad of applications, my purpose in this essay is to call attention to inequity in the treatment of students of color on the autism spectrum, specifically to our perceptions of behavior and the extent to which that behavior is considered through the lens of race or autism. While implicit bias against neurodivergence is an under-researched field, the difficulties that students of color face in white-normative educational institutions and the challenges that autistic students face in neurotypical-normative educational institutions are established (Hyland, 2005; Ito, 2018; Diamond & Lewis, 2019), and so autistic students of color must contend with multiple hierarchical systems.

## Who Gets Seen?

Greta Thunberg has recently catapulted onto the media scene, becoming a household name for taking adults and governmental powers to task for their lack of action addressing dire environmental issues. In 2018, she launched an international youth action group called Fridays for Future, in which young people strike on Fridays to protest their governments' inaction on climate change. In September of 2019 her emotional speech at the United Nations Climate Action Summit went viral (Chuck, 2019), drawing the ire of President Trump on Twitter (to which Thunberg had a much-lauded reply). Thunberg is also neuro-atypical, having Autism Spectrum Disorder, which she refers to as Asperger's (this diagnosis no longer exists in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental*

*Disorders V* (DSM-V), so for the purpose of this article I will use the term Autism Spectrum Disorder). She is open about her diagnosis, asserting that it is her “superpower” (see Figure 1), and that it is what makes it possible for her to have such passion for climate change (Chuck, 2019).

While stories of Thunberg were consistently present on my social media platforms for weeks, I also began to see instances of counternarratives that called attention to non-White teenage environmental activists. Counternarrative is defined by *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* as “stories/narratives that splinter widely accepted truths about people, cultures, and institutions as well as the value of those institutions and the knowledge produced by and within those cultural institutions” (2008). Activists who are trying to call attention to the centering of White activists by the public, while ignoring the work of young climate activists of color, are speaking to the values of our societal institutions that applaud the work of Thunberg while minimizing that of other young activists of color.

This is not to diminish the excellent work of Greta Thunberg. What she has done in terms of bringing global attention to a vital and timely issue is inspiring and impressive. The passion that she carries to her cause is a model for activists everywhere, young and old. But there are those, like grassroot organizers (Activism, Actually, n.d.) that believe it is worthwhile to question why she was able to gain such media attention while others did not. Autumn Peliter, a member of the Wikwemikong First Nation, has been advocating for clean water since she was eight, has been invited to speak at the United Nation Secretary-General’s Climate Action Summit twice, in 2018 and 2019, and was nominated for an International Children’s Peace Prize (Wikipedia, 2019). Xiuhtezcatl Martinez, an 18-year-old indigenous climate activist, has been advocating since he was six years old, founded the environmental protection organization Earth Guardians, spoke at the Rio+20 United Nations Summit in Rio de Janeiro and the General Assembly at the United Nations, and has published a book on the subject of climate activism (Earth Guardians, 2019). Why is it that their work does not receive similar accolades in popular media?

Although it would be challenging to determine with absolute certainty why Thunberg was able to garner such attention for her work while



**Greta Thunberg**  @GretaThunberg · Aug 31

When haters go after your looks and differences, it means they have nowhere left to go. And then you know you're winning!

I have Aspergers and that means I'm sometimes a bit different from the norm. And - given the right circumstances- being different is a superpower.

[#aspiepower](#)



**Figure 1. Greta Thunberg Tweet from August 2019**

Peliter and Martinez have not been able to gain such visibility, one viable option is that seen through the White gaze (Morrison, 1998; DuBois, 1903/2014) of global media, Greta Thunberg is a more palatable image of a young activist, (despite the vitriol and anti-autism sentiments that have been lobbed her way). Issues of representation and visibility in media are topics that have been frequently written about both in popular writing and research (Boboltz & Yam, 2017; Lawson, 2018; Tukachinsky, 2015; Yuen, 2019), as is the difficulty of obtaining a platform for activists to voice their concerns (Gorsky & Erakat, 2019). It is worth considering the extent to which it was easier for Thunberg to grab the attention of global social media compared to other non-White activists who simultaneously speak to issues of racial justice, a topic with which the White-dominant media does not always want to engage.

## Diversity on the Spectrum

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1 in 59 children is on the autism spectrum (2018). Although autism is still most prevalent among White children (making up 54.2% of recorded cases in 2010), the majority of those White children are of a higher socioeconomic status (79.2%) compared to non-Latinx Black (39.8%), Latinx (42.5%), and students identifying on other ways (69.2%) (Durkin et al., 2017). Additionally, the reported cases of autism among children have risen significantly, with the CDC reporting that the number of cases diagnosed have more than doubled since 2002. Also notable is that autism is about four times more commonly diagnosed among boys than girls.

There are some interesting statistical nuggets within the recent data: rates of diagnosis are consistently higher among White children within all socioeconomic classes (Sheridan, 2018), White children are diagnosed at far higher rates than children of other races, (13.2 per 1000 compared to 11.1 among Black children and 8 among Latinx children) (Furfaro, 2017), and the rate of autism among Black children from high socioeconomic families is much higher, suggesting that higher rates of autism correlate with greater access to diagnostic services, since there is no biological reason for autism to differ across racial groups. Black and Latinx children are also more likely to be diagnosed later, meaning that they miss out on years of valuable services, treatment, and support (Pacific Standard, 2017). Some reports suggest that there are racial differences in the perception of behavior; that Black parents are less likely to report autism symptoms, possibly because of a lack of knowledge or understanding about neuro-atypicality (Donahue, Childs, & Richards, 2019).

But other research has suggested that the medical and diagnostic system may be at fault for the racial disparity in diagnosis. In a study by the Center for Autism and Developmental Disabilities Research and Epidemiology at the University of Pennsylvania, researchers found that among a sample of children eligible for Medicaid, Black children were 2.6 times less likely to receive a diagnosis of autism on their first specialty care visit (Mandell, Ittenbach, Levy, & Pinto-Martin, 2007). Specifically, they are more likely to be diagnosed with ADHD, adjustment disorder, and conduct disorder. Another study at McGill found that doctors were “more hesitant” to

diagnose autism in non-White children (Rentz, 2018). In an investigation by National Public Radio (NPR), workers at West Regional Center in Culver City reported that Black families tended to bring documentation to their intake visits that detailed school and social reports of “behavioral issues,” prompting an intake counselor to consider a conduct disorder over an autism spectrum diagnosis (Rentz, 2018, para 13).

In his book on the history of autism, Steve Silberman (2015) tells the story of Hans Asperger, one of the first doctors to write about autism as a phenomenon. While Asperger had patients with a range of symptoms, in his writing he focused only on the high-functioning ones, painting an incomplete picture of both his patients and autism. According to Silberman, Asperger, who was living in Vienna during the Nazi era, was trying to save children from the Nazi’s euthanasia of children they considered “feebleminded” (Senior, 2015, para 2). More recent research has disputed this narrative, asserting that Asperger was more closely tied to Nazis than originally thought (Czech, 2018), but either way, Asperger’s early writing contributed to the white-washing of autism, settling it in the minds of many as a condition of white wealthy children.

Autism exists on a spectrum, and therefore there is no one way that a person on that spectrum acts, thinks, or presents. Despite there being a large range of possible manifestations, some behaviors that are seen in autistic children are: avoiding eye contact, having trouble talking about their feelings or understanding others’, giving unrelated answers to questions, getting upset by minor changes, having obsessive interests, flapping their hands, rocking their body or spinning in circles, having flat facial expressions, avoiding or resisting physical contact, not understanding unspoken personal space boundaries, or not being comforted by others during moments of upset (CDC, 2019). Many of these behaviors, if not understood to be linked to autism, could be considered disruptive behavior, especially in a standard classroom setting in which middle-class White normative behaviors are expected (Ogbu, 1995; Hyland, 2015). But a vital question for educators to ask ourselves is: are we (either as individuals or as institutions) being more understanding of White students who exhibit these behaviors and others related to autism than we are of non-White students who act similarly?



## Unconscious Bias

There have been a number of studies that draw a link between the race of students and disciplinary consequences, finding that non-White students experience more frequent and more severe disciplinary consequences than their White counterparts. Rocque & Paternoster (2011) found that “African American children receive more disciplinary infractions than children from other racial categories” (p. 633). Morris (2005) determined that different demographic groups were viewed in distinctly different ways by adults at the school, with the White and Asian American students being perceived in the most “nonthreatening” way (p. 25). In his review of the literature on socioeconomic and racial disproportionality in suspension for his study on special education and school discipline, Skiba (2002) notes that research clearly supports that Black students are suspended more frequently than White students and receive fewer mild consequences, even when data are controlled for economic status. More distressing, he points out that school disciplinary researchers have found that Black students do not misbehave at higher rates and, on average, receive harsher consequences than their White counterparts for comparable offenses.

In an analysis of Maryland’s practices and reporting on race and disability, the researchers found that not only were Black students more likely to be suspended than White students, but youth with disabilities were suspended at higher rates than those without (Krezmien, Leone, & Achilles, 2006). In the study, the odds ratios for suspensions for Black students with disabilities were higher than the odds ratios for suspension for White, Latinx, and Asian students. While the researchers did not find evidence that Black autistic students were suspended at higher rates, given the underdiagnosis of autism among students of color this might not be accurate, especially considering that the likelihood of Black students with a diagnosis of emotional disturbance (ED) being suspended was significantly higher than that of other races, and as noted earlier, Black autistic children are often misdiagnosed with conduct disorder, which is a subset of ED (Council for Exceptional Children, 2018).

Although it would be difficult to see into the hearts and minds of all the teachers in the above studies and ones like them with similar results, it

is likely that some of them hold conscious bias against their students of color. But there are many of them (most of them, I would assume), who believe that they are unbiased. After all, most people go into teaching because they care about kids and want to make a difference. But the data show disproportionate disciplinary consequences for students of color, especially Black students, even when other factors are controlled for. Now, of course, teachers and students are part of a larger system, one that is increasingly built upon measurable outcomes and pressures on students and teachers, alike.

Very often teachers are forced to follow school rules and disciplinary procedures that they disagree with or that make them uncomfortable; doling out punitive consequences when they would prefer something more restorative, or wanted to be more understanding, but being overwhelmed by bureaucratic and administrative pressures. But again, when all other factors are controlled for, non-White students still face harsher punishments (Skiba, 2002), suggesting that there are forces of bias, unconscious or not, on the part of teachers and administrators.

And where does this leave us in terms of considering our autistic students of color? If students of color face more frequent and harsher disciplinary consequences, and if non-White student are diagnosed later and less frequently as being on the autism spectrum (and often misdiagnosed with conduct-related disorders), then it is clear that there are overlapping populations; there are autistic students of color who need services, support, and understanding, and who might be receiving those, if only they were White. Although the problem is clearly systemic and institutional, and attention and resources are needed at structural levels, teachers can also make vital shifts in their individual classrooms.

## Teacher Identity as Ever-Developing

Janet Alsup (2006) urges teachers to aim for an identity that exists in “the place of becoming, the space of ambiguity and reflection” (p. 9). The notion that there is no end goal to teacher identity, that instead it is ever-evolving and continually growing, is crucial for all educators seeking to become better, but is especially important for White educators. We live in a society that privileges Whiteness and we have all been socialized

to internalize a certain degree of bias, regardless of our social and political views. If that were not the case, the data on school discipline would look different, but unfortunately, teachers do not treat all students equally. But if educators consider teacher identities to be in perpetual growth, and accept that, as social beings, unconscious bias is inevitable and mistakes will be made in teacher-student interactions, we can approach ourselves with more forgiveness and our students with more grace and respect.

Autistic students of color are an underserved group that exist in a specific cross section of double-discrimination. They are in the hands of a system that may not be seeing them with clear eyes and that may not be evaluating their behavior through the most just lens. Many factors contribute to their vulnerability, such as a lack of funding for special education and evaluative services. If class sizes were smaller, teachers would be more able to attend to individual students' needs, and if those teachers were paid more their quality of life would be better, and it would likely decrease their stress level and ability to handle challenging classroom situations. Were teacher and student success not measured by test scores, then learning could be more individualized and enjoyable. So, by no means am I suggesting that the full weight of this injustice lies at the feet of teachers. But I do believe that perception is complicated and sometimes just being aware of the potential for misperception can make teachers fairer and less biased.

Although the demands made of teachers are already considerable, building in the space and time to expand teacher understanding of autistic culture could go a long way in reducing unconscious bias in this realm. Often what teachers know about autism is limited to the language of IEPs and the portrayal of autistic people in media. If, for instance, some professional development time could be dedicated to an exploration of autistic culture and the diversity of experiences, with a focus on the particular realities of autistic children of color, it might bring an awareness to the generally narrow way in which autism is viewed in the educational world.

Sometimes one needs to just see something in a new light in order to be able to appreciate it. Greta Thunberg, the previously mentioned climate

activist and modern-day hero, asserts that Asperger's is her superpower (Thunberg, 2019). She is making great strides in changing the global perspective of autism. And so perhaps as educators we can not only follow this wave and consider how we view autistic students in our classes but strive to view the behavior of all our students with fairer and more forgiving eyes.

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