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# Teaching While Autistic: Constructions of Disability, Performativity, and Identity

Alexa Baird

Identity is not a thing to be possessed; a static, essentialist state of being that can be permanently obtained. Instead, the development of identity is a continuous, active process of negotiation within the societal space wherein a person operates. The construction and ongoing maintenance of one's identity, and the various intersectional components at play reside within a complex network of sociopolitical, cultural, public, and private demands. This article seeks to develop an understanding of identity work and, more specifically, how constructions of disability shape autistic teachers' identity work as a difference.

The preexisting literature on identity work reveals the diverse methods that individuals employ within various institutional settings in an effort to strive to maintain a favorable self-identity. This model of the accepted self is customarily aligned with preconceived normative expectations and characteristics (i.e., male, white, heterosexual, non-disabled) that have been instilled through various hegemonies. That is to say that the construction of what constitutes a desirable self-identity can only be made possible by comparing what is desired against what is observed as the accompanying deficient or deviant identity.

The structure of organizational contexts and practices tends to be based on the normative assumption of the non-disabled individual as the prototypical state of being human. Therefore, schools, similar to many institutional sites, act to replicate the normative expectation of ableism and the atypical mind. These parameters impact not only the disabled students that operate both within and outside these educational spaces but also the disabled adults embedded within these arenas professionally. Thus, disabled teachers function as a marginalized group that has historically been mostly absent from the discourse on education and critical disability studies. Instead, leading research has converged around primarily two topics: the experiences of neurologically diverse young people in schools (Hess et al., 2008; Locke et

al., 2010; Wei et al., 2014), as well as the construction and mechanisms behind the field of special education (Thomas & Loxley 2007).

When first considering the role of the disabled teacher, and precisely the demands unique to the position of autistic teachers in terms of identity work, it is imperative to examine the institutional and cultural models of schools that shape the discourses surrounding how teachers construct and negotiate their professional identities with the corresponding perceived notions of ability and disability. The theory of performativity is central to understanding the basis of this discussion on identity construction and maintenance. Since, from this theoretical perspective, identities are not inherent, but rather a continuous means of bargaining between various power dynamics within a society. In the process, this essay will seek to discuss the theory of passing behavior concerning autistic individuals and autistic teachers.

Specifically, the act of intentionally camouflaging autistic characteristics as a social coping strategy that allows the autistic individual to appear, or rather pass as neurotypical. The term passing relies on the terminology and methods used most often when discussing the transgression of racial and LGBTQ identity borders. The concept of passing is often viewed as a performative accomplishment wherein one group identity is typically rejected to gain membership into another. In this sense, passing as neurotypical/non-disabled functions as an additional element of cultural performance which acts to complicate intersectional issues of identity further. This article seeks to act as a preliminary investigation into the topic in the hopes of promoting research interest in this area. In what follows, four issues will be explored: the post-modernist self, the disabled other, teaching while autistic, and notions of performativity and submission.

## **The Post-Modernist Self**

For theorist Michel Foucault, the interplay of power and identity is diffused and embodied throughout discourse and regimes of truth (Foucault, 1991). Subjects and their identities are deeply imbued in the cultural spaces and institutional organizations in which they operate, which in turn, reproduces social doctrines that act to construct provisional identities. According to Foucault, one's identity, by its very virtue, is inherently bound in subordination to ideas; however, these ideas are merely interpretations.

Thus, they remain always in a state of constant mediation. (Foucault, 1991). While Foucault equates power to the knowledge of production and control of resources, scholars such as noted French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu apply this concept to the subjugation of cultural and individual agency and mobility. In this sense, the relationship between identity, knowledge, and power creates opportunities for negotiating one's authority and, consequently, status within society. Bourdieu maintains that self-conscious actions of identity maintenance should be regarded not merely as a method of expression but also as a medium of power through which individuals prioritize their diverse interests. While Foucault's perception of the social constructivist model perceives institutional power as somewhat supreme, Bourdieu instead observed power as culturally and symbolically created, a force that is continuously re-legitimized through an interplay of individual performance and cultural maintenance of hegemonic structures. The primary means in which this occurs is through what Bourdieu terms habitus, or instead, the socialized norms that manage behavior and thought.

Habitus moderates the “the mental structures through which [individual actors] apprehend the social world, [and become] essentially the product of the internalization of the structures of that world” (Bourdieu, 1989, p.18). Bourdieu's concept of habitus assisting in the framing of how identity formation is strategically constructed as a means of prioritizing which specific identity markers are then “endowed [through society] with sense and value” and as such, which identities possess cultural and social capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.127). Thus, specific characteristics or identities are designated as holding worth and, therefore, should be sought and preserved. In this sense, habitus acts as a boundary forming mechanism that helps to verify the exclusionary margins between the perceived dichotomous notions of what constitutes as normal versus the abnormal, the self versus the other.

## The Disabled Other

The means of Othering is essential to the practice of identity creation, in terms of both the individual and the group, as this system of establishing hegemonic homogeneity requires the conscious construction of a model to be positioned against comparatively. Stuart Hall in “Introduction: Who Needs ‘Identity?’” the opening chapter of *Questions of Cultural Identity* states:

Identities are constructed through, not outside, difference. This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside that the 'positive' meaning of any term - and thus its 'identity' - can be constructed (Derrida, 1981; Laclau, 1990; Butler, 1993). Throughout their careers, identities can function as points of identification and attachment only because of their power to exclude, to leave out, to render "outside," adjected. (p.4)

In this sense, Hall calls to attention how the reorienting of one's identity in relation to the Other "is an act of power," which is not natural, but rather a "constructed form of closure" that simplifies an individual's comprehension of reality, affirms group membership and consequent self-worth, all while maintaining the pre-established socio-economic hierarchies (p.5).

In terms of disability studies, or specifically, how the process of othering is enacted onto the disabled body/mind, legal scholar Martha Minow (1990) calls to attention the dilemma of difference, that is to say, the problem that arises when society chooses to label people as different to accommodate those differences; however, the creation and maintenance of this label often acts to exacerbate possible adverse consequences, whether they be social, educational or emotional. Minow discusses how societal norms and their adherence to these largely unspoken conventions works to construct perceived differences as intrinsic rather than acknowledging that differences are relative. For example, prior research (Bellini et al., 2007; Frye, 2018; Weiss & Harris, 2001) has allocated a great deal of time and effort into the study of autistic behavioral patterns, and lack of social skills; markers that are often coded as diagnostic tools used to establish what makes a body/mind different from that of neurotypical people. These same characteristics would not distinguish these individual actors as different when positioned against other autistics or even other neurologically divergent individuals. This comparison highlights the societal and cultural standards that are implicit in the assessment of differences. If autistic behavioral patterns are categorized as different, then neurotypical is established as the norm.

Similarly, in "Culture as disability" authors Ray McDermott and Hervé Varenne (1995) argue for examining schools' institutional and cultural practices that shape the discourses surrounding the perceived notions

of ability and disability. Specifically, Varenne and McDermott center their dialogue on a foundational concept of understanding that disability is a socially and politically constructed response to observed anomalies. Whereas a medical model locates dis/ability within individuals and proceeds to diagnose and treat the problem, Varenne and McDermott approach the subject from the perspective of a societal framework that examines the cultural constraints that contribute to the conceptualization of disability as it is understood by society at large.

As Varenne and McDermott write, “It is one kind of problem to have a behavioral range different from social expectations; it is another kind of problem to be in a culture in which others use that difference for degradation. The second problem is, by far, the worse” (p. 330). This statement returns us to the stigmatization of the Other and the obligatory accompanying negative stereotype that transpires through the act of classifying oneself or being classified. To be disabled is to be “cast as a diminished state of being human” (Campbell, 2009, p.5). It is through this means that one assigns or is assigned an identity that must undergo a constant process of negotiation within the societal space wherein a person operates. In this sense, a disabled actor’s actions and behaviors function as identity markers that are fraught with intricate social implications and identity politics.

## Teaching While Autistic

The notion of active identity work refers to the means of negotiating and managing one’s self-identity in relation to the organizational context of workspaces and perceptions of employability. Similar to other public subject positions, the occupational role of teachers exists within ableist institutional spaces that are governed by various mechanisms that act to reproduce hegemonic hierarchies and promote assumptions regarding identity as well as abilities. Therefore, the teacher’s professional identity must also be examined through a social constructionist lens wherein it is understood how the individual establishes a sense of self-recognition through their employment, which can be shaped by cultural, political, and organizational contexts. With this concept in mind, it is imperative to recall how normative assumptions with regards to identities within schools, in particular, have been historically further compounded by the discordant relationship

between disability, mental health, and education. In “Teaching (with) Disability: Pedagogies of Lived Experience,” Robert C. Anderson states:

[The presence or disclosure of disability on the part of the educator] negotiates personal and vulnerable spaces. The teacher with a body marked as different (disabled, gay, pregnant) is keenly aware of embodiment in the classroom. Unlocking these moments creates “the potential for an intensely ethical classroom encounter” (Freedman & Holmes 2003, p. 12). Negotiating these spaces offers opportunities for dialogue that have been seldom explored in traditional pedagogies. People with disabilities challenge our notions of what a classroom should look and feel like. (p. 374)

Anderson envisions an educational space wherein the open inclusion of disabled minds/bodies and voices on a professional scale acts to disrupt the standardized social norms and power dynamics through fostering critical pedagogy that challenges assumptions about disabilities. While the teacher with a body marked as different may be limited in their agency in terms of disclosure due to the visual markers of their disability, teachers whose disabilities are cognitive rather than physical in nature are then met with the dilemma of choice: to disclose their disability or not.

Professional boundaries pose particular difficulties for autistic teachers because of the pervasive presumption of neurotypical behavior being viewed as synonymous with competence. This perspective is perhaps due to the professional integrity of the teacher being coupled precariously with public anxiety regarding the safety of children, which, when combined with the mainstream reductive ideas regarding disability and neurodiversity, pose specific employment vulnerabilities (i.e., perceived loss of teaching credibility, job loss, lack of professional growth) for autistic teachers. In response to these ableist assumptions, high functioning autistic teachers may be left to negotiate the boundaries between the disabled and professional self by enacting performative behaviors and camouflaging strategies in order to manage their identities in school contexts characterized by a cultural structure of ableist normativity.

## Performativity and Submission

Central to this discussion regarding disability and identity work is the influence of performativity. Performativity theory is most closely related to the work of theorist Judith Butler, wherein it is regarded as the analysis of identity as a discursive product; an intended result produced not through natural attributes, but rather, from the ritualized practices of compulsory social norms that in turn construct and affirm individual or group identities. In this sense, performances function as a means through which social actors purposefully create and present desirable versions of the self to signal power relations and group membership. Identity performance can take a variety of forms due to the various type of intersecting identities (i.e., race, gender, sexual identities, socioeconomic class subcultures, dis/ability, etc.) however, the motive behind self-presentation is often the accruing of gains, whether material or otherwise, through the positioning of oneself in a manner that promotes a particular social station; to pass as normal and to reject the attributes of the self that may be deemed as “abnormal” by society.

The concept of passing is often referred to as “the process whereby a person of one race, gender, nationality, or sexual orientation adopts the guise of another” (Pease, 1996, p. 300). As such, passing is constructed as a “performative accomplishment and assessment by both the group claimed, and the group denied” (Alexander, 2004, p. 378). In his article, “Passing, Cultural Performance, and Individual Agency: Performative Reflections on Black Masculine Identity,” Bryant Keith Alexander discusses whereby individuals and communities engage in the act of passing as a performative tool to establish distance between one’s self and the unnatural Other whom society has rejected. For example, “[when gay men] pass as straight [in an] attempt to avoid the social and cultural strictures against homosexuality” or “[when] light-skinned Blacks [will pass] for White [to] assume the social and cultural privileges of being White and [thereby] avoid the stigma that is sometimes socially associated with being Black” (p. 380). Alexander stresses that these performances are not merely attempts at securing validation and cultural membership from one group but also how passing, at its core, is a “performance of suppression” (p. 380), an active denial of the self.

Similarly, this understanding of performative suppression can be used when discussing the othering and ownership of the disabled identity. While

disability is a component of identity often disregarded when discussing this topic of passing and the performative elements of suppression, it still exists as an intersecting component of an individual's identity that must be addressed. Often autistic individuals regarded as higher functioning possess an array of strategies that “[use] explicit techniques to appear socially competent [in a manner that aligns with normative standards] and [simultaneously provides them with the means of preventing] others from seeing their social difficulties” that are often associated with their disability.

Research has found that individuals who are better able to conceal behavioral characteristics often aligned with autism report higher levels of confidence in their ability to “make friends, improve their social support, and perform better in job interviews” (Hull et al., 2017, p. 2521). Through the suppression of these traits and the reorientation of themselves away from the conception or presentation of the self as disabled, they gain the perceived rewards of normative, able-bodied group membership. This perception may hold especially true for teachers, who again, grapple with the performative expectations of the communities that they serve and the institutional sites in which they operate.

Yet, this performance is costly, as autistic individuals' self-reported evidence suggests that the monitoring and maintenance of camouflaging of autistic behavioral traits is a notably exhausting and challenging task even when perceived as successful (attempts at camouflaging deemed unsuccessful often resulted in low feelings of self-worth and anxiety) (Bargiela et al., 2016). Given that teacher stress and subsequent burnout has increasingly been recognized as a widespread issue, the performative demands required of autistic teachers may, in turn, lead to higher rates of job dissatisfaction and teachers exiting the profession.

## Conclusion

The framework of ability and the conceptualization of the able-body/mind is inherently reliant on the conception of disability as a difference. This structure imposes the dichotomous categories of “disabled” and “non-disabled” onto the body/mind to construct and sustain the understanding of acceptable levels of behavioral, intellectual, and social norms. That is to say that, the construction of what constitutes a desirable self can only

be made possible by comparing what is desired against what is viewed as the accompanying deficient or deviant identity; that of the normal versus abnormal. To return to “Teaching (with) Disability: Pedagogies of Lived Experience” Robert C. Anderson borrows from the words of professor Rod Michalko, to ask “Does a disabled body harbor a particular and valuable pedagogy? Are professors merely ‘talking heads,’ or do our bodies speak as well, and, if so, what do they say in the classroom, and how are they heard?” (p. 372)

While the need for disabled voices within the classroom is greatly needed the nature of teachers’ professional identities and the normative, ableist assumptions that act to form intricate relationships regarding power, identity, and culture places autistic teachers within a delicate position between seemingly warring private and professional spheres. With this in mind, this topic remains underdeveloped in terms of qualitative data. Thus, further research is needed regarding autistic teachers’ personal experiences as they navigate the professional and social demands within the ableist parameters of the classroom.

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