19 Negative Policies for Dealing With Diversity: When Does Assessment and Diagnosis Turn Into Sorting and Segregation?

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The perspective presented in this chapter derives from a series of policy re-

In my view, each of these practices is based on a clinical or instructional

model of assessment and diagnosis where the intention is to provide instructional help specifically targeted to the individual student's needs. Although the idea is to individualize instruction, negative side effects accrue as soon as students are removed from their peers and assigned to a special place to

receive help. Hence the title of the chapter is meant to suggest that assessment and diagnosis turn into sorting and segregation when special help implies special placement. The special placement response is especially pernicious when it also means receiving dumbed-down instruction.

students—I consider the kind of support that teachers might need to make these transformations possible.

RESEARCH ON SORTING PRACTICES

TRACKING, SPECIAL EDUCATION, GRADE RETENTION, AND READINESS ROOMS

Tracking

Tracking is one of the most pervasive practices in 20th-century American schools. It was developed early in the century in response to universal

lum to students in low ability classes. In addition to content differences

ing problems. Because of its origins, special education placements naturally assume a medical model or deficit model of educational difficulties (Chapter

stigma among a child's peers, it is nonetheless true that labeling a child changes the nature of the classroom teacher's responsibility for that child's learning in both subtle and explicit ways. For example, once a child is la-

ter of a standard deviation) than control students who went directly on to the next grade. Although researchers have reported the counterintuitive and harmful effects of retention since 1909 (Ayers), the research has often been criticized on the grounds that the nonrandomized control groups might have been better off initially given that they were promoted despite their low

least on testing. However, formal testing programs to determine grade-to-grade promotion have increased substantially during the 1980s. In addition,

countability testing; for example, children may be retained in the year preceding a high-stakes test. By whatever selection method, teacher recommendation or formal test, minority children are retained at higher rates than other groups.

Kindergarten Retention and Programs for At-Risk Kindergartners

grade and are used interchangeably regardless of philosophical assumptions or instructional approach.

The purpose of 2-year kindergarten placements of whatever stripe is to foster "readiness" for first grade as defined locally. By placing similar children together and gearing instruction to their needs, the intention is to ensure a more successful, less stressful experience in first grade. Advocates for 2-year programs promise parents that their children will become leaders because of the extra year and insist that there is no stigma associated with kindergarten retention if "it is handled properly." Research evidence disputes

shows typically no difference academically between unready children who spent an extra year before first grade and at-risk controls who went directly on to first grade (Shepard, 1989). The findings of no benefit are consistent

of the children who need the extra resource are placed in one classroom. Apparently educators do not think of this as tracking or as a potentially harm-

theory, about individuals' inherited capacity to learn, is well known as a controversial theoretical perspective. The second theory, which is the behav-

differences among racial groups—most laypersons have also revised their notions about the relative influence of heredity and environment on an individual's demonstrated intellectual abilities. However, revisions in the common view, shared by teachers and the public, have not kept pace with the research insights provided by cognitive psychology, sociology, or cultural

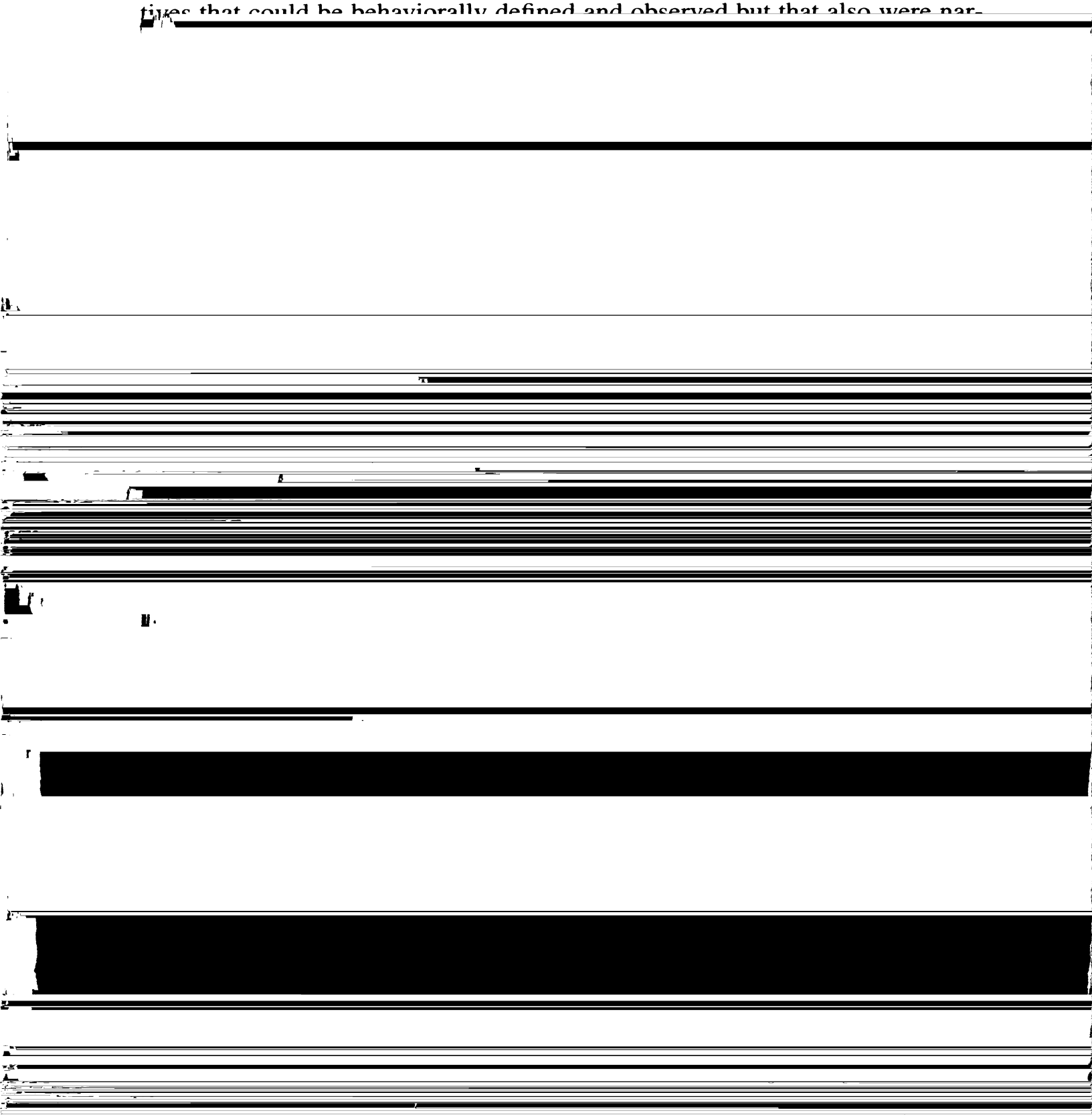
very elaborated ideas about how interactive are the events and processes that develop learning ability. Simplistically, today's view is that a person's intelligence is determined by two quantities, heredity plus environment, rather than one. But once they are added together and cemented (say, by the time a

materials and standardized tests; however, most educators neither describe themselves as behaviorists nor recognize that their beliefs about learning come from behaviorist principles. Behaviorism goes back to the stimulus-response conditioning of Pavlov's first experiments. The basic tenet of this theory is that all learning can be broken down into constituent skills that must be learned sequentially from the simplest to the more complex. For example, in Skinner's (1954) words, "The whole process of becoming competent in a field must be divided into a very large number of very small steps, and reinforcement must be contingent upon the accomplishment of each step" (p. 94). In practice, enactment of behaviorist theory follows the model of mastery learning, programmed instruction, and the like, where learning ob-

do not go on to the next objective until they have mastered the lower level skill.

These ideas have a powerful hold on how teachers think about instruction because it seems so intuitively reasonable to help a student who is failing

"understanding"—a principled stance against the earlier reification of intelligence. However, this led necessarily to the specification of learning objectives that could be behaviorally defined and observed but that also were nar-



psychology that all learning involves thinking—even comprehension of simple texts (see Resnick & Resnick, 1990), instruction predicated on the old model denies "poor" students opportunities to think until they have mas-

of assigning poor achievers to special places where they receive bad instruction is analogous to sending debtors to prison in Victorian England. The only comforting thought in the face of this dismal picture is to realize that millions of public school children are failing *because of,* not *in spite of,* the concerted effort vested in special programs. The prospects for the future would be much grimmer if the evidence suggested that the educational system had already made its best effort.

SUMMARY: NEW THEORIES AND NEW PRACTICES

When Binet first invented the idea of mental measurement, he worried that teachers would find it "an excellent opportunity for getting rid of all children who trouble us" (Binet & Simon, 1905/1973, quoted in Brown et al., in press, p. 19). As noted by Brown et al. (in press), Binet foresaw the reification of individual's scores and the development of self-fulfilling prophesies: "It is really too easy to discover signs of backwardness in an individual when one is forewarned" (Binet & Simon, 1905/1973, p. 170). The sorting and segregating educational practices of the past 90 years have been the

of educational practice based on research understandings about how children

The respective chapters in the volume provide detailed elaborations of current theory and implications of theory for practice. Therefore, I will not attempt to redevelop and explicate those ideas here. However, for the benefit of the novice reader, and to contrast with the old theories, let me enumerate

1. *Intelligence and reasoning are developed abilities*. Intelligence is neither a biologically nor an environmentally determined trait but is the result of complex interactions of the individual with his or her social environment.

unconnected information quickly exhausts the brain. The learner cannot acquire new ideas nor see the connection between ideas unless he or she actively constructs a mental schema of relations. Reading comprehension is the process of thinking and making meaning from text. It requires interpreting, retelling the story to oneself, and rereading when the thread is lost. Thus all learning involves thinking. If thinking is officially postponed until after skills are acquired, learning will be stunted.

4. *Furthermore, meaning is socially constructed.* What children learn

to the principles of constructivism and to the models of culturally responsive literacy instruction described in this book. Old beliefs die hard. It is no more reasonable to expect teachers to adopt these complex new views whole than

experiences to school learning. Teachers will need support of the kind described by Gaffney and Anderson in Chapter 13 for their own process of learning to become experts with these ideas. More importantly, if they are to be active and constructive learners, they will need support from each other to develop fully elaborated conceptions of what these ideas mean in practice and to evaluate and improve their own efforts over time. One such model of

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