Bridging the College Outcomes Gap: Is it Possible?[1]

Response to Daskalakes
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INTRODUCTION

Just days after reading Derek T.M. Daskalakes' "Crossing Without a Bridge," I received the following email from an undergraduate teacher preparation student about to embark on a field-placement in an elementary school: "What do I do in the classroom when I am unsure about spelling a word for a student and the teacher does not have a dictionary? It is a strong fear going in. Do I let the teacher know about my dyslexia or should I keep it to myself? I feel like I have to apologize for it regularly." Daskalakes' essay helped me to perceive the deep and formative ways that the policies governing the education of individuals with learning disabilities (IwLD) and special education practices shaped this young woman's approach. I better understood her impulse to hide, her fear of being uncovered, and her feeling that her learning difference required an apology. Further conversation revealed that this student chose not to register at our university's Accessible Education Center. In this, she is not alone. A 2014 report from the National Center for Learning Disabilities shows that even though 55 percent of IwLD entered college with transition plans that included an outline of specific and necessary accommodations, less than half those students (26 percent) contacted representatives of their two or four-year colleges.[2] Having started college in 2013, my student intends to graduate with her Bachelor's degree eight years later, in 2021. This student bears witness to the very issues inspiring "Crossing Without a Bridge."

Daskalakes identifies two barriers that contribute to the college outcome gap for IwLD. The first barrier stems from the effects of disparate policies governing educational contexts. Secondary policies aim for equal outcomes, as measured by standardized learning and assessments.[3] Policies governing post-secondary education, on the other hand, are civil rights legis-

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lation and focus on providing equal access to college.[4] This outcomes-access difference shifts the "overall responsibility [for successful outcomes] from the institution and its practitioners [in secondary education] to the individual" in college.[5] The disconnect between the policies leaves students such as mine to make a bridgeless crossing from high school to college.

Daskalakes then locates the practices of secondary special education within Michel Foucault's analysis of schools, identifying and articulating a second barrier. Secondary special education practices of separation, support, and surveillance normalize and discipline IwLD into "positions, perspectives, and modes of thought and behavior" situated in abnormality and disability.[6] These practices develop a "subject" without the skills and attitudes required to succeed in college contexts, especially those of self-determination and self-advocacy. Essentially, special education shapes IwLD into being ill-suited for the demands of college. Together, the educational policies and special education practices contribute to the college outcomes gap.

There is much to appreciate in this argument. In particular, it expands the range of possible explanations for the college outcome gap and identifies potential sites and mechanisms for change at both policy and practice levels. In what follows, I suggest that underlying Daskalakes' argument is something far more problematic and far less malleable: the standardization of learning and its relationship to sorting students. A sharper focus on these two aspects of schooling illuminates the ways in which tinkering with policies and practices may never meaningfully address the gap. No amount of change will alter the development of stigmatized IwLD subjectivities when they attend schools driven by standardization.

STANDARDIZATION AND SORTING IN SCHOOLS

Daskalakes compellingly argues that the policies and practices designed to produce equity in access and outcomes in effect prepare IwLD for increased struggle or failure. The irony is blistering, but not completely surprising. Special education's "hidden curriculum" creates subjects whose relationship to formal education becomes one in which their differences rela-

tive to articulated "standards" are always already framed in terms of disability and subsequent corrective actions. This subjectivity is maintained through surveillance and micro-assessments.[7] Underlying Daskalakes' cool, precise, and compelling argument burns a fierce indictment of standardized learning and standardized assessment.

Standardization, however, is not new to American schooling. Horace Mann's response to the regional and communal differences of schools across early America was to advocate for common schools— schools whose characteristics include uniformity in educational aims, centralized control, separation into grade level, and compulsory attendance. Common schools were designed to have homogenizing and standardizing effects across regions and across individual learning. The cognitive and behavioral uniformity they aimed for, including the elimination of immigrants' cultural and religious differences to create "good American citizens," may be different from the cognitive uniformity aimed for in current American schooling, but these standardizing forces are embedded in the very inception of common schools. Later, educational reformer Ellwood P. Cubberly wrote that "[o]ur schools are, in a sense, factories, in which the raw products (children) are to be shaped and fashioned into products to meet the various demands of life."[8] Cubberly's model points to how schooling aims to standardize, and in doing so, effectively sort students. Factory schooling reproduces social, economic, and academic inequality. More recently, we have seen mass curricular standardization via the Common Core Standards and Next-Generation Science Standards. Using twenty-first century technologies, educational institutions have grown increasingly effective at shaping and measuring learners and learning relative to these standards. All of these iterations of "reform" efficiently and effectively sort students in the guise of standardization, and they do so on a massive scale. Standardization and sorting began long before current policies and practices, and they extend beyond special education classrooms. They are embedded in the very DNA of American public schooling. They are not *products* of the educational policies and practices currently governing secondary education. They are the parents—parents who

are insufficiently committed to equitable educational outcomes.

It would be a mistake to think that standardization, standardized assessment, and sorting have not permeated the post-secondary level as well. Neoliberal assessment regimes have also forcefully gained ground in higher education. The age-based/grade-level standardization of K-12 contexts may be absent, but undergraduate and graduate students are sorted, separated, homogenized, and normalized by their educational institutions into subjectivities in which differences of outcomes are noted and valued accordingly. Standardization of higher education can be seen in the gates to graduate education (e.g. grades, GREs, MCATs, CSETs), but it is felt most acutely by students and faculty in college majors and courses, which are arguably the most relevant educational sites for the outcome gap under consideration. At my university, we are required to map our course readings and assignments onto a set of learning outcomes. These course learning outcomes map to program learning outcomes; program learning outcomes map to university learning outcomes; and all these outcomes map to WASC accreditation requirements. Some programs, such as those in teacher education, must also map learning outcomes to state and professional accreditation expectations. Institutions of higher education are increasingly measuring outcomes of student success, and are requiring faculty to "close the feedback loop" by ensuring curricular reform occurs only within the numerous layers of articulated outcomes. The system is closed, and acceptable reform happens only within its borders. The standardization tail waves the practice dog in higher education just as it does in secondary education. Given this state of affairs, it is possible to argue that moving secondary special education practices into college settings could help close the outcomes gap. This move, however, misses the point that this leaves the development of the colonized and stigmatized subjectivities of IwLD untouched.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

One might think that Daskalakes' argument implies that a "bridge" could or should be constructed to improve the educational outcomes of college goers with learning disabilities—that we ought to, as David Tyack and

Larry Cuban characterize it, tinker toward utopia in our efforts toward reform.[9] I question whether this tinkering has the potential to narrow the outcome gap in any context of standardization. Whereas the bridge metaphor serves to brilliantly identify a gap in policies and the problematic practices that undermine equity in college outcomes, it meets the end of its usefulness when one considers how these policies and practices exist in secondary and post-secondary contexts of standardization, and when standardization's effects necessarily sort students. Standardization always develops subjectivities relative to their positions near the standard(s). No amount of tinkering can change that reality.

In this light, Daskalakes' argument points to the necessity of a more radical change—one in which students and their learning are not measured and sorted relative to standards, and in which attention is paid to the central problem of what it means to educate all persons equipped to engage in self-determined and lifelong learning.

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1 I am indebted to Michael Katz for his critical insights in the development of these ideas.

2 Candace Cortiella and Sheldon Horowitz, *The State of Learning Disabilities: Facts, Trends and Emerging Issues*, Third Edition, (New York, National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2014), 23, https://ncld.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/2014-State-of-LD.pdf.

3 These policies include: Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA); Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA); and Individualized Education Program (IEP).

4 Secondary policies relevant for IwLD include Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

5 Derek Daskalakes, "Crossing Without a Bridge: Reconsidering Postsec-

ondary Transition and Outcomes for Individuals with Learning Disabilities," Philosophy of Education 76, no. 1 (2020).

6 Daskalakes, "Crossing Without a Bridge."

7 Daskalakes, "Crossing Without a Bridge."

8 Elwood P. Cubberley, *Public School Administration: A statement of the fundamental principles underlying the organization and administration of public education* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916), 338.

9 David Tyack and Larry Cuban, *Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform* (Cambridge, MA: The Presidents and Fellows of Harvard College, 1995).