

Disability categories in education were redefined to exclude minorities, study shows

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Organizations inescapably categorize people, and those in the most desirable categories may do whatever it takes to stay there and to exclude others until a more desirable category emerges. However, dominant groups also can rerank existing favorable and unfavorable categories when weaker groups gain greater access to the traditionally favorable categories. Two University of Kansas professors have

published a study of this reranking process in education, which they refer to as categorical manipulation.

The paper outlines a theory of the reranking process against the backdrop of research on status competition and organizational stratification. It then tests the theory by drawing on data from a large urban school district, where categorical manipulation occurred to keep [racial minorities](#) out of the most desirable mild disability categories.

The article's co-authors are Argun Saatcioglu, associate professor of educational leadership & [policy studies](#) and by courtesy sociology, and Thomas Skrtic, Williamson Family Distinguished Professor of Special Education. The study appears in the *American Journal of Sociology*.

When groups who have enjoyed status and prestige for a long time are forced to accept outsiders into their customary categories, they can move down to what formerly was a less prime slot and use their influence to redefine the terms of categorization. The practice has happened in business, employment and popular culture. For the article, the KU authors document how one city school district moved upper-class [white students](#) from the least stigmatizing and well-resourced disability categories into what, at the time, was the least desirable [category](#) when a court order forced desegregation in the 1970s and [minority students](#) started joining the top categories.

"The idea is that the categories are arranged like a ladder. The most desirable are at the top, and women and minorities only move up a rung if men and whites move up first," Skrtic said. "This also happens by people moving down, because there was pressure from below and that category now becomes the 'good' category because the so-called 'good people' are now in it."

Through the analysis of [student](#) and school records, and fiscal data, along

with interviews with parents and district personnel, Saatcioglu and Skrtic document how the manipulation happened. In the early '70s, there were three categories of learning disabilities, denoted as LD, in the district: Those served in regular classrooms, those pulled out for services in resource rooms and those placed full-time in segregated LD classrooms, which the authors refer to as LD1, LD2 and LD3, respectively. LD1 was most desirable, as it received the most support from teaching aides, the most exposure to the regular curriculum and least segregation from general education classrooms. LD1 students were typically white and from middle- and upper-class backgrounds. The district was slow to integrate following the *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* decision, and a court order in the '70s required more integration. As more black students from low socioeconomic backgrounds began moving into LD1, white students who were there moved to LD3. Saatcioglu and Skrtic document how what was formerly the least desirable category, LD3, became the new destination.

"When desegregation started, they moved the white LD1 kids into LD3," Skrtic said. "We showed that not only did they do that, but they moved the kids and moved the money with them. But low-income white kids stayed behind. It was a racist as well as a classist move."

What was the least desirable category, LD3, was redefined by additional financial support, more support from teachers' aides and more support in testing and other measures. The shift was achieved by manipulating testing practices to artificially deflate the official performance of students formerly in LD1 and any incoming white student who normally would have been categorized as LD1. Soon after being labeled as LD3, white students' achievement went up, as the full curriculum and supports went with them to a category that now had more desirable conditions. White parents, including those interviewed for the study, created what was called the Learning Disabilities Association, which helped coordinate the moves. As white, middle- and upper-class parents moved

into the district, the association informed them of the best placements, their changes and the attached benefits for their children.

"It wasn't like [black students](#) were going to dominate LD1—not that there would be anything wrong with that—but the mere threat that at least some black kids were now coming into LD1 created significant concern among white parents, who started leaving like crazy... some left the district altogether," Saatcioglu said. "We've seen such exit behavior in traditionally white neighborhoods once a few black families move in. The difference here is that instead of moving out to other all-white neighborhoods, white families had to refurbish a previously all-black category and then keep blacks out of there."

The study was funded by a grant from the Division of Social and Economic Sciences of the National Science Foundation. The authors point out that by further studying categorical manipulation, researchers can understand how even fully complying with demands for change can fail to result in genuine change as dominant groups redefine status. They implore scholars to look for the phenomenon in other areas as better understanding how it happens can help prevent the perpetuation of inequality. In their own ongoing work, Saatcioglu and Skrtic are examining federal data from 1998 to 2006 to further understand how educational labels are parsed out through racial and class means, and how middle- and upper-class white parents have been able to hoard the best categories.

"This paper is about organizations and inequality," Saatcioglu said. "Our study documents how categorical manipulation occurs in schools, but it can happen in any bureaucratic context where people are labeled."

More information: Argun Saatcioglu et al. Categorization by Organizations: Manipulation of Disability Categories in a Racially Desegregated School District, *American Journal of Sociology* (2019).

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