

When They See Us

Intersectionality and Ableism in Special Education

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As educators we are often so steeped in our work, in our classrooms, in planning, and in holding space for our students, that we don't have time or space to check in with ourselves on how issues of ableism, racism, white-supremacy and other dangerous societal constructs influence our teaching practice and our classrooms. So this paper is intended to be an internal check, a time to look inward, into our pasts and our present, to uncover biases and apply learning related social justice to build a more inclusive, equitable, and joyful future. There will be more questions in this session than answers and we hope these questions will inspire continual growth and reflection in your practice.

Before we discuss the relationship between race and disability and how systemic issues may impact the education that our disabled students of color experience, we invite you to respond to a series of prompts to help place yourself in this conversation. You may want to write or draw in a journal or take notes.

What is your earliest memory of seeing yourself represented in an educational experience?
Have you seen yourself represented?

Thinking about your educational experiences, do you remember people with disabilities being present in your learning spaces?

Do you remember a diverse student population?

Were there teachers who were different races than you?

Did the teaching staff represent the student population?

Our past informs our present. We bring with us biases from our own schooling experiences that we both draw from and must move beyond. All these reflections about our own experiences inform what we notice and how we interact as teachers now, consciously and unconsciously.

How can we work toward questioning and examining the learning spaces that we create and inhabit?

Think about how disabled students of color are represented in education settings, nationally and locally.

According to a study from Innovate Schools, “Black and Latino students were less likely to be identified for special education services across five disability categories. Black students were 58% less likely to be diagnosed for learning disabilities and Latino students were 29% less likely” (Innovate Public Schools, 2019). In some cases students of color are over-enrolled in special education services.

We have to question, are the disabled students of color we interact with getting the education they need?

And are these students getting full arts experiences in their schools?

Are those arts experiences designed to meet the needs of these learners?

Even when the education system does afford disabled students of color the educational settings they need and rich arts environments with opportunities to explore and express through the arts, it is critical we ask ourselves about whether these students see themselves represented. How do you make sure your learners see themselves represented in your curriculum?

We hope you will reflect on these questions in the way that you would like to reflect, through writing, through art making, through discussion with a friend or colleague, whatever will help you think through them deeply.

As we check in with ourselves as educators, it is critical we reflect on the ways in which we are actively taking an anti-ableist approach. Talila, or TL, Lewis, a Social Justice Engineer, Educator, Organizer, Attorney, and Artist as self described on TL’s website, crafted this definition of ableism:

ABLEISM a·ble·ism \ 'ābə-,li-zəm \ noun

A system that places value on people’s bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normalcy, intelligence, excellence and productivity. These constructed ideas are deeply rooted in anti-Blackness, eugenics, colonialism and capitalism. This form of systemic oppression leads to people and society determining who is valuable and worthy based on a person’s appearance and/or their ability to satisfactorily [re]produce, excel and “behave.” You do not have to be disabled to experience ableism.

A working definition by Talila “TL” Lewis in conversation with Disabled Black and other negatively racialized folk, especially Dustin Gibson; updated January 2020 (Lewis, 2020).

In TL's definition of ableism, TL connects ableism with other constructed ideas that lead to systemic oppression of disabled students of color. The education system in the United States is rooted in these ableist ideas that place value on a socially constructed definition of success. The ideas we have about the goals a student should have on their Individualized Education Plans or IEPs, the academic milestones they should reach, the social skills they should develop, the physical tasks they should perform, the way that they should communicate, and so much more are targets that are informed by these constructed ideas and so ableism underpins much of the education system in which disabled students of color are expected to thrive.

How do we affirm the valuing of our students' bodies and minds in our classrooms?

We will explore five areas to think about:

Representation

We can use artwork from artists who have intersectional identities such as Stephen Wiltshire. Stephen Wiltshire is a Black autistic artist who creates highly detailed drawings of city-scapes (Wiltshire, 2021). While often described as a savant, it is important to focus on the artists' work not as a rare anomaly but a wonderful example of a strengths based approach to arts education.

What other artists can you bring into your curriculum to represent intersectional identities?

Inclusive and Accessible Spaces

Alice Sheppard, in her work with Kinetic Light, explores what it means to have, by design, truly inclusive artistic spaces. Not only are the performance spaces inclusive but the pieces as well. As described on the Kinetic Light website, "Working in the disciplines of art, technology, design, and dance, Kinetic Light creates, performs, and teaches at the nexus of access, disability, dance, and race. Disability is not the deficit of diagnosis. In our work, intersectional disability is an aesthetic, a culture, and an essential element of our artistry. Access is a central part of the art and our creative process" (Kinetic Light, 2020).

This video is a performance made by Kinetic Light in quarantine presented by Lincoln Center. The artists created their own audio description that is woven throughout the dance piece like a poem:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=teLT26uKlyw> (Lincoln Center, 2020).

How will you build inclusive practices into the design of your learning spaces?

Valuing Artistic Expression

Yayoi Kusama is an incredible artist who experiences mental illness and has represented her experience through color, shape and pattern within her work. Kusama is Japanese and often reflects on her life story to create as an artist.

Kusama shows learners that there is no right way to make art, and that artists can create their own visual world. For Kusama art is a means of expression to express all parts of her complex identity. Kusama says, "Accumulation is the result of my obsession and that philosophy is the main theme of my art" (Manatakis, 2018).

Care and Support

Carol Gilligan, ethicist and psychologist, said, "The ethics of care starts from the premise that as humans we are inherently relational, responsive beings and the human condition is one of connectedness or interdependence" (Gilligan, 2011).

Interdependence is one of the principles of Disability Justice, a framework that as Patty Berne, one of the people who established it describes, "understands that all bodies are unique and essential, that all bodies have strengths and needs that must be met" (Berne, 2015).

How do we make our learning spaces places of care and support in a way that values the unique strengths and needs of all bodies and minds?

bell hooks says, "Teachers who extend the care and respect that is a component of love make it possible for students to address their fears openly and to receive affirmation and support" (hooks, 2003).

How do we care for our students while supporting them in achieving their goals and supporting their growth on their terms?

Radical Acceptance

To radically accept our students is to not impose expectations but embrace students as they are and place their goals and wishes that they have for themselves as most important.

Take Ableist Larry, a commentary on an often used tool from the classroom to share expectations related to whole body listening. What does it really mean to listen with our whole bodies in a space where all bodies are valued? Ableist Larry is a helpful image to support us in shifting our mindsets toward radical acceptance:

<https://autloveaccept.wordpress.com/2015/03/25/whats-the-problem-with-whole-body-listening/>
(Lei, 2015).

When we teach we should ask ourselves:

- Is this expectation necessary? Why?

- Is this a goal the student and the family have? Or is this your goal? Or society's goal?

Centering Joy

Bettina Love is a dynamic educator who has stressed the importance of love and joy in educating all children. Love centers black children and prioritizes the presence of joy in their learning and encourages the usage of an asset based lens for teachers to deliver joyful culturally relevant content.

When we are allowed and encouraged to be joyous it shows value.

In Bettina Love's book, *We Want to Do More Than Survive*, Love says, "Teachers who say they are deeply concerned about social justice or that they 'love all children,' but cannot say the words 'Black Lives Matter' have no real understanding of what social justice is and what it truly means to love, find joy, and appreciate their students and their students' culture" (Love, 2019).

Bettina Love also says, "Abolitionist teaching is searching for spaces of understanding and affirming. Abolitionists dreamed in full color of what life would be without oppression. Black joy makes that world manageable for dark people; it is how we cope. It is how we love" (Love, 2019).

As Love so beautifully discusses, all children deserve joy in their learning and deserve to be fully seen by those that choose to educate them.

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