

When They See Us

Intersectionality and Ableism in Special Education

Aliza Greenberg and Alyssa Liles-Amponsah

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Aliza Greenberg: Hello my name is Aliza Greenberg. I am a white woman in my mid 30s with brown curly hair and red glasses. I am wearing a black shirt, sitting on a brown sofa, and behind me is a white wall. I work as an arts teacher and access and inclusion specialist.

Alyssa Liles-Amponsah: My name is Alyssa Liles -Amponsah . I am a black woman with tan skin with dark curly hairy styled to one side. I am wearing a black sweater with earrings and thick black framed glasses. I work as an artist, educator and Associate Director of Diversity Initiatives and Community Relations at Temple University.

Aliza Greenberg: Aliza speaking. We will appear in a small box in the corner of our slides as we speak and we will identify who is speaking before we begin. All our slides have a white background and black text.

Alyssa Liles-Amponsah: Alyssa speaking. 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 session 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.

Aliza Greenberg: Aliza speaking. 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. We will read each prompt and pause briefly. Please feel free to pause the video and reflect for longer. 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? For this first question we will model by sharing our reflections.

Growing up my teachers were predominantly white. I had one mixed race teacher in second grade and that is my only teacher of color in all of my K-12 education. I went to a public school. I had the privilege of always seeing myself represented in that way having teachers of the same

race as me. It wasn't until graduate school that I had an educator who acknowledged that they had a disability and voiced their needs.

Alyssa Liles-Amponsah: Alyssa speaking. Growing up I attended predominantly African American schools, where I saw many African American teachers and in that sense, saw myself in various roles. As I got older my family moved and I no longer had African American teachers, and navigated a daily range of microaggressions and at times exclusive practices that permeated the school culture. At times, It was difficult feeling invisible or misunderstood by educators in charge of teaching you.

Now that we have modeled our own reflections, please take some time as explained earlier, to reflect on the next questions in whatever way is most comfortable for you and your learning style.

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.

Aliza Greenberg: Aliza speaking. 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." (innovateschools.org)

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.

Alyssa Liles-Amponsah: Alyssa speaking. How do you make sure your learners see themselves represented in your curriculum?

We hope you will come back to these questions and reflect on them 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.

Aliza Greenberg: Aliza speaking. 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:

<https://www.talilalewis.com/blog/ableism-2020-an-updated-definition>

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

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.

Alyssa Liles-Amponsah: Alyssa speaking. How do we affirm the valuing of our students' bodies and minds in our classrooms?

We will explore 5 areas to think about.

The first, Representation.

We can use artwork from artists who have intersectional identities such as Stephen Wiltshire is a Black autistic artist who creates highly detailed drawings of city-scapes. 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. Here is an image of Stephen, a black artist in a white button down shirt with black polka dots. His arm is outstretched holding a pencil adding lines to a large piece of paper covered in a detailed pencil drawn city-scape. The next image is a detailed pencil-drawn city-scape of Manhattan in a birds eye view.

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

Aliza Greenberg: Aliza speaking. The next area is 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."

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.

[Video Clip: 4:20-6:00]

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

Alyssa Liles-Amponsah: Alyssa speaking. 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. She says, "Accumulation is the result of my obsession and that philosophy is the main theme of my art." Here is an image of Yayoi Kusama with orange hair sitting on the ledge of an orange room filled with black dots. In the center of the room is a large pumpkin covered in patterns of black dots. Her dress is also orange covered in black wave-like patterns of dots.

Aliza Greenberg: Aliza speaking. 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.”

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.”

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.”

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

That leads to 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.

The image is of a cartoon boy presenting a list of body parts with this text:

Eye contact can be physically painful for some.

You don't have to look to be good at listening! Your ears can do their job all by themselves!

Sometimes verbal stims help us to process and that's okay if making sounds helps you listen & learn!

Flappy hands are happy hands! Your hands can be loud & proud and you can still listen!

You can move your feet & walk around, that won't stop your ears from listening or learning! It can even help you to do those things!

Your body is yours and you can move it however you need to. Your boundaries are just as important as anybody else's!

Your brain is always thinking, even when others do not understand! Your brain is awesome exactly as it is!

Your heart is caring about others, and you deserve the same in return!

Ableist Larry is working on his ableist assumptions about Autistic people! Share this poster with others to help them learn too!

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?

Alyssa Liles-Amponsah: Alyssa speaking. 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.

This is a drawing of Bettina Love created by Indi McCasey that shows Love in magenta ink speaking with hands outstretched. The quote above reads, "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." - Bettina Love, *We Want to Do More Than Survive*, 2019.

This is from Indi's instagram page and Indi's handle is at the bottom @Indifyer.

Bettina Love 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."

I have been exploring joy in my own work. On this slide are two of my paintings that center Black joy. In the first painting a child in a long white skirt and yellow sweater dances with a woman in red pants and a white shirt, holding hands, their arms raised in the air. In the second painting, a street in Philadelphia is painted with brilliant orange. A child swings above the street in a star-lit sky, below her color emerges in the buildings and cars that line the street.

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.