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Disability Studies in Education – Building Platforms to Reclaim Disability and Recognise Disablement

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Abstract

This paper provides the historical and theoretical foundations for the emergent field of Disability Studies in Education. Disability Studies in Education proceeds from the trans-disciplinary work we find in the continuing development of Disability Studies. It applies the principles and conceptual threads of Disability Studies to critique the ableist traditions, structures and cultures of education and to suggest how education might be otherwise. The paper makes clear the distinction between special education and disability studies in education. Special education has proven its resilience and willingness to appropriate the discourse of inclusive education in order to adapt and sustain its core assumptions about children with disabilities and their education. Accordingly, it is critical that this journal make explicit the distinctions between the conceptual foundations and practical applications of special education and Disability Studies in Education. This first paper is an attempt to draw these lines of distinctions and the aspirations for the Journal of Disability Studies in Education.

Keywords

Disability Studies – Disability Studies in Education – ableism – social theory – inclusive education – special education

In his introduction to Scot Danforth and Susan Gabel's (2006) book, *Vital questions facing disability studies in education*, Stephen J. Taylor strikes out with an essential observation, disability studies in education – as we now call it – started out long before it had a name.

Like the area of inquiry on which it is based – Disability Studies – Disability Studies in Education existed before it had a name. That is to say, the key themes underlying Disability Studies in Education can be traced back many years before it was identified as an area of inquiry or associated with professional groups, conferences, and scholarly publications. Of course, in earlier times, some of these themes were not fully developed, and their implications not completely explored. Yet an understanding of the intellectual forbearers of Disability Studies in Education can help us understand more clearly the foundational ideas underlying this area of scholarship.

TAYLOR, 2006:XIII

Of course, Taylor is correct. Tracking back through to founding principles and the formative intellectual traditions is essential to sustaining both conceptual and political fidelity.

Starting with political foundations establishes a firm footing for this journal. There is a dialectic that all too often is submerged in the wash of inclusive education discourse (Slee, 2018; Walton, 2016). Disability Studies in Education emerged from what has been a long and sadly continuing resistance against the oppression of children and young people with disabilities in and through education. Histories of disability (Stiker, 1999; Braddock & Parish, 2001; Titchkosky, 2003; Snyder & Mitchell, 2006; Historic England, 2018) chronicle the socio-political architecture that ensured exclusion of children and young people from schooling and, in turn, from opportunities in civil society beyond schooling. Struggles of families and their children together with allies and activists to secure a basic human right to an education resulted in a conditional educational settlement – special education (Danforth, 2009; Lewis, 1993). The strain of rebellious progressivism represented in the special educational belief in the educability of children with disabilities who had been dismissed as “uneducable”, “feeble-minded”, “retarded”, “backward” was attenuated by special education's accommodation outside of the regular school provision. There remained a belief that these children did not belong with their non-disabled peers.

Special education stands as an institutional and cultural metaphor for the unwillingness and inability of what came to be called the regular school to

enrol all children from their neighbourhoods in their education programmes. This is not ascribing sole responsibility to special education as the agent of the exclusion of children and young people with disabilities. There is a tradition of co-dependence between the regular and the special school in the identification, calibration and management of diverse student populations. This relationship has strengthened over the years. There have been attempts to conceal this through the adoption of the discourse of inclusion. However, the veneer is thin.

Segregation on the basis of ethnicity and the principle of “separate but equal” was declared invalid in the judgement *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka* (347 US 483, 1954). The mainstreaming movement was emboldened by civil rights victories and there has been, in the United States, litigation and the passing of law such as *Public Law 94-142 – The Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EAHCA)*. Public Law 94-142 advanced the right of children with disabilities an education in the “least restrictive environment” wherein they would be guaranteed an Individualised Education Programme (IEP). A series of legal challenges to the interpretation of PL94 – 142’s least restrictive environment by school boards saw it replaced in 1990 by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) with further revisions in 1997 and 2004 (Norwich, 2008). There remains considerable “interpretive latitude” and “clauses of conditionality” that privilege the power of special educators whose roles and numbers have expanded in the drives for mainstreaming and integration (Slee, 1996; Tomlinson, 1985; 2017). To this day we see, notwithstanding the flowering of the rhetoric of inclusion in the United States the maintenance of a segregated special school sector, the proliferation of special / inclusion classes in the mainstream, that Douglas Biklen (1985) so aptly referred to as “islands in the mainstream” and the growth of special education. Nora Gordon (2017 & 2018) from the Brookings Institute is amongst many researchers to focus upon the disproportional representation of Black American and Hispanic children in special education and note it as a signifier not just of institutional racism, but of the intersectionality: poverty and educational disablement.

Our history might just as easily have commenced in other countries and jurisdictions to reveal variations on what is an established educational tradition – the exclusion of children with disabilities. Sally Tomlinson (1981, 1982, 2017) has steadfastly scrutinised the continuing rise of special education as a powerful determinant of life’s trajectory for an ever-increasing number of young people being swept up in an expanding catalogue of childhood disorders and syndromes. In Australia, too we have witnessed the accommodation of inclusive education by a resilient and rebranded special education sector of

education jurisdictions (Lewis, 1993; Fulcher, 2017; Slee, 2011). Zygmunt Bauman's observation that as the apparent official clamour for and discourse of inclusion becomes louder and shrill, the more mixophobic we are (Bauman, 2004; Bauman & Mazzeo, 2012) is vigorously played out in education. Children and young people with disabilities are the collateral casualties (Bauman, 2004) in education jurisdictions that are risk averse and through reductive testing programmes nurture an ethic of competitive individualism (Slee, 2018; Hamre, Morin & Ydesen, 2018; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2018).

In New Zealand, the long running case brought by IHC, a disability rights advocacy organisation, against the Ministry of Education remains unsettled. Still we hear the voices of parents whose children are denied enrolment to the local school that their siblings attend (Deloitte Access Economics, 2017). In Australia, this contravenes the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 and the Disability Standards for Education 2005. These actions transgress Article 24 of CRPD 2006 to which Australia is a signatory. The schools are not censured.

Disability Studies in Education is a political rallying point – unequivocally ideological (Brantlinger, 1997; Ware, 2004). There have been numerous attacks on inclusive education research because of its ideological transparency or honesty. Its critics claim it is therefore incapable of producing research that is 'scientific' and worthy of serious consideration (Kauffman & Hallahan, 1995; Kauffman & Sasso, 2006a&b; Farrell, 2006, 2010, & 2012; Imray & Colley, 2017). Echoes of similar attacks on Barry Troyna (1994), the British anti-racist education researcher, for what was called partisan research that lacked objectivity by Martyn Hammersley (1993) are audible in this continuing attempt to undermine the research of disability studies in education and inclusive education. Julie Allan and Roger Slee (2008) interviewed a number of researchers for a project on doing inclusive education research. In an interview with Dave Gillborn and Deborah Youdell, Dave observed that ideology is always used as a pejorative reference and, that like sweat you smell everyone else's and never your own. Ellen Brantlinger (1997) demonstrated Dave's point by applying the rules of scientific research as set out by Mick Dunkin (1996) to the work of prominent traditional special educators. Their work was obviously in breach of their proclaimed standards (1997).

We can summarise this discussion by stating that the education of students with disabilities is first and foremost a matter of human rights. Here we can refer back to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations General Assembly resolution 217A, Article 26, 1948) which was strengthened in the Convention on the Rights of the Child – CRC (United Nations General Assembly, 44/25, Articles 28 & 29, 1989) and most recently by the Convention

on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities – CRPD (General Assembly Resolution 61/106, Article 24, 2006). UNESCO (1994, 2000, 2003, 2014, 2015, 2016 & 2017) has progressively adjusted its statements issued from world conferences on *Education for All* to proclaim the right of all children, including children with disabilities, in the regular school and classroom. The exclusion and inclusion from the neighbourhood school is first a political issue and second a technical issue. This is the political mooring of Disability Studies in Education that distinguishes it from the advancing appropriation of inclusive education by neo-special education.

Steven Taylor (2006) also draws our attention to the fact that like its parent – Disability Studies – *Disability Studies in Education* is quintessentially trans-disciplinary and embraces a wide range of methodologies to apply to its research programme. Disability Studies in Education provides a platform for researchers from disparate disciplines and professional callings who share a concern with the oppression of people with disabilities in and through education. Accordingly we observe historians, philologists, sociologists, critical psychologists, political scientists, economists, curriculum, instruction and assessment researchers, anthropologists, cultural studies researchers, anti-racist, feminist and gender studies researchers, queer studies researchers, medical researchers, and those interested in the arts. Of course, the list is indicative. As Lester and Nusbaum (2018) have observed a common and uniting thread in Disability Studies in Education is the commitment to reclaim disability as Simi Linton (1998) to expose the flaws of and damage done through its many misrepresentations. Disability and disabled people are *centred* in the research to generate new forms of research that strike back at ableist research traditions. This constitutes the shift in the politics of disability research that Mike Oliver (1992) called for.

Moreover, we have observed a range of conceptual approaches unbounded by the traditional knowledge disciplines. This makes for lively, and unfortunately sometimes hostile debates as we have witnessed in defences and critiques of the social model of disability (Shakespeare, 2006; Oliver & Barnes, 2012; Goodley, 2017). What is clear is that these debates proceed from a determination to better understand the enduring and changing circumstances of oppression as a means for developing action to improve the lives of people with disabilities.

Disability Studies in Education has in a short period of time established itself as conceptually sophisticated. In the tradition of Disability Studies, Disability Studies in Education has traversed phenomenology and Neo-Marxist materialism to establish disability as a social construction (Oliver, 1990; Oliver &

Barnes, 2012), feminist and poststructuralism to interrogate the experience of impairment (Thomas, 1999; Corker & Shakespeare, 2002; Shakespeare, 2013), new-materialism and posthuman studies to challenge assumptions about the nature of 'human' in an age of the hybridity of human and machine through prosthetics and technology (Braidotti, 2013; Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2015). Researchers from the global South have interrogated Disability Studies in Education and Inclusive Education as Northern intellectual formations that speak of colonial oppressions (Nguyen, 2015, 2016 & 2018; Singal, 2015).

Returning to Lester and Nusbaum (2018), they cite Denzin (2017:8) who speaks of the crying need for: "emancipatory visions, for visions that inspire transformative inquiries, and for inquiries that can provide the moral authority to move people to struggle and resist oppression". Lester and Nusbaum (2018) apply this in framing a qualitative disability methodology capable of moving beyond the exclusions of established research methodologies, protocols and forms of expression. Herein the questions of the authenticity of voice and politics must be confronted.

It is expected that the *Journal of Disability Studies in Education* will not be like a church denominational publication where all observe an established orthodoxy. This is a genuine forum for debate. That said, there are some foundational values embraced by the journal that may be listed as five propositions:

1. *Segregation of children in special schools according to diagnostic categories does not lead to improved educational experiences and outcomes. Therefore, research advocating for segregation of people with disabilities is anathema to the aims of this journal. Segregation deprives all students of an appreciation of the reality of human diversity and encourages the formation of at best reductive knowledge and at worst misrepresentation.*
2. *The journal is committed to presenting conceptions of impairment, disability, and disablement that challenge disabling diagnostic discourses that undergird the work of traditional special education and are all too present in misrepresentations of inclusive education research, policy and practices.*
3. *The journal is committed to research that interrogates the effects of school culture, articulated through curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, workforce structures, built environment, enrolment and reporting protocols, community relations, extra-curricular programmes and so forth, on students with disabilities.*
4. *Education policy analysis that acknowledges the overt and subtle intersections of class, poverty, race, ethnicity, language, gender, sexuality, geopolitical context with disability is important to building our research.*

5. The dominance of research led by the countries of the North has reduced the capacity to build international research that is representative of the global South.
6. All sectors of education and informal education constitute our frame of reference.

You might be asking why a journal of disability studies in education now? After all, disability studies in education researchers have found many platforms to host their research. Disability studies journals such as *Disability & Society* and inclusive education journals such as the *International Journal of Inclusive Education* are obvious homes. Disability Studies in Education researchers have also decided on journals for submission according to the focus of their work. For example:

- Teacher Education
- Research Methods
- Studies in Pedagogy
- Philosophy of Education
- Sociology of Education
- History of Education
- Curriculum Studies
- Assessment
- Childhood and Play Studies
- Educational Psychology
- Special Educational Needs
- Studies in Education
- Urban Studies
- Subject Specialisms

The list is almost endless. What is clear is that in the field of inclusive education there is a fundamental tension that is manifested in its leading journals. The interpretation of the nature and interests of inclusive education is necessarily broad. Not surprisingly with a focus upon exclusion and its impact on a range of student population cohorts these journals are of necessity very broad in their field of research interest. This applies to the features of exclusion and the populations affected and importantly to the disciplines and methodologies that interrogate the sources and objects of exclusion. The quite proper dedication of such journals to the conditions of educational exclusion that apply to refugee, asylum seeking and traveller children who may be displaced

by conflict, economic migration or natural disasters is evident at this point of time in the field of research in inclusive education. Disability Studies in Education has no difficulty with this and is in fact interested in the intersection of disability and population movements and forced containments (Slee, 2011, 2018).

What is problematic for disability studies in education researchers is that journals of inclusive education have become a platform for special educators applying the discourse of inclusion to describe research, which carries many unreconstructed special education assumptions about disability as a signifier of individual defectiveness. It is hardly surprising that this has eventuated. The resilience of special education and its mobilisation through the inclusive education programmes, policies and practices of education jurisdictions is well documented (Slee, 2011, 2018; Allan & Sturm, 2018; Gabel & Conor, 2014; Erevelles, 2011; Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2015).

The *Journal of Disability Studies in Education* provides an unencumbered platform free from that confusion and or ambiguity and or misrepresentation. The editors look forward to a journal representing the work of disabled researchers and their allies pursuant to evolving understandings of the experiences of education for people with disabilities.

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