

A history of special education: Circumventing Brown vs. Board

The histories of special education and Brown vs. Board (1954) are interconnected. In the 1950s as schools integrated, a sharp rise in the use of standardized tests occurred. Based on rigid and narrow ideas of academic ability, these exams identified and created groups of students deviating from the “normal”/“average” student. Fitting students into “normal” modes became a goal of education. Learning differences were transformed into deficits.

Since most educators were challenged by this diversity of students, separate classes based on ability were one way to make teaching easier. Over time, special education became identified as a space to put children who were difficult to teach. Yet, because of biased notions of race and ability, these separate “special” classes became increasingly populated by minorities.

Special education permitted forms of racial segregation under the guise of “disability.” As education researchers Ferri & Connor (2005) revealed, as the practice of legally dividing students in schools according to racial “difference” was being challenged, dividing students according to “disability” gained greater acceptance. Now a parent was told her son was in a separated special class not because of his skin color, he was “LD.”

Ferri and Conner view race and ability as socially constructed rather than a biological characteristic. Yet, most of society’s understanding of desegregation and learning ability is based on assumptions and perceptions of Black and disabled people as essentially inferior. Such stereotypes are deeply entrenched in our cultural imagination through distorted portrayals in books, media, and film.

Compared to public debate over racial segregation, exclusion based on disability made sense to many, becoming a more socially accepted and normal category for certain students of color. Racially diverse schools simply re-segregated via special education. Researcher Roslyn A. Mickelson (2001) uses the term “second-generation segregation” to explain this misuse of special education.

Now it is easier to understand why Black males are over-represented in special education. Ironically, over-representation runs counter to our democracy’s promise of equal educational opportunity for all. As I mentioned during my April talk in Tel Aviv, Israel during the 18th International Democratic Education Conference, before America sells democracy to the world, we must first guarantee the democratic purpose of our public education system.

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Next week Part 3: Indiana, Indianapolis, race and disability, class and ability: From Attucks and Wood high schools to IPS #59 (Sidener Gifted & Talented magnet), Chas. Tindley Charter School, and New Horizons Alternative High School.

Ferri, B & Connor, D (2005). Tools of Exclusion: Race, Disability, and (Re)segregated Education. *Teachers College Record*, 107(3): 453-474.

Mickelson, R. (2001) Subverting Swan: First- and Second- Generation Segregation in Charlotte, NC. *American Research Journal*, 38(2): 215-252.