

<CN>Chapter 10</CN>

<CT>A Dialogue we've Yet to Have: Race and Disability Studies</CT>

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<TXT>Johnnella Butler's (1989) call for scholars to more deeply engage in difficult yet necessary dialogues around race, gender, sexuality, and class is also relevant to the ways that scholars have yet to fully account for the overlapping politics of disability and race. As Erevelles, Kanga, and Middleton (2006) write, scholars in "critical race theory and disability studies have rarely explored the critical connections between these two historically disenfranchised groups within educational contexts (p. 77). Given the longstanding problem of overrepresentation of students of color in special education (Blanchett, 2006; Losen & Orfield, 2002; Ferri & Connor, 2006; Harry & Klinger, 2006), it has become increasingly difficult to ignore these connections. Could it be that, "educators and researchers believe that if they do not name these issues, they will go away" (Blanchett, 2008, p. xii)?

A quick, yet disheartening review of dissertation abstracts does not bode well for the field. Of the ninety nine dissertations published in the past five years that include "disability studies" in the title, abstract, or as a key term, only twenty four include analyses of race or ethnicity, and of those only five are in the field of education. It seems clear that unless we intervene quickly we will likely produce another generation of disability studies scholars willfully ignorant of issues of race. A similar lack of engagement with disability studies is evident in scholarship focused on racial inequity. It is into this absence that I write—hopeful that this chapter serves as an invitation for more sustained and meaningful dialogues among my colleagues in disability studies and race studies.

There are many difficult dialogues that remain to be explored between critical race theorists and scholars in disability studies in education. Working margin to margin, I examine one potential starting point for building a coalitional politic that accounts for and works to eradicate multiple ways that students are "othered" in schools. Specifically, I focus on the entangled histories of racism and ableism embedded in the construction of mental deficiency (and normalcy), as well as the legacies of this history. I begin this conversation with the ways of talking about race and disability that have been less than helpful and then point to the history of feeble-mindedness as one of the several promising starting points for moving the dialogue forward. Although I don't focus explicitly on issues of normality or the normal curve, discussions of the intersection of race and disability—or gender and race or race and class and so on—reveal just how simplistic and misleading the construct of normal is. </TXT>

<A>Speaking for One Another

<TXT>According to Bakhtin, explanation requires only one consciousness, while understanding requires two (Hohne & Wussow, 1994). Thus, understanding requires that we both orient ourselves to the particular context of the "other" and engage in dialogue across our differences (Morris, 1994)—an engagement infused with multiplicity and productive tension. This does not involve speaking to or for one another—but entering into a more dialogic engagement across difference.

Certainly there are many connections between disability studies and critical race studies. As a group, scholars in both fields are not so much cohesive in terms of focus or methodology as they are committed to a shared interest in social justice (Bell, 2009). Both disability studies and critical race studies place ideology at the center of their analyses—exploring ways that ableism and/or racism are deeply engrained in the very structures of society (Parker & Lynn, 2009). Both reject biological determinism and view race and/or dis/ability as socially constructed, ever shifting in terms of meaning and shaped by intersecting political, social, and historical contexts. Finally, both fields value narrative and counter-narrative (Parker & Lynn, 2009), not simply as expressions of lived experience, but as important sites of knowledge production to resist hegemonic representations that valorize individuals, groups, and bodies of knowledge deemed “normal” and marginalize the “other.” Yet, despite these and other similarities, scholars in critical race studies and disability studies have yet to engage in any sustained dialogue about the interconnections between ableism and racism. Of course, we should not assume that these groups would agree on either the source of the problem or its solution.

Thus, what is needed is not simply a cursory attending to race or ethnicity, but a sustained and careful analysis of the ways racism and ableism are interdependent. Unfortunately, too often, when scholars or activists do attempt to combine analyses of race and disability or gender and disability, they do so by analogizing between the two or placing these systems of oppression in a hierarchy (May & Ferri, 2005). This amounts to placing one type of oppression as overarching or as foundational to all others. A common claim is that disability cuts across all the other forms of oppression. Moreover, because anyone can acquire disability it is therefore thought to be more universal, as opposed to the particular interests of race or gender, I suppose. I admit to being puzzled by these assumptions. Don’t race, gender, and sexuality, for example, cut across social class? Moreover, what is universal about disability experience—Is there really one disability experience or isn’t it mediated by the particular social, historical, and political context?

A slightly different approach attempts to garner attention to one type of oppression by linking it to another, usually through analogy. Consider a bumper sticker that reads something like, “Black people had to fight for the right to ride in the front of the bus, but we can’t even get on the bus.” Other examples use terms like being “shackled” by ableism or “crippled” by racism. These analyses ignore the ways that racism and ableism are dissimilar—ways that they cannot or should not be seen as interchangeable or analogous. Moreover, they all but erase those who experience racism and ableism simultaneously—a point cogently raised in the germinal collection of essays, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies* (Hull, Scott, & Smith, 1982).

Another approach focuses on the “double jeopardy” of race and gender (Beale, 2008); or, disability and gender (Rousso & Wehmeyer, 2001); or, race/ethnicity and disability (Fierros & Conroy, 2002); or, the “triple jeopardy” of race, gender, and sexuality (Bowleg et al., 2003; King, 1988); or, gender, race, and disability (Demas, 1993). Although these analyses are preferable to ones that completely ignore the intersection of race and disability, for instance, they run the risk of oversimplifying interlocking and multiple systems of oppression by offering a false sense of equivalency among different forms of oppression (Carbado, 1999). In other words, if we think about various forms of oppression and privilege from this model, anyone can be and often is multiply situated by diverse forms of privilege and oppression. This, however, is not to say that all forms of oppression are equivalent or interchangeable—a form of “conceptual tidiness” that Spelman (1988) rightly critiques. Thus, although one may experience heterosexual privilege, this should not be construed as similar to the ways someone else might experience

racial privilege or class privilege. Neither will our experiences of one form of oppression (ableism or homophobia, for example) be analogous to someone else's, particularly if we live in very different circumstances because of race or social class, for example.

Finally, disability studies scholars have yet to grapple with the ways that disability has functioned as a "discursive tool for exercising white privilege and racism" (Blanchett, 2006, p. 24), as well as normative gender and sexual practices. Perhaps it is because of these many ways that attempts to "do" intersectionality can and often do go wrong that scholars have come to see this work as impossible and simply avoid it. It is telling, for instance, to pick up a disability studies book and search the index for terms like race or ethnicity. Even if you find these terms, the analysis will often be brief and superficial—the "embarrassing etcetera" (Butler in Zerilli, 2004) tacked on at the end of a list of more central oppressions. Likewise, you will most likely see a similar dearth of attention to disability or ableism in books that focus on critical race studies, leaving disability to be defined as asocial, apolitical, and ahistorical. Evoking biological determinism and deficit notions of disability, critical race theorists have sought to distance themselves from any association with disability (Erevelles et al., 2006).

The bulk of educational literature examining race and disability has focused on documenting overrepresentation in special education (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Losen & Orfield, 2002). Requiring schools to disaggregate achievement data by race and ethnicity, has been "a powerful tool for describing inequity and addressing its causes" (Gibb & Skiba, 2008, p.2). This said, I think it is safe to say that we have done more describing and documenting the problem than addressing its causes or proposing solutions. Thus, although scholars have begun to address the ways that race and disability intersect (Connor, 2008; Erevelles et al., 2006; Ferri & Connor, 2006; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Watts & Erevelles, 2004), there is much work that remains. As Blanchett (2008) writes,

A first step in moving forward toward more equitable schooling opportunities and experiences for impoverished African Americans and other students of color identified as having disabilities is to openly discuss these issues, how they play out in educational settings, how practices and policies contribute to these and other educational inequities, and how individuals identified as having disabilities experience the intersections of disability with race and social class in the American educational system. (p. xii)

In the remaining section of this chapter I discuss one of the more difficult dialogues that remain to be explored between critical race theorists and scholars in disability studies in education. I focus therefore on the concept of mental deficiency as it represents a pernicious confluence of ableism and racism.

The Color of Ability

According to Noguera (2006), "innate racial differences rooted in biology have been...the favored explanation for disparities in intellectual performance between students of color and white students" (p. 5). Race and class differences in measures of "intelligence" have been taken for granted as evidence of white, middle class superiority, rather than a cause for questioning the legitimacy of such measures. Prevailing ideas about race, class and ability provide the justification for "otherwise morally indefensible political and economic institutions such as slavery and colonialism" as well as various sorting practices in schools (Oakes, Wells, & Datnow, 1997, p. 487). The history of mental deficiency, therefore, is an obvious place to begin

to try to come to terms with the interconnected histories of racism and ableism in education, as well as the legacies of this history in terms of our current practice.

Historically, disability (and particularly mental or cognitive disability), according to Baynton (2001), proved to be an effective tool in justifying discrimination and inequality not just of people with disabilities, but also women and racial minorities as well. Mental retardation and all of its related terms is a construction whose “changing meaning is shaped both by individuals...and by the social context to which these individuals are responding” (Trent, 1994, p. 2). At their core, however, cultural meanings of mental deficiency are saturated with eugenic-based racism, which gave the concept the traction it needed in order to be seen as a social and political cause for concern (Danforth, 2009). This explains why mental deficiency only became a crisis once it was associated with a host of “social ills such as crime, unemployment, prostitution, and alcohol abuse” (Danforth, 2009, p. 20). Conveniently, these and other social problems were blamed on the inherited defectiveness of individuals, who were variously characterized as mentally defective, feeble-minded, and subnormal. But when did the idea of feeble-mindedness get entangled with race, in particular, and why, despite scientific evidence to the contrary, does this supposed relationship between race and ability remain so ingrained? How can retracing this history help us to locate where and when notions of race figured into ideas about dis/ability? And, finally, how does challenging the legacy of this shared history of ableism and racism necessitate a coalitional politics?

The concept of mental deficiency arose as a “response...to serious disruptions and dislocations that resulted from the nation’s transformation into an urban, industrial society” (Franklin, 1987, p. 190). The historical context would most likely include two World Wars, the Great Depression, the largest wave of immigration into the U.S., and the vast migration of African Americans from the rural south to the burgeoning urban centers of the north. To say these were tumultuous times would be an understatement. It is against this historical backdrop that we see the earliest facilities designed for individuals who were considered feeble-minded which, despite efforts to the contrary, were more custodial than educational, as well as the first college textbook focusing on special education (Franklin, 1987), and the first teacher training programs (Osgood, 1999).

Despite some early optimism that these state schools for the feeble-minded would parallel the successful education of individuals who were blind or deaf, the rhetoric quickly shifted, making it clear that these institutions were for the protection of the state, rather than for the education of the individuals who were placed in them. By the time eugenics gained currency in the first two decades of the 20th century, feeble-minded women of child bearing age became targets for ever more restrictive interventions. Reformers proposed that, “all women under 30, when arrested for misdemeanors, or upon the birth of a second illegitimate child, should be committed” until they were past child bearing age (Trent, 1994, p. 74). The first of these institutions for women, according to Trent, was opened about sixty miles west of Syracuse, NY for women between the ages of sixteen to forty five. This particular focus on women reveals the view at the time that feeble-mindedness was an inherited trait, which if left unchecked, would pose a serious burden on society.

When it became obvious that institutionalizing every feeble-minded individual in the country would be impossible—partly because the term was so ill defined and also because, at the time, the U.S. was facing serious economic hardships—states began to look for alternatives, such as sterilization. Individuals who submitted (either voluntarily or involuntarily) to sterilization could be released back into the community. The most famous example of eugenic sterilization

was argued in the *Buck v. Bell* Supreme Court decision of 1927, which upheld a Virginia eugenic sterilization statute. After the Court sided with VA, 30 more states passed similar statutes. Before the practice was overturned, 65,000 Americans (mostly women) were sterilized without their own or their family's consent (image archive). Speeches given by superintendents of state "schools" for feeble-minded individuals illustrate the thinking at that time. At an annual conference in Vermont, the Superintendent of one institution reported feeling gratified that the state is "beginning to take a marked interest in the study of feeble-mindedness" (Russell, 1917, p. 31). He writes that the "burden of feeble-mindedness is felt by the entire public and every intelligent person who has considered the subject realizes that this blight on mankind is increasing at an alarming rate" (p. 31). The expressed concern was that birthrates of poor and immigrant women were outpacing white and middle class women. The superintendent claims that rather than waste time and resources trying to train or educate such individuals that a more "rational and progressive policy" for dealing with this "great problem" (p. 32) was "early identification of feeble-minded persons" so they could be removed from public schools and placed in "special institutions" (p. 33).

A few years later another Superintendent identified the "subnormal mind" as the country's "greatest social burden" (Allen, 1921, p. 3). He named feeble-mindedness as "a prolific cause of crime, prostitution, disease, pauperism and human inefficiency (p. 5). He went on to claim that "every feeble-minded person is potentially a criminal and that every feeble-minded woman is potentially a prostitute" (p. 6). Reflecting eugenic thinking, he located the abnormal condition of feeble-mindedness in heredity and, therefore, advocated "segregation, specialized training and supervision" in a state school for mental defectives as "the only practical and sensible" course of action (p. 7). He further proposed that males be admitted between the ages of five and twenty one and females between the ages of five and forty five. Of course, economic conditions in the U. S. at the time made this vision of almost lifelong incarceration impractical. This vision was soon replaced with other modes of containment, including marriage restrictions and forced (or coerced) sterilization (Danforth, 2009).

Of increasing concern at the time were individuals who were considered "high grade" mental defectives, who could "care for themselves and may present no physical evidence of deficiency," but who were thought to be at risk of becoming a "pauper, alcoholic, thief, prostitute or graver criminal" (Russell, 1917, p. 32). Over time there was a shift from feeble-mindedness being characterized as a burden to it being characterized as a menace (Trent, 1994, p. 141). Because of her supposed ability to pass her defect on to her offspring, "the higher grade mentally defective girl of child bearing age" was often posited as the greatest threat to the community. The "high grade feeble-minded person" (Russell, 1917, p. 31), because of "their resemblance to the normal person," made them all the more dangerous. Individuals in this category, superintendents argued, required clinical diagnosis and specialized training and supervision (Allen, 1921). Of course, the new field of mental measurement quickly established itself as the clinical arbiter of normalcy because it could root out these more subtle differences among individuals that were not obvious to the ordinary—or normal—person.

Yet, even before states began widespread institutionalization of so-called defectives, the U.S. passed the "Undesirables Act" in 1882 to ensure that "convicts, paupers, the insane, and idiots" would not be able to enter the country (Trent, 1994, p. 86). These laws reflected a concern about the waves of immigrants coming into the U.S. before and after WWI, particularly from southern Europe (Italians, Jews, and Eastern Europeans). Compared to earlier immigrants from northern and western Europe, latter groups were more often poor and illiterate (Erevelles et

al., 2006). Because of their already low status, they were obvious targets for the loose and unformed categories of “unfit” and “feeble-minded.” Viewed as an inherited trait, feeble-mindedness was linked to criminality, deviance, or dependence (image archive). Thus, the fact that immigrants were poor or illiterate was not thought to be a reflection of social, political, or economic circumstances, but, rather, due to inherited deficiencies. After eugenics fell out of favor, these same groups were seen to be “culturally deficient” products of the negative effects of urbanization or industrialization on our nation (Franklin, 1987). Although often seen as progressive, compulsory education was a natural outgrowth of earlier attempts at social control, such as sterilization, institutionalization, and marriage restriction.

Viewing this history from a contemporary lens might lead most people to think that the earliest groups associated with mental deficiency were immigrants and poor people, particularly women, not people of color. For example, Goddard’s 1912 infamous study of the Kallikak family as well as similar studies that followed, focused primarily on the rural poor, not on people of color. Moreover, discourse about feeble-mindedness rarely mentioned race specifically (Trent, 1994). However, as Guglielmo and Salerno (2003) argue, many of the later waves of immigrants coming into the U.S. were not considered white. Moreover, blacks, already legally segregated in the South under Jim Crow, were migrating to northern cities in great numbers. Yet, unlike other groups that eventually became “culturally absorbed” and granted “white” status, African Americans “continued to remain the denigrated racialized other in U.S. society” (Erevelles et al., 2006). Thus, the answer to the question about when feeble-mindedness became entangled with race is that it has been from the very beginning—as long as you understand race to be socially constructed.

But, why do these ideas continue to hold sway, particularly for students of color, and what are the legacies of this history in terms of education? Like the concepts themselves, the educational responses to so-called “backward” children emerged in the political, social, and economic conditions of 20th century America (Franklin, 1987). The first non-custodial classes for students who were considered “backward” emerged in the form of ungraded classes (Franklin, 1987; Osgood, 1999). Patterns of enrollments in these classes are instructive. In Boston, enrollment in special classes grew slowly in the first “twelve years of their existence,” but between 1912 and 1930 and coinciding with ever-increasing diversity in the city and compulsory attendance laws, enrollments in special classes burgeoned. During the same period in Atlanta, special classes for “deaf, blind, mentally defective, socially maladjusted, and backward” children were instituted—at least for white students (Franklin). However, after forced desegregation and compulsory attendance laws, special classes would once again be called upon to serve those students who had been rejected by general education and would again experience burgeoning enrollments, particularly among students of color and English language learners.

If we pay close attention to the history of special education, what we see is a series of attempts to deal with diversity by creating ever more specific categories of otherness, categories which have always been (and continue to be) associated with race, class, and culture/ethnicity. We should not be surprised that today’s special education classrooms continue to be over populated with students of color, particular in those categories that are more subjective (and less obvious, like the “high grade” mentally defective category), that patterns of school disciplinary referrals and placements are disproportionately applied to students of color, or that the achievement gap continues to mirror racial inequalities. What we should be surprised at is the lack of real engagement with these inequities. Does our collective silence, as disability studies scholars, reveal a complicity in this history—are we not surprised because we expect to see these

differences? If we link the history of categories, such as mental retardation, and special education more broadly with racist ideologies, do we stop at critiquing only the overrepresentation of students of color or do we insist on dismantling the whole enterprise? If we, as critical race scholars, take “our” kids out, who do we think still belongs “in there”? What then justifies our current state of affairs and how do we collectively dismantle it?</TXT>

<A>Conclusion: Is Coalition Possible?

<TXT>Calls for coalitions often assume, uncritically, that there are shared interests among two separate groups, in this case, those whose work focuses on race and those whose work focuses on disability. Of course, many scholars would find such an assumed dichotomy puzzling—working always from the intersections of these as well as other identity categories. But, for the moment, let us assume that, given the fact that there are programs, journals, book series, and degrees that are demarcated by their particular focus on either race or disability, these are indeed separate fields of study. What then is possible in terms of working margin to margin—of building and sustaining a coalition? What are the conditions that would facilitate disability studies scholars and critical race scholars becoming more reliable allies? Moreover, what would a viable and sustainable coalition require of ourselves and each other?

As Carmichael and Hamilton (2008) write in their chapter *The Myths of Coalition*, there are often unexamined assumptions operating in calls for coalition. First, such calls assume that there are shared interests—that each party stands to benefit from the alliance. However, what this has often amounted to is the belief that what is good for the majority is also good for the minority, advancing an agenda that uncritically equates the dominant group’s interests with what is normal universal. In other words, “what is assumed to be good for white people will necessarily be good for black people,” is often an unstated assumption operating in calls for coalition. Yet, these groups often operate from different sets of premises and priorities, which can lead to conflicts of interests, rather than shared interests (Carmichael & Hamilton, 2008).

Before we can engage in a shared dialogue or form coalitions, Carmichael and Hamilton (2008) insist that we engage in a serious and self-critical examination of any potential conflicts of interests between our groups. We must also acknowledge and account for differences in political and economic power between ourselves and any potential ally. Finally, we must determine a mutually beneficial goal that we both stand to benefit from the alliance. It is from this position of shared self-interest that fuels a sustainable coalition.

The purpose of this paper was to open a dialogue about what might be a useful starting point from which to forge a coalition—to begin to outline the points of contact between our various struggles for social change. Such points of contact are not necessarily without conflict or tension. Thus, we must not be satisfied with seeking out the easy places where we walk side-by-side, but rather the more difficult moments where we must face one another eye-to-eye and engage across our differences—to see where our histories entangle and our futures interdepend. If we fail to engage in this more difficult work, we will stay the course, but ultimately fail to do the more transformational work that we must do to ensure schools are a place where all students can and do thrive. </TXT>

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