

Recognizing Ableism in Educational Initiatives: Reading between the Lines

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ABSTRACT

The ubiquity of ableism in education policy requires being increasingly alert to the portrayal of, (including the absence of), disability within educational initiatives. Ableism is a form of oppression, a largely unconscious acceptance of able-bodied norms from the inaccessibility of instructional materials, to assumptions about the body (a healthy body is within one's control) to the acceptance of segregated settings. In response to the call for this special issue, previous qualitative inquiry into the unintended consequences of three educational reforms were synthesized using critical disability theory. Seemingly disparate at first glance, all three initiatives, while ostensibly increasing equity, also contained ableism that reinforced stereotypes about student variability and served to further isolate disabled students. One federal (Alternate Assessment), one state (CCSS modules), and one local (project-based learning) policy implementation are included in this theoretical analysis. Reading between the lines means being alert to ableism, and is essential to prevent the historical marginalization of students with disabilities from continuing within contemporary "progress".

KEYWORDS

Ableism; educational policy; special education.

INTRODUCTION

Teachers are routinely expected to implement policies developed by others (Good et al., 2017; Conchas et al., 2020). Education policies or reforms will frequently have unanticipated outcomes; some students will benefit more than others or implementation may falter as the complexities of local contexts arise (Gottfried & Conchas 2016; Park & Datnow, 2017). Unintended consequences may be positive or negative, and access and inclusion for students with disabilities represents this mixture of outcomes. Small gains have been made, however, there is a pattern of approaching - then turning away from - truly transformative change. For example, educating students in the least restrictive environment (LRE) was a potentially radical provision when the first special education law was passed in 1975 (Hehir, 2005). Instead of being at home or institutionalized, students' schooling could occur in one of an array of placements, including public school classrooms. Educators were directed to engage in a team process, discuss individual needs and make decisions. However, more than four decades later, students are heavily segregated by perceived ability and disability label (Cosier et al., 2018). In essence, a policy provision with transformative potential resulted in some mainstreaming but largely enabled various forms of segregation (Annamma et al., 2012). Race/ethnicity, poverty level, neighborhood location, and other variables also impact the implementation of education policy but once ableism is identified, it's presence is undeniable (Connor et al., 2016; Piepenza-Samarasinha, 2018).

Policy has been a tool for both moving the quest for equity forward, as well as keeping disabled students largely on the margins of schools and classrooms. The argument advanced here is that hidden ableism is a major reason for this troubling paradox. While ableism was not a term widely used at the time, the elements of disability as a deficit, a characteristic needing protection or custodial care, and regarded with benevolence or pity, are evident in looking back (Baynton, 2017). These elements reveal a pattern of good intentions with little real change in the status of individuals with disabilities, and can be expected to continue unless policymakers and educators learn to read ableism between the lines and act to counter it.

The call for this special issue invited exploration of the unintended consequences of a "business model" of education and what teachers can do to regain their profession in the face of increasingly narrow mandates. The purpose of this analysis is to provide one definitive answer. First, ableism will be defined and then it's presence illustrated within three different education policies. Findings from two of the initiatives have been published previously utilizing street-level bureaucracy theory from the policy implementation literature. The analysis of these policies provides a guide to help educators to recognize and then act to counter, ableism., In so doing, teachers as well as students will benefit.

Ableism as a Theoretical Perspective

Ableism is a largely unconscious acceptance of able-bodied privilege and sense of normal that does not need to be defined, normal is recognizable, and "we know it when we see it".

Ableism is inherent in the inaccessibility of physical structures (i.e. the absence of ramps) to assumptions about the body and mind (having a “fit” and healthy body, and regulation of one’s emotions and moods is within one’s control) to the acceptance of segregated settings for people who appear to behave and communicate differently than “normal” (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2020; Broderick & Lalvani, 2017; Davis, 2018; Dolmage, 2017; Danforth & Gabel, 2016). Ableism underlies assumptions about physical and mental health and wellness and the perceptions of individuals who fail to meet society’s standard of normal (Dolmage, 2017). Ableism has been described as political and social circumstances that are experienced by individuals who otherwise would have little in common and, similar to other systems of oppression, “ableism thrives on the beliefs of the inherent superiority of some and the inferiority of others on the basis of group traits.” (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019 p. 2).

The identification of ableism has come largely from disability studies, an interdisciplinary field encompassing the social sciences, arts, philosophy, literature, education and more (Davis, 2018; Dolmage, 2017). As a theoretical framework, critical disability studies rejects disability as a deficit or limitation within an individual but rather, asserts that disability is a social and political construction (Ferguson, 2016; Ferguson & Nussbaum, 2012; Danforth & Gabel, 2016). As such, categorical labels (i.e. emotional disturbance or intellectual disability) that seek to sort and explain disability actually allow students to be segregated and their needs pathologized as “exceptional” or “severe”. Recognizing and critically questioning the non-specific but negative connotation of these terms is part of reading between the lines.

Reading between the lines to identify ableism is not about blame or suggesting odious intent by policymakers or educators, but rather, developing an increasingly sophisticated awareness of the assumptions about disability that have been absorbed by all citizens simply by being in the world (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2020). Disability is not a static or singular experience but in popular culture, disabled people are often disfigured villains in films, sick and weak heroines in novels, and quirky savants on television. Stories of individuals with disabilities are often offered as inspiration or motivational for nondisabled people, or the same individuals are lauded for their courage and heroism for merely living. (Davis, 2017; 2018). Identifying ableism requires dedicated and deliberate unlearning of prolonged societal conditioning. Well-intentioned policies and educational interventions are likely to enact ableism within this overarching societal mindset. The three examples that follow illustrate how ableism hides within seemingly benign and innovative educational initiatives. Once identified, the process of unlearning can begin.

Overview of the three educational initiatives

Three examples of initiatives that appeared promising to students with disabilities are provided as evidence of unexamined ableism, from federal (Alternate Assessment or AA-AAS) to state (Common Core State Standards modules) to local (PBL or project-based learning). Although these may appear as disparate items at first glance, they all contained elements of

ableism that reinforced stereotypes about student variability and further marginalized students whose status was already tenuous. In addition, while focusing on the outcomes for students with disabilities, analysis found two indicators that accompanied the deficit narrative and can serve as a warning that ableism is also at work: teacher autonomy was subtly reduced, and neoliberal values of individualism and competition were couched in progressive-sounding language such as equity, engagement, and social justice.

In each of the following initiatives, although teacher participants rightfully criticized the hurried implementation, the same teachers reported that they implemented the reforms in good faith. While the stated aims of increased academic achievement (via test scores) may have been met, each initiative resulted in more segregation of students with disabilities while also restricting teacher decisions over classroom instruction.

Alternate assessment (AA-AAS)

The Alternate Assessment (hereafter AA-AAS) addressed the lack of accountability for students historically considered “not ready” or unable to benefit from academic instruction. Learners considered to have less cognitive ability have often been denied equal access to academics and other opportunities (Parekh, 2017). In the United States, both No Child Left Behind (2002) and the reauthorized Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA (2004) stipulated that students with significant cognitive disabilities, considered unable to take state assessments even with accommodations, must participate via AA-AAS. The AA-AAS promoted “high expectations for academic learning” by measuring academic progress, and calculating student scores into school accountability reporting (Timberlake, 2016).

This extraordinary and unprecedented policy requirement appeared to legitimize students who were often relegated to secluded classrooms and taught primarily daily living skills (Ayres et al., 2011; Hehir, 2005; Ruppert et al., 2018). The transformative possibilities of academic curricula for these students seemed feasible with the provision that all students with disabilities, not only be provided “access to the general education curriculum” but be assessed on the same standards as their nondisabled peers. (Malow-Iroff et al., 2008; Ruppert, et al., 2018) Such access to the body of knowledge enjoyed by nondisabled students was significant because curriculum and instruction were seen as the pathway to legitimacy. Every state was charged with developing their own assessment but all had to align with the state’s overall academic standards. The AA-AAS required evaluation on standards in math, science and English language arts, meaning academics was now required and daily living skills could not constitute a student’s entire schooling (Goldstein, & Behuniak, 2012). Now, they would be assessed on academic material and their scores would count; it appeared their value as students and status in schools had improved. However, while there have been changes, lofty expectations have not yet been realized.

Curricular modules with scripted instruction

The second policy example comes from the state level, and also represents an attempt to use teachers to implement a reform linked to standards. Scripted curricular modules were

disseminated to assist with Common Core State Standards implementation (CCSS). Curricular modules in English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics for grades pre-kindergarten through 12 were available for download online and at one time, were in use across NY and available to other states (Barrett et al., 2017). The materials included lesson plans, scripted notes for teacher and student responses, supplemental readings and assessments. The language was remarkably similar to that of the AA-AAS, including “high expectations for all” and improved academic achievement for all students.

Thus, another policy implementation was begun with renewed possibilities for academic access for students with disabilities. The CCSS would prepare students for careers or college and ensure that all students would be receiving similar high quality academic programs regardless of where they resided (Kornhaber et al., 2016). For students receiving special education services the implantation of the CCSS would mean the same as the AA-AAS – access to challenging academic content and higher expectations for what they could learn (<https://www.cec.sped.org/Special-Ed-Topics/Specialty-Areas/Common-Core-State-Standards>). While revisions to the CCSS have recently been made, the revised standards (Next Generation Learning Standards) are still accompanied by modules designed to guide teacher behavior (Sawchuk, 2017).

Project -based Learning

The third example is teacher implementation of Project-Based Learning (PBL), a teaching process in which students are guided through an extended sequence of inquiry around a real-world problem. Advocates of PBL assert that this teaching method supports students to evaluate sources of information, think critically, direct aspects of their own learning, and communicate effectively with peers and adults (Dole et al., 2017; DuFour & DuFour, 2015). The appeal and promise of PBL is that it can engage students with a wide variety of strengths, needs, interests, and competencies together (Lee & Blanchard, 2019). PBL serves as the example of local policy implementation because extensive professional development was offered to teachers in public schools in a region of New York state from 2015-2018. Teachers who implemented PBL after training were invited to participate in an implementation study. Both those identifying as general and as special educators were interviewed about their successes and challenges. Different expectations were reported by teachers because some districts required a certain number of projects per year, others empowered teachers to create projects as they were inspired, while still others provided pre-designed projects for teachers to implement.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative design employing in-depth interviews with teachers was utilized in all three studies. The highlights of the methodology are contained in Table 1. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and analyzed using elements of grounded theory and narrative analysis to understand the power of curriculum and uncover how decisions about academic

access was part of teacher decision-making for students considered to have significant cognitive disabilities. The data were then re-analyzed deductively through a perspective of ableism, noting deficit-based language, references to disability categories, student ability, and the ways teachers referred to their own ability to make choices and decisions about their practice (Wertz et al., 2011). The participants in all three studies were different, but overwhelmingly female, white, and with a range of experience from 4-25 years. The AA-AAS study was conducted in rural and suburban areas in one New England state and the Curricular modules and PBL studies were conducted in primarily rural and suburban areas of a second east coast state. While recognizing the importance of intersectional identities, the results were not aggregated by gender, race/ethnicity, age, disability or other identity markers. The percent of teachers who were non-white and non-female was so small that to identify them would compromise confidentiality. Further detailed analyses may be found in (Timberlake, 2016; Timberlake et al., 2017; Timberlake, 2020). The results represent a total of 53 interviews, 30 in-person and 23 via telephone. Copies of all interview guides are available upon request.

Table 1: Three studies of academic access and disability analyzed for ableism

Educational initiative	Participants	Data collected	Sample questions from interview guide	Manifestation of ableism
1. AA-AAS	Special education teachers n=33 Gr.3- 11	2015 state A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could you walk me through your planning process? • Has the AA-AAS changed what you teach or how you teach? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hidden Assumptions of separation built into the structure and content of the assessment as well as the implementation with individual students.
2. CCSS Scripted modules	General education and special education teachers n=12 Gr. 2-6	2017 state B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you tell me a story about a way that the curricular modules are working for students? • Can you tell me about any concerns you have about the ways students experience the modules? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dysconscious Disability overlooked and not directly addressed. Assumptions that treating all students the same way reflects fairness and equity.
3. PBL	General and special educators n=18 Gr. 3-11	2018 state B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kind of observations have you made about your students and their responses to PBL? • Could you think specifically about students who do not have strong social skills? ...students who are significantly above or below grade level? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dysconscious Perceptions of students remained intact while experimenting with pedagogy. Maintained status quo for students with disabilities.

RESULTS

Revisiting the data from all three studies suggests why the policy intent of academic achievement and liberation from low expectations for students with disabilities has not yet been obtained. While some positive outcomes were achieved, three seemingly different initiatives share the same unintended consequences when analyzed through the lens of ableism. All three inadvertently reinforced medicalized perceptions of disability as weakness needing “remediation”, and as an “otherness” different from what were considered typical learners. Next, the benign language in all three masked the neoliberal emphasis on individualistic, competitive achievement, and education as a commodity in the marketplace. As noted above, the full details of each investigation are available elsewhere but the impact of the reforms and the prominence of ableism in each are highlighted next.

AA-AAS: The Ableism in “High Achievement for All”

Ableism manifested in this first policy primarily through two conditions, isolation and teacher resignation.

Isolation

The AA-AAS led to a state implementation process where fidelity to the test meant increased segregation for the students. In an attempt to increase technical validity, the AA-AAS was designed to mirror large state assessment models. Thus, isolation was built into the structure and process of the AA-AAS because compliance with the format and content of the assessment was outside of general education (Goldstein & Behuniak, 2012; Timberlake, 2020). In the state where this research took place, special educators began to use the vocabulary of the assessment such as LOCs (levels of complexity) and AAGLEs (Alternate assessment grade level expectations) which served to cement not only their separateness as teachers, but the separateness of students whose status in schools was already separate because of the complexity of their disabilities. Special educators’ also reported that they taught skills they may not have taught if they did not have to implement the AA-AAS (especially in math and science), but they did so in isolation. “You can do the tasks over and over again ...if I see that they’re going to be able to master the task before the deadline, then I’ll teach it but it’s out of the classroom and in total isolation.”

Teacher stress and resignation

When queried about supporting students with disabilities in general education, special educators reported an increasing distance away from the ideas of community. They began to accept not only that general education was inaccessible but that they should not interfere with the achievement of more “able” students. They considered their general education colleagues too busy to have to deal with the extra demands of co-creating inclusive assessment tasks, “They are so stressed with the assessments they are required to do like 4 times a year, there’s none of that cooperative learning or nice big classroom activities...” The language of conformity and efficiency was reflected in the sense of responsibility to keep

students with disabilities from “bothering” others. “When they go in[to general education]the classroom rules apply to everyone. If they become disruptive to the classroom then we leave.” Implementation of the AA-AAS uncovered the very concerning finding that testing and the push to achieve more rigorous standards was serving to build academic proficiency for nondisabled students at the expense of students considered to have disabilities.

When viewed through the lens of ableism, actions that seem considerate and pragmatic (refraining from disturbing general education) are shown to be based on a de-valuing of students, specifically, decisions of whose academic progress matters, who deserves engaging academic environments and what accommodations are important.

Finally, representing protective instincts but a belief in the “otherness” of disabled students, a teacher explained “we can’t just dump them in regular classes where everything is over their head and they won’t get anything out of it”. The ableism within this concern is that the need for a segregated setting is obvious, when in actuality, self-contained classrooms do not inherently guarantee quality, (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011) that students with disabilities are inanimate and may be metaphorically picked up and “dumped”, that content was “over their head” implying a lack of comprehension within the student without articulating the responsibility of educators to make content accessible. Such unexamined ableism allows policies that segregate students into self-contained classrooms and into special assessments that may only be conducted by special teachers at special times, to be developed and implemented without the critique they deserve. All bodies “have strengths and needs that must be met” (Piepenza-Samarasinha, 2018 p. 21). More learners than not, experience anxiety, sensory overload, struggles with comprehension, illness, and other challenges at some point, however, hidden ableism keeps disabled students and teachers in their place.

CCSS: The Ableism in “Equality for All”

In a similar way, the use of scripted curricular modules also reduced schooling to test scores, reading levels and quantifiable outcomes, revealing an implementation guided by ableism. Here, ableism can be located within the absence of disability, the lack of evidence that student differences (including disability) were addressed and that adherence to scripted materials was the way to be fair. Broderick & Lalvani (2017) argued for the use of “dysconscious ableism (as opposed to unconscious) building on prior work on dysconscious racism. Dysconscious ableism is not an unawareness but a flawed awareness- a way of thinking about disability that upholds and is upheld by, mainstream ideology around normality. Operating with dysconscious ableism means “tacitly accepting norms and privileges” including that there is a measurable attribute called “disability” and that the binary of disabled and nondisabled is a clear divide (Broderick & Lalvani, 2017 p. 895)

Disability and the need for structure

Within teacher implementation of the CCSS modules, dysconscious ableism is a helpful lens as disability was not overtly ostracized but largely ignored, a background to the normal workings

of the classroom. According to teacher participants, despite some initial apprehension, the scripts provided a structure for implementing the much more ambiguous CCSS, and provided rigor and equality because all students were taught using the same scripts. The words “structure” and “anchor” explained the modules’ appeal, i.e. “very well-structured” while two special educators described the modules as difficult for students but “good for them” nevertheless (Timberlake et al., 2017). The participants in this research were committed to student learning and concerned about students’ academic progress, but the ableism had them viewing disability as an individual deficit that could be remedied without an examination of why they were using materials where disability was invisible. For example, reading between the lines could mean asking whether disability is represented in the texts and scripted materials, and if so, how? If not, what might the absence of disabled people mean? What additional pathways could be offered for students to access the content in the modules and might all students benefit from using different materials and veering from the scripts occasionally? As with the AA-AAS, the language of “high expectations” and the importance of “raising the bar” appealed to educators’ professionalism and desire to serve their students well.

Treating all students fairly

Participants reported that “equity” meant that students were held to the same standards and were provided access to the same content. For example,

I thought it was pretty exciting because a lot of times the expectations in different schools vary- I worked in [--] city schools and it was really sad to see the effect that lower expectations had on those students- so I thought it was neat that we all have certain standards that we have to adhere to, I thought it might help level the field.

Teachers repeatedly referred to the ability of the modules to help students achieve high standards, and that equal exposure to content coverage was a remedy for underachievement by subgroups including students with disabilities “I’m working on making sure I’m mentally ready to hold my expectations high regardless of what I see the students coming in with, still pushing them as much as I possibly can.” The policy message had been communicated to the teachers - the scripted modules had been sold by appealing to the values of fairness, equity, and rigor, but masked the inequity of ignoring student variation. Importantly, ableism does not deny impairment but rather asserts that responses to impairment are problematic. For example, the way student needs are defined (too distractible, unmotivated) and the vocabulary used (“low functioning”) can be changed by recognizing ableism.

What’s wrong with rigor?

The policy language in the three initiatives outlined here sounds inviting but actually served to solidify the status of students with disabilities as outsiders. Supposedly virtuous concepts (i.e. “rigor”, “raising the bar”, “assess all students on the same high standards”, “engage all students in relevant activities”...) come “laden with ethical baggage”, and are far from neutral (Aldred, 2009 p.6; Allais, 2012; Slee, 2014). Orthodoxy, a term from the economic literature is

helpful when learning to read between the lines. Economic orthodoxy refers to the unquestioned acceptance of certain economic explanations (Aldred, 2009). Educational orthodoxy is reflected in oft-repeated tenets that are accepted as “true” without critically questioning the conclusions being asserted, such as the need for students with disability labels to have separate assessment systems and the value of teachers using scripted or packaged materials in the name of equity and fairness. As discussed next, ableism and orthodoxy also appear in the words “real-life, engaging and relevant”. Progressive and student-centered reform language masks neoliberal values with winners and losers and an ableism that is easy to overlook.

Ableism in PBL: “Engagement for All”

Reflecting on the data from interviews about local PBL implementation revealed a similar strategy to that of the scripted modules and the AA-AAS. Specifically, in districts that embraced a PBL approach teachers reported “we have to do at least five projects a year” and others received a bound book of PBL activities for them to implement. Teacher autonomy was again reduced in pursuit of an intervention that would raise achievement while being in the “best interests” of students. Ableism can be considered “dysconscious” here as well (Broderick & Lalvani, 2017). Meaning, in this context, that participants shared varied experiences with projects but descriptions of students contained familiar disability constructs and vocabulary.

Innovations in Pedagogy

The language of PBL has the same appeal to neoliberal values despite the friendlier terms of “real-world,” “relevant, and “21st century” (Hallerman et al., 2011). 21st century skills include collaboration, working in teams, problem-solving and are defined as what “the business world tells us that successful employees, managers, entrepreneurs and leaders in the 21 century economy need...”(Hallerman et al., p. 9). The presence of ableism in the local implementation was not reflective of teachers deliberately discriminating against students, the dysconscious ableism here refers to the norms of ability grouping and perceptions of “high and “low achievers” that remained despite pedagogical shifts. PBL received mixed reviews including teachers who spoke in glowing terms (“exciting”) and those that were disappointed in the outcomes (“the kids didn’t really get invested”). A sixth grade teacher in a district that required PBL but allowed teachers to create their projects reflected, “I gave them choice on things they didn’t need to have a choice about.” And then “the end product was so open that they had a really difficult time completing their task.” This educator continued to refine their skills “I was young and still in a very eager mode whereas now I’m a bit more skeptical. I know what I’m doing is good and I want to make sure if I’m adding something new, it’s worth it”. Autonomy and growth for teachers was a positive outcome in districts that enabled teacher innovation, although the impact of unexamined ableism remained. Another participant was less reflective about the complexity of real change and defined PBL as a class project that they

“turned around on them [the students] “I kind of turned it back on them and said, “this has to come from you”. Special educators who were in inclusive settings expressed concerns that required accommodations and modifications weren’t always included in the project planning while general educators felt that special educators weren’t supporting the projects. This finding suggests that the special-regular binary continues to influence roles and expectations regardless of pedagogy. PBL appeared to be more effective when students were heterogeneously grouped (i.e. teachers referred to “advanced students” who could “push” other students to achieve more). But, the language of ability was still strong, i.e. students as “high and low functioning” with “slackers” being students who interfered with the success of the projects, mostly due their behavior and social interactions.

Defining the real world

Unsurprisingly, implementation was key, PBL required a significant change from traditional instruction and implementation research has regularly found that results depends on myriad local factors including (but not limited to) teachers’ interpretation of the policy, time devoted to experimenting with new ideas, resistance to mandates, collegial support and ability to enact change within already heavily work schedules (Brodkin, 2015; Good et al., 2017; Gottfried & Conchas, 2016) Consistent with prior research on implementation, teachers made pedagogical decisions based on their interpretation of what PBL meant within their current circumstances (Brodkin, 2000 ; Gottfried & Conchas, 2016) From an implementation perspective, variables that help explain the outcomes could be organizational, institutional, the agency of individual actors, but ableism rearranges the picture. Viewed through the lens of ableism, the projects would be considered real world and relevant depending on the ways students were included and how the topics accounted for the social and political realities that disabled students face. Again, critically deconstructing “normal” and refusing the security of seeking normal learners creates more possibilities for all students.

Notably, the rhetoric surrounding PBL as “real world” and geared toward students’ future employment mirrors the language used to deny academic access to students with intellectual disabilities (Ayres et al, 2011; Courtade et al, 2012). For students with disabilities, preparing for the “real world” has meant that much of academics and inclusive social activities has been considered frivolous when time is short and the future depends on self-sufficient independent workers. In describing their instructional decisions, it was clear that general educators have been exposed to the same pressure to prepare students for an uncertain future holding high standards and providing instruction as directed. A common theme across the three studies was teachers’ fear that they must focus intently on preparing students for a future where the individual is expected to work, be productive and independent, and not rely on others in a competitive and ruthless economy.

DISCUSSION

The ableism contained within values such as independence, rigor, achievement and productivity, is not immediately apparent as these terms are revered in the U.S. as the hallmarks of hard working individuals. However, reading between the lines reveals an acceptance that there is a “normal” learner and there are “normal” bodies who have the ability to thrive while others are incapable. Recognizing ableism means re-defining normal and committing to the belief that student variability is not a surprise, but IS the norm. The special-general education binary must be questioned because the line between special and ordinary is amorphous and ableism has offered only two positions for students with disabilities: as deficient and needing intervention or as inspirational, needing admiration.

The need for separate teachers with separate certifications in separate classrooms teaching separate content is often perceived as obvious and the separateness allows more attention and a better education. However, the belief in the students with disabilities as outsiders helps explain why each of the three initiatives were created and implemented without considering a wide variety of student characteristics and contexts. In *Demand the Impossible* (2016) Ayers asserted “When the aim of education is the reproduction of all the social relations as they are now, schooling is nothing more than locating oneself on the grand pyramid of winners and losers. (p. 159). Avoiding such a consequence can be minimized or eliminated by using the framework of critical disability studies, specifically ableism to read between the lines.

Reading between the lines also means recognizing when educational initiatives are moving students with disabilities and their teachers further from the school community. One recommendation to avoid ableism is to separate disability from special education by replacing the medicalized paradigm of disability and the protective and care-taking orientation with real equity and respect. The second is to be alert to the ableism within economic capitalist concepts that appear in education reform as the language of benevolence and success.

Unlearning Ableism

Special education has been a source of significant progress and provided students with services and supports that were unimaginable in the past. The procedures for IEPs and due process provisions have given parents options that did not exist prior to 1975 (Hehir, 2005). However, special education now occupies a contested space- while initially a significant civil rights provision, it has inadvertently served to label, segregate and remediate students to fit a standard of “normal”. Teachers are prepared to support separate populations of students, maintaining disability as “otherness” and an entire system of professionals and institutions profit from the required curricula, evaluations and certification tests (Broderick & Lalvani, 2017). Many special educators have heard some version of “you must be a special person” or “you must have so much patience”. Such apparent accolades are common but troubling as they assume disability to be burdensome, distasteful, and difficult. Unlearning ableism means

re-imagining education, asking new questions about what disability means, and challenging the prevalent deficit-based language, practices and policies of schooling (Danforth & Gabel, 2016). A critical disability framework centered on ableism asks penetrating questions about how disability is construed and who benefits from the definition, who is served by the status quo, who makes decisions, and whose agency is respected (Connor et al., 2016). This fundamental query can be used to analyze policy and read between the lines to see, for example, who decides where students learn the skills to be assessed on the AA-AAS or how a project is designed in PBL with student identities in mind and reminding caring and concerned educators to reject the discourse of “high or low functioning”. Distinguishing between special education and disability does not mean denying impairments or limitations but responding differently and allowing the full range of human-ness to be part of schooling. Committing to critically questioning the presumption that disability is a static objective state that can be managed by nondisabled professionals with the correct certification is a powerful way to resist ableism, as is rejecting the discourses that some students are “slackers” or too difficult to participate in all schooling has to offer..

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that teachers and students will benefit when policymakers and educators act to recognize and then counter ableism. Educators and advocates for students with disabilities have been on a quest for full participation in the life of school: academic achievement, extracurricular enrichment, friendship and social engagement. (Connor et al., 2016; Danforth & Gabel, 2016) While policies have helped the quest advance, there are still hidden obstacles in the way. The policies and interventions discussed (AA-AAS, CCSS modules and PBL) have offered outcomes previously not afforded to students with disabilities and are certainly important destinations to have reached. Reading between the lines is now essential for concerned educators and policymakers to recognize how the historical marginalization of students with disabilities has occurred and to prevent it from continuing within educational interventions of the future.

Author's Note

I alternate people-first, “students with disabilities” and identity-first “disabled students” because of the debates in the field as to which is preferred and most respectful. See Dunn, D. & Andrews, E. (2015). Person-first and identity-first language: Developing psychologists’ cultural competence using disability language. *American Psychologist*, 70(3), 255-264 and <https://news.northeastern.edu/2018/07/12/unpacking-the-debate-over-person-first-vs-identity-first-language-in-the-autism-community/>.

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