Out with the Old: A Conversation about Canada’s Dated Special Education System

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Canada’s education system is constantly evolving, with changes being made to policy and procedure on a consistent basis in order to accommodate for the growth of societal knowledge. Particularly, as society begins to accept a more intersectional framework, our education system should begin to reflect these changes. Special education classrooms are still a fairly common practice in the Canadian education system. The onset of special education was a response to the lack of education that was occurring for those with disabilities (Norwich, 2014). Shifts in ideology from institutionalization to special needs classrooms was initially beneficial to people with disabilities as it encouraged attendance in schools, as iterated by Dunlap the CEO of KIT (Kids Included Together) – an organization that offers free inclusion training (2015). Gradually, testing for various disabilities within primary schools increased and the label of “disabled” was embraced by the North American Education System. This naturally benefitted those within this community, as accommodations and individualized education plans were created. Conclusively, the onset of this model of education increased accessibility to education and intrinsically offered young students a concrete social identity, much like a sense of belonging to a minority group (Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007).

That being said, it is evident that the time has come to consider that this kind of “specialized” education can be a source of oppression for children with disabilities. Education has the potential to have an incredibly positive influence on students; unfortunately, with the current system, narratives of difference are often being unintentionally reiterated to students with disabilities.

To provide context to this essay, the theoretical framework that supports this argument will be provided. Subsequently, this model will be challenged for the social and societal implications on the lives of children with disabilities. To conclude, an argument will be made for new, more intersectional models of disability to be accepted by the education community in order to establish better policies for an inclusive education system.

This analysis serves to challenge the systemic barriers that oppress people with disabilities. There are two main models in defining barriers for people with disabilities. The social model sees disability as a social identity, with the barriers or disability being defined as the loss of opportunities to take part in “normal” life, and impairment being the functional limitation (Isrelite & Swartz, 2004). This is in contrast to the medical model which views disability as a problem with the individual, and not the environment (Isrelite & Swartz, 2004). In this essay there is an emphasis on the complex embodiment model which “raises awareness of the effects of disabling environments on people’s lived experience of the body, but [...] emphasizes that some factors affecting disability [...] derive from the body (Seibers, 2013). This theory accounts for the complexities of the lived experience of people with disabilities, providing a more complete picture of the disabled experience. Particularly when discussing people with disabilities in schooling, complex identities need to be accounted for.

Additionally, we will be focusing on using an intersectional framework. Internationality serves to “analyze the differential ways by which social divisions are concretely enmeshed and constructed by each other and how they relate to political and subjective constructions of identities” (Erevelles & Minear, 2013). Using this framework will allow this paper to focus on the way in which special education classrooms may impact children with varying identities. Race, class, and gender may impact one’s success in the special education system, which will be discussed later.

To begin, awareness and understanding of social constructivism, and the social model of disability, leads to fundamental issues with this model of schooling. Siebers describes the oppression of the disabled population as “driven not by individual conscious syndromes, but by social ideologies that are embodied” (2015). As a society with standardized education, we must be critical of systematic ideological stereotypes that are being upheld by the segregation of students with disabilities. The unspoken implication of segregation is othering, which leads children to be pitied and marginalized. The development of a sense of identity begins when we are recognized by other people as being a person; therefore, by putting children with disabilities in “special” classrooms, we are limiting
their attainable sense of self (Hegel, 1807). This is because on a structural level, segregation implies that they are not seen equal in value to able-bodied children, which is an easily internalized message. One student in Davila’s interviews with children placed in special education classes said, “You can’t do the same things in school as everyone else, and it’s embarrassing” (Davila, 2015). This exemplifies that, from a young age, children are internalizing the social ideology that is being put forth for them. Special education classrooms consistently tell them that they are not enough.

On a social level, our core ideology surrounding children with disabilities is constructed through the practice of othering. The lives of these students are mysterious to children outside these classrooms and therefore understandings are constructed through media misrepresentations - which is problematic to developing a new narrative for students with disabilities (Young, 2012). Separation implies that they are not capable of engaging with society as able-bodied children do, which consequently makes these children up for failure instead of providing them with an inclusionary support system (Dunlap, 2015). In Ontario, women with disabilities “demonstrate exceptionally low rates of workforce participation, and nearly one-third live in poverty” (Isrelite & Swartz, 2004). As said by Driedger, a major part of this issue is attitudes towards people with disabilities. They are seen as “recipients, not contributors” (Driedger, 2004). These detrimental attitudes increase even more when we look at the intersections between gender, race, disability and other oppressors. A system of education that shows children their peers with disabilities are not their equals could be a major contributor to this problem.

Calling children “special” also creates an implication of social behaviors towards them that has a negative effect on children (Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007). It is evident that the perception of self for children with disabilities is altered by the acceptance of these social ideologies. “Special” has become a word with a negative connotation; it implies inherent reiteration of the same negative social narratives (Norwich, 2014). Children with disabilities should not be labeled as having a “special” education, but an education like any other. Labeling these students as different is to disable them through exclusionary language.

On top of the issue of language, a classroom for “special children” encompasses various impairments, trivializing the individual experience, needs, and social locations of a myriad of children. Segregation to “special needs” generalizes children’s difficulties, which is often racialized (Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007; Davila, 2015). Students of colour are found to be overrepresented in special education and are more likely to be placed in separate, non-inclusive programs (Harris et al, 2004; Davila, 2015). Throughout history, disability has been used to justify inequality for minority groups (Baynton, 2013). In a study examining the experience of Latin American students in special education, they used critical race theory to contextualize their social experiences. It explained that minority groups in special education are statistically more likely to have lower learning expectations. This exemplifies how intersectional perspectives are not being taken into account in the current model of schooling. This can lead to learning disparities in students because of assumptions about their learning capabilities that are based in internalized racism, and ableism (Davila, 2015).

This can be attributed to the narratives of difference within our social ideology. The dichotomy of able-bodied people being seen as capable renders disabled people as “special” or incapable. In a blog post, Klein, a frustrated special education teacher, expresses her distaste for a system that encourages feelings of academic inferiority through low expectations, particularly for students from families with lower income or uninvolved parents, stating “the special education system fails these kids” (2012). Evidently, there are educators with exigent demands for a revised system of education. This is a call for action.

Klein’s testimony, as well as the aforementioned reasons, are why an intersectional analysis of inclusionary models is the next step forward. Normalizing the lives of students with disabilities can improve the social ideologies surrounding disabilities, by challenging the notion that they are different at all. Othering is a dated practice, often rooted in fear. There are new models for the education of people with disabilities that are now being proposed. Norwich proposes the capability approach, which could greatly benefit the education of those with disabilities. It defines disability in a way that extends beyond the medical and social models of disability and describes it as a deprivation of limitation in capability or functioning (Norwich, 2014). This could mean a definition of individualized educations that extends beyond the “conventional” disabilities, to impairments that link to a much wider scale of disadvantage. This accounts for three factors of disability that could affect a student’s ability to perform. The first is personal characteristics like age, as well as their medical diagnosis as disabled. Additionally, it accounts for commodities and resources available to children, and for the social environment in which the student is situated, including physical and social barriers. Since the label of “disabled” is socially constructed, new models of this definition should include the complexities of the disabled experience, as stated in the complex embodiment model as well (Siebers, 2014).

Conclusively, as summarized in my previous arguments, the model of special education falls short in three distinct areas. It serves to reiterate narratives of difference through segregation, presenting children with disabilities as less capable than their able-bodied peers. It also impacts a child’s social identity through internalized feelings of inadequacy, setting these students up to feel inferior to their peers. Lastly, it generalizes impairments into the special education category, trivializing the individual experience of the disabled population, and forgetting to include intersectional perspectives, which contextualize their systematic oppression.
Moving forward, it is my belief that educators should seek to modify current accepted practices in the education system to reflect the changing ideologies in disabilities studies. My suggestions are as follows:

1. Educators and policymakers must adopt a modernized model of disability, one that accounts for the intersectional experience of students with disabilities, and can account for the layers of oppression that students with disabilities may be experiencing. This model should be reflected in all structural changes being made in the future. A likely candidate is the capability approach, as developed by Norwich (2014).

2. The education system should move away from the exclusionary model of having a separate special education classroom, and seek to integrate students into classrooms as completely as possible. This may lead to a change in the stereotypes about students with disabilities, as well as help to prevent students from internalizing these narratives of inferiority and difference.

3. Educators should be required to read literature on disability theory and its intersections with race, particularly those who seek to work with students with disabilities. Understanding the way in which the social systems have previously, and still do, oppress students with disabilities should lead to more thoughtful and inclusive teaching methods in the future.

Ultimately, this research has implications that extend beyond the issue of special education classrooms. In the broader context, understanding the ways the education system falls short can improve the lives of those with disabilities, by lessening the societal oppression that this group feels on a daily basis. Examining the current social systems creates a space for better accessibility and inclusion of people with disabilities, and in turn more informed and impactful policies and procedures.

**Works Cited**


