

Disability Teaches Us: **Disability and Ableism in Schools History**

Disability Justice is “an honoring of the longstanding legacies of resilience and resistance which are the inheritance of all of us whose bodies or minds will not conform. Disability Justice is a vision and practice of yet-to-be, a map that we create with our ancestors and our great grandchildren onward, in the width and depth of our multiplicities and histories, a movement towards a world in which every body and mind is known as beautiful” (Berne, 2015)

Essential Question:

How do historical (and current) beliefs and practices contribute to ableism, racism and intersectionality in schools today? And how do we shift them towards justice?

Directions

- 1) Each group will be given a time period (see table of contents below)
- 2) Read through the events (5 min)
- 3) Discuss the events relating back to the essential question (15 min)
 - a) Choose a person to take notes and report back to the large group
- 4) As a closing, consider: Based on what you've learned, what's a next step you will take?

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GROUP 1: Pre-colonial - 1800s



Education in indigenous communities was not restricted to a single way of teaching and learning. Indigenous pedagogies had different approaches to human variability that centered connectedness and interdependence. A common sign language amongst indigenous tribes, now referred to as **Plain Indian Sign Language (PISL)**, was not only inclusive for people who were deaf, but also served to communicate across different tribal languages.

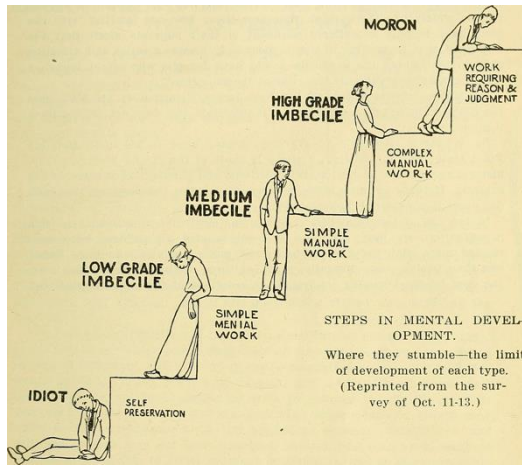


In most states it was illegal to teach slaves to read or write. In **1772**, **Phillis Wheatley**, a young African slave, was accused of plagiarizing poems when her owners wanted to publish her work. Although eighteen judges examined Phillis Wheatley's work and deemed her to be competent, her owners had to go to England to find a publisher willing to publish for the first book of poetry written in English by a person of African descent.

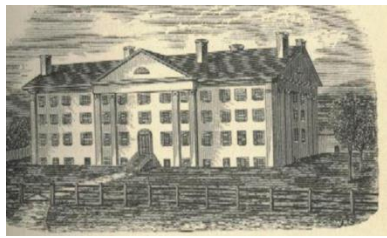


After the Revolution, there was an urgency to define the features of a "fit citizen." The legal frameworks were designed to shape the nation's legal, economic, and civic structures. "Racist ideologies defined male and female African Americans as fundamentally inferior specimens with deformed bodies and minds who were best confined to slavery. Indigenous peoples were killed or removed, and generally made ineligible for citizenship. And like these other categories, but often privileged by whiteness, most white women remained *feme covert*s—legal nonentities determined unfit for civic life. Disability, as a concept, was used to justify legally established inequalities." (Nielsen, 2012, original italics)

GROUP 2: 1800s - 1850s



In the 1800s schools for youth with disabilities were often funded by philanthropists. A few served students well and believed in their ability to learn life skills. However, the majority believed in full segregation of the “mentally retarded” and “feeble-minded.” They enforced policies in line with eugenics and capitalist aims to exploit people with disabilities for free labor and/or deem worthless because of their inability to participate in production lines.



Connecticut Asylum for the Education of Deaf and Dumb Persons was established in **1817** for students that were “unfit but redeemable or deserving.” At that time, this was considered progressive and people found it empowering and liberating, especially when it started opening more leadership opportunities for the Deaf community. (Nielsen, 2012)



During slavery most Southern states had laws against teaching enslaved peoples to read and write and people of African descent were considered having moral, mental, and intellectual disabilities. However, slaves often participated in “fugitive pedagogies” (Givens, 2019), teaching one another to read and write in secret.



Harriet Tubman (1822-1913) is an abolitionist known for her work on the Underground Railroad, where she helped runaway slaves to flee to safer areas of the country. Tubman had epilepsy as a result of a head injury from being severely beaten by her master at age 12. Even though she needed to stop and take rest breaks throughout her journeys, Tubman ventured into the depths of slave country many times, saving countless lives.

GROUP 3: 1850s-1900s



Courtesy of the Straight Ahead Pictures Collection

Washington School for Defective Youth was established in **1886** as a residential school for the “deaf, mute, blind, and feebleminded” youth of Washington Territory (Washington became a state in 1889). Youth with disabilities were sent away to the school to live and attend classes instead of living with their families.



Native Americans had been sent to **Indian Boarding Schools** to make them more “American” because it was believed that their cultures were primitive and lacking intelligence. The government said that residential schools for people with disabilities and boarding schools for Native Americans were helping “cure” people, which is both deeply racist and ableist. Students in these schools were taught that they were innately bad and were not treated with respect. In Washington State the three most well-known Indian boarding schools were Cushman Indian School in Tacoma, Spokane Indian School, and Tulalip Indian School.



Watson v. City of Cambridge (1893): The Massachusetts Supreme Court upheld the “expulsion [from public school] of a student solely due to poor academic ability” on the ground that the student was too “weak minded” to profit from instruction.



Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) established that schools that were “separate but equal” served public good. Not only did this keep schools racially segregated, it isolated “epileptic” and “feeble-minded” youth.

Published in ***American Charities (1908)*** by Amos G. Warner, “**Three kinds of classes are proposed for abnormal children**: training classes for the mentally deficient, coaching classes for the slightly backward, delicate, or exceptional, and disciplinary classes for the truant and disorderly... The movement is recognized as highly important not merely for the relief of the teachers of normal children in the public schools, but as a preventive measure. Such children become in many cases semi-criminal, or at least incapable of self-support. Among the group of backward children will be found those who with this special training and medical care may become normal, and among them also some who will prove to be really feeble-minded and in need of institutional care. In either case the work of prevention is economical as well as humane.”

GROUP 4: 1900s-1950s



Alexander G. Bell's, the inventor of the first telephone, mother was deaf. However, he believed that sign language was backwards and Deaf people needed to assimilate. He is pictured here with students at **The American Association To Promote Teaching Speech To The Deaf**.

Standardization and assimilation based on language gave rise to oralism, a method of teaching Deaf students to read lips, use hearing devices, and verbally speak. By WWI up to 80% of Deaf students were taught with

oralist techniques instead of sign language. There was also a decrease in Deaf adults hired as principals and teachers, even at Gallaudet, a historically Deaf school. Oralism remained dominant until the 1970s. Sign language remained alive due to the Deaf community's vibrance and resistance. (Nielsen, 2012)



Alfred Binet and Theodore Simon developed the first modern intelligence test in 1905, the **intelligence quotient (IQ) test**. Binet said that "slow children" were unwanted by schools or hospitals. IQ tests were used to identify "defectives," "morons," "idiots" and "imbeciles," with the purpose of segregating them out of society.

Hiawatha Asylum for Insane Indians (1898-1934) in Canton, South Dakota housed more than 300 indigenous peoples from at least 53 tribes. Indigenous peoples were considered insane when they opposed sending kids to boarding school, resisted, argued, or held onto indigenous religion and tradition. It was thought that Indigenous peoples were more likely than Europeans to be insane based on the standards of normality. (Nielsen, 2012)



People with disabilities were considered immoral, irregular, and a social threat. In the case **Buck v Bell (1927)**, the court stated that "three generations of imbeciles are enough" and ruled that sterilization of women with disabilities does not violate 14th amendment rights.

GROUP 5: 1950s-1970s

Judith Heumann (born 1947) is a disability rights activist. She was the first person using a wheelchair to teach in New York City. She has worked with Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, and organized the 504 Sit-In protest in San Francisco, CA. The protest she organized is still the longest sit-in at a federal building to date.



In **1950 The Association for Retarded Citizens** (they have since dropped "retarded" and simply go by The Arc) was formed by a small group of parents to act as voices for change and counter deficit notions of disability. At the time, little was known about the condition of intellectual disability (then referred to as 'mental retardation') or its causes. There were virtually no programs and community activities to support children and adults with intellectual disabilities or their families. Today The Arc has over 730 chapters around the United States and includes community support, advocacy, and education programs.



Brown v. Board of Education (1954): The U.S. Supreme Court held that a separate education for African-American children was not an equal education, providing an important precedent for an integrated public education for all citizens. Advocates for students with disabilities argued that the exclusion of students with disabilities was a denial of equal educational opportunity.

Unfortunately, it would take nearly 20 years for this precedent to be applied to children with disabilities.



Two landmark court cases, **Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (1971)** and **Mills v. Board of Education (1972)**, established the educational rights of students with disabilities. Both cases resulted in public schools being required to provide educational services to students with disabilities.

Following the PARC and Mills cases, between 1972 and 1975, 46 right-to-education cases were filed on behalf of students with disabilities in 28 states. After so much family advocacy and activism, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), passed in 1975 established incentives for states to provide services to students with disabilities. EAHCA stated that students with disabilities were entitled to a free and appropriate education (FAPE) and set out the rights of students and their families.

GROUP 6: 1970s-2000s



In **1975**, the **Education for all Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA)**, revised in 1990 to be the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), gave all students the right to a free, appropriate public education, including students with disabilities that had been in institutions or experienced greater physical or mental impacts because of their disabilities. IDEA requires all public schools accepting federal funds to provide equal access to education to children with physical and mental disabilities. It also requires that each child have an individualized education program (IEP) that is implemented in the least restrictive environment possible.



During the **504 Sit-In** in **1977**, 120 protesters (people with disabilities and their aides) slept, ate, and protested inside the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in San Francisco, CA for 26 days. They demanded that rules to implement the law passed three years prior finally be issued. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act stated, “no qualified individual with a disability should, only by reason of his or her disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.” The Black Panthers and Gay Rights activists were in solidarity and provided support and materials for the 504 Sit-In.



Courtesy of Tom Olin

In **1990** the famous “**Capital Crawl**,” youth and adults with disabilities literally crawled up the steps of the Capitol building in Washington D.C. without their wheelchairs, walkers, or other adaptive equipment to highlight the lack of physical and political accessibility. This demonstration was to demand that **The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)** be passed by lawmakers.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA): The ADA is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life, including jobs, schools, transportation, and all places that are open to the general public. The purpose of the law is to make sure that people with disabilities have the same rights and opportunities, and access to their communities, as everyone else.

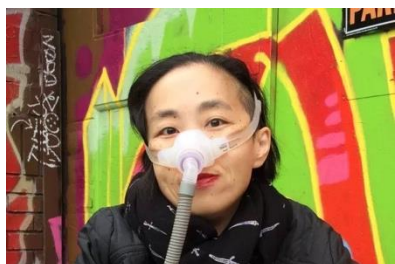
GROUP 7: 2000s-Now



Anita Cameron (1965 -) is a disability rights activist and advocate. Anita is a member of **ADAPT** (formerly American Disabled for Accessible Public Transit, now American Disabled for Attendant Programs Today). One of the first protests for ADAPT was at a McDonalds in Denver, CO in 1984. A local newspaper reported, “The nearly two-dozen protesters... began blocking entrances to the restaurant’s parking lot. Four entrances and the drive-through lane were closed for about an hour... Each entrance was blocked by two to three [protesters in wheelchairs], some holding signs that read ‘Discrimination Hurts Everyone!!!’ and ‘How Can I Enjoy An Egg McMuffin When I Can’t Get To The Tables?’” Cameron has been arrested 124 times with ADAPT, doing nonviolent civil disobedience, modeled after other activists such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mahatma Gandhi. She continues to be an advocate for LGBTQIA+ communities, voting rights and the accessibility of polls, and emergency preparedness for people with disabilities.



The **2004 Amendments to IDEA** included new methods of disability identification, use of response to intervention (RtI), early intervention, discipline standards, and ensuring public schools provided appropriate and accessible instruction. These amendments also included attention to training and hiring highly qualified special education teachers. These amendments addressed the disproportionality of students of color identified with disabilities, placed in segregated settings, and suspended or expelled as compared with their white peers, and strengthened provisions for reducing it. (IDEA Website: <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/>)



Alice Wong is a disability activist and consultant, and producer of the Disability Visibility Project Podcast. Her book, *Disability Visibility* is coming out this year and is on sale pre-order now! To the Huffington Post (2017) she said, “I’m a disabled person whose activism is primarily online. Living in a world that is physically and socially inaccessible (e.g., micro-aggressions, lack of transportation, lack of accessible buildings and venues) and living with a body that has significant energy and assistance needs, makes it difficult for me to ‘show up’ the way most activists imagine what ‘showing up’ means.”

GROUP 8: 2000s-Now



Disability History Month Act (2008): Starting in 2006, Disability Rights Washington (DRW) coordinated with a variety of disability rights self-advocacy groups after hearing about other states that passed bills requiring that disability history be promoted during October, which is Disability History Month. They wrote letters about their experiences and disability civil rights, and over 90 students visited legislators to talk about the importance of passing the bill to expand people’s awareness and create an inclusive culture that celebrates people with disabilities. Legislators listened and the governor signed it into law in 2008.



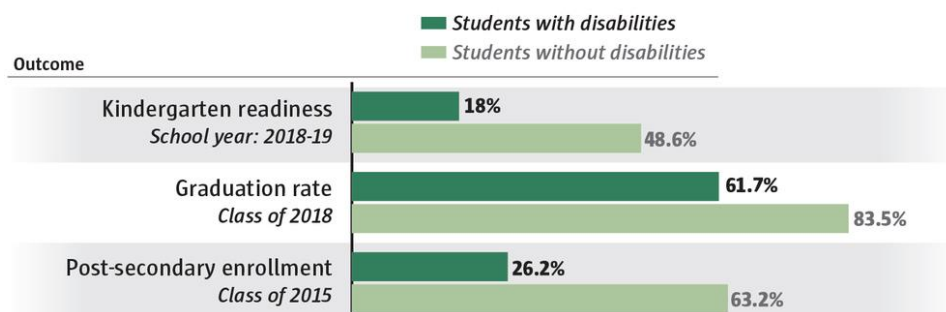
Respectful Language
How Self Advocates in Leadership passed the nation's first legislation to end the derogatory labeling of people with disabilities

Respectful Language Act (2010): Washington Arc self-advocates with intellectual and developmental disabilities organized to pass the Respectful Language Act in 2010. This grassroots movement sought

to replace offensive language (e.g. mentally retarded, disabled people) with person-first language (e.g. people with disabilities) when referring to people with disabilities in state documents. Washington State was the first state to pass such an act. One advocate, [Cherie Tessier, said, “It meant that people could look at us first as a person instead of labeling us.”](#)

What happens to Washington’s special education students?

This year, lawmakers and advocates hope to improve funding and school environments for students with disabilities, who often start behind and graduate at lower rates than their peers.



The chart to the left shows that rates of kindergarten readiness for the 2018-2019 school year were 18% for students with disabilities compared to 48.6% for students without disabilities. The graduation rates for the class of 2018 show 61.7% of students with disabilities graduated compared to 83.5%

of their non-disabled peers. Post-secondary enrollment for the class of 2015 was 26% of students with disabilities compared to 63.2% of students without disabilities. (Source: Office of Superintendent of Instruction printed in Seattle Times, April 2019)

GROUP 9: Contemporary Movements and Issues



Lydia XZ Brown is a nonbinary disability justice advocate, organizer, and writer. Lydia recently completed a term as Chairperson of the Massachusetts Developmental Disabilities Council (2015-2017) as the youngest appointee nationally to chair any state developmental disabilities council. Lydia is the lead editor behind *All the Weight of Our Dreams*, the first-ever anthology of writings and artwork by autistic people of color, published by the Autism Women's Network in June 2017. Lydia has been honored by the White House, Washington Peace Center, National Council on Independent Living, and many other places.



Leroy F. Moore Jr. is a writer, poet, musician, and activist. He is a co-founder of Sins Invalid, a disability performance art collective. He created a lecture series called, "On the Outskirts: Race & Disability." He is also producer and columnist of Illin-N-Chillin at Poor Magazine. Leroy is the creator of Krip-Hop Nation, a movement that uses hip-hop music as a means of expression for people with disabilities. The goal of Krip-Hop is to educate the music, media industries and general public about the talents, history, rights and marketability of Hip-Hop artists and other musicians with disabilities.



Mia Mingus is a writer and organizer working for disability justice to end child sexual abuse. She describes herself as a queer, physically disabled Korean woman and a transracial and transnational adoptee who is dedicated to communities and movements working for social justice. She travels nationally, giving talks and trainings, and is a member of the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collaborative (BATJC), a local collective working to build and support community responses to end child sexual abuse.



Shain M. Neumeier is an attorney, activist and community organizer, as well as an out and proud member of the disability & LGBTQ+ communities. Their passion on the issue of ending abuse and neglect of youth with disabilities in schools and treatment facilities stems from their own experiences with involuntary medical treatment and bullying. They work in Western Massachusetts in their own law practice focusing on disability, youth and transgender rights.