



Why Teach Disability Studies?

An Essay for Teachers¹

Mrs. Thompson teaches Social Studies at a high school in Iowa that recently accepted several deaf students who had previously attended a separate school. She doesn't understand why the students and their parents are adamant about having sign language interpreters in all of their classes. One of the deaf students is taking Mrs. Thompson's class in American History in which she examines the establishment of Native American schools. The deaf student is excited about the unit when he hears Mrs. Thompson explain how Native American students were punished for using their native language. He peppers her with questions about the history of schools for the deaf. She is unable to answer them. The entire class has missed an opportunity to understand more clearly sentiments about American education, religion, and the role of government in the late 1800s and early 1900s—and today.

Jack, an 11th grader around San Diego, California, is working on a paper on Brown vs. Board of Education for his American Government class. He has some problems seeing, and his school has helped make his readings accessible to him. In this class, students have looked closely at the American civil rights movement and its relationship to non-violent human rights movements around the world. Yet, the class doesn't address the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, now IDEA, or its far-reaching impact on American schools. Nor has there been a discussion of the struggle for civil rights by Americans with Disabilities, culminating in the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990. Jack feels left out. The teacher and students don't recognize the fact that American disability rights laws are held up in nations around the globe as exemplary human rights legislation. They also fail to see the influence of the African American civil rights movement on efforts to eliminate discrimination against other populations.

Mr. Dunmore teaches Jack's American Government class. He knows discrimination, injustice, and patronizing treatment when he sees it. He would include lessons on disability studies in his class if he knew where to go on the Internet or WWW.

Ms. Polito is a middle school inclusion teacher in Vermont. She's worked with other teachers in many ways—as a consulting teacher, inclusion specialist, and team-teacher. Ms. Polito has been trying to find ways to help administrators, teachers, parents, and students

understand why including students with disabilities is so important. “Disability Awareness Day” never made sense to her. How can she relate what she knows and believes about people with disabilities to what is being taught at the school?

Jeff is a 10th grade student in a school outside of Syracuse, New York. For the past three years, his grandmother has been living with his family. He knows that she has been losing her memory and acting strange at times and that her doctor says she has Alzheimer’s disease. His aunt and uncle recently visited and had a heated argument with his own parents. They said his grandmother was “crazy” and “demented” and should be placed in a “home” for her own good. The next week Jeff’s American Studies class studied reform movements in the mid-1800s and learned about Dorothea Dix’s address in Massachusetts decrying conditions in poorhouses. He was hungry to learn more about the treatment of people with cognitive or mental difficulties. What happened after Dix’s Memorial? What are institutions, asylums, or “homes” like today? What are the responsibilities of family, local community, state government, and federal government in helping people like his grandmother? Where could he go to find answers to his questions?

These scenarios capture why I believe that it is important to teach disability studies in the social studies, science education, reading and language arts, and other subjects at the 6th through 12th grade levels. I will give my reasons why I think this is important in another way:

Disability directly or indirectly affects everyone:

- Estimates of people with disabilities in American society range from approximately 15% to 19.7% of the population or 38 to 52.6 million people.
- Practically everyone will either experience disability directly or have a family member or loved one who has a mental or physical impairment. If a person is fortunate to live a long life, he or she will almost surely experience a mental or physical disability of some kind.
- Disability can happen to someone at any time—today, tomorrow, next week, or next year. The more one knows about disability studies and the current perspectives of people with disabilities, the more likely one will be to adjust to becoming disabled and to reject stereotypes and traditional ways of thinking about disability.

People with disabilities are present in society as never before:

- Because of laws outlawing discrimination—specifically Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act—people with

disabilities are increasingly present in America's workplaces, stores, transportation systems, and public facilities.

- The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has resulted in millions of students with disabilities—5,775,722 students ages 6 to 21 in 2000-01—receiving a public education.
- Due to the “least restrictive environment” mandate of IDEA and the increased emphasis on inclusive education, students with disabilities are attending regular school programs. Millions of students with disabilities participate full- or part-time in regular programs. Both teachers and nondisabled students have increased exposure to students with disabilities.

Disability provides a unique lens through which to view American history, current events, and civic values:

- Disability raises issues of rights and responsibilities as well as the role of the government in promoting the welfare of all citizens. What are the roles of federal, state, and local governments, voluntary associations, and individuals in providing assistance to and preventing discriminatory treatment against other citizens?
- Disability figured prominently in major events in American history, ranging from the rise of popular culture to immigration policy to veterans benefits following the Civil War, World War I, and World War II.
- Disability encourages a respect for diversity and difference in a democratic society.
- Disability helps us understand the connection between language and societal attitudes and beliefs. Does it make a difference how we refer to other people? Do some names hurt and others bring pride? Who has the right to decide what any group of people should be called?
- Disability sheds light on the influence of values and beliefs on science and professional practices. From attempts to measure intelligence as a single entity to discussions of heredity, disability has been embedded with social and cultural meaning.

Disability studies is now available to teachers in lesson plans and various teaching resources:

- Teachers and students can review, examine, and interpret primary source materials, including first-person accounts, laws, public and private records, correspondence, and printed materials.

- Rich histories have been written on the topic of disability in American society that provide students with ways to understand disability in social and historical context.

Teaching disability addresses curriculum standards:

- Disability studies provides examples that can be used to teach social studies, history, civics, science, reading and language arts, and other subjects.
- Disability is an ideal subject through which students can learn basic lessons regarding culture, individual developmental and identity, power, authority, and governance, civic ideals and practices, and other themes in national and state educational standards.

In contrast to race, ethnicity, gender, and other characteristics, disability largely has been invisible in curricula at the elementary, middle school, and secondary levels. Teaching opportunities have been lost, and students with and without disabilities have not been able to examine issues that may not only touch them personally, but from which they can learn broader lessons about society. This can and should change.

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¹The scenarios at the beginning of this essay come from or were inspired by Laurie Block, Straight Ahead Pictures.