# When Children are Left Behind: The Social Education of Disability Studies in the Trumpian Era

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Some day, may be, there will exist a well-informed, well-considered, and yet fervent public conviction that the most deadly of all possible sins is the mutilation of a child's spirit; for such mutilation undercuts the life principle of trust, without which every human act, may it feel ever so good and seen ever so right, is prone to perversion by destructive forms of conscientiousness.

--Erik Erikson, quoted in Jonathan Kozol's (1967) Death At An Early Age.

Surely there is enough for everyone within this country. It is a tragedy that these good things are not more widely shared.

--Jonathan Kozol, Savage Inequalities, (1992, p. 233)

During the 2016 presidential election, Donald Trump visibly mocked New York Time's reporter Serge Kovalesky. Although, the event did spark a great amount of debate in the news and social media, it is safe to wonder what kind of conversation the candidate's action sparked. According to Trump, he was not mocking the reporter's disability. However, questions regarding the proper social response should linger, making us to pause and think what ought to be socially acceptable when treating the disabled.

Jonathan Kozol and Eric Erickson (Kozol, 1967, 1992) remind us that we – teachers, academics, and educational theorists – must strive to make education a meaningful socially experience for the students (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2007; Giroux, 2003; Kincheloe, 2007). As Erevelles (2002) states, one of the main goals entrusted to educational institutions has been to transform "individual into citizens" (p. 5). In the pursuit to transform individuals into citizens, however, scholars have struggled for years to incorporate the concept of social justice and equality in education (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003). From such struggle of social justice, we experienced the emergence of critical pedagogy (Kincheloe, 2004). Critical pedagogues have contested that much still needs to be done to end oppression and inequality (Apple, 1995; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2007). For example, Friere (1970) – considered by many the father of critical pedagogy (Kincheloe, 2004) – reminds us that education, sadly, rests on the banking education idea where teacher knows best and the student acts as a mere depository of knowledge.

Arguably, this is counterproductive to our notion that the student must be educated to be fully functioning citizen (author, 2015). For Freire (1970), knowledge that is only for immediate purposes such as passing a test and soon forgotten is not valuable knowledge. Freire argument is that such pedagogical practices do not enable the student to explore his or her situation in the world. Other proponent of critical pedagogy, McLaren (2003) and Apple (2005), argue that the practice of banking education promotes market and capitalistic ideals in education, which only widens the social inequalities and injustices in our society. The struggle for critical pedagogy have evolved around the notion of challenging the current distribution of knowledge, values, and practices to promote a truly democratic society (Gabel, Cohen, Kotel, & Pearson, 2013; Giroux, 1988). Critical pedagogues equate social justice as the pursuit of knowledge that would create autonomous members of a democratic society enabling them to be active participants of society in the light of Rawls's (1971) social contract.

### Social Justice and the Disabled

The contested and explosive dilemmas of social justice and education have not escaped the disability arena (Danermark & Gellerstedt, 2004; Erevelles, 2002). Like in many other fields of education, scholars in disability studies also face the daunting task of defining "key features" in this realm of study (Goodley, 2007). Furthermore, scholars in disability wrestle with what constitutes social justice for disability and who will benefit from it. Moreover, disability scholars fight with never ending argument of who is capable of becoming an active citizen within the margins of democracy in the realms of the physically challenged (Guttmann, 1988). It is inevitable that in such discourse conflicts with what and how civic education for the disable should take place. For example, Gutmann (1988) argued that, even with best educational intentions, children with severe disabilities might not benefit from a proper civic education. Gabel (2002) argues that the concept of giving a disabled a voice in our society is debatable when such individual is impeded from talking, walking, and properly function. Therefore, we may find it difficult to agree who gets included and who gets excluded from the discourse of disability and citizenship.

Discourses about civics and social justice for the disabled are not easy. For example, Erevelles (2002) argued that even within the strive to include every disabled in the discourse of citizen participation, "there seems to be little interest

in the citizen's right of persons with cognitive/severe disability except when discussing how severely a fetus or a person should be before one is justified in preventing its (the fetus) birth or allowing the person to die" (p. 6). Therefore, it appears that, for the most part, engaging discourse of what would constitute an enabling participatory citizenship for the disabled has a form of liberating education has been avoided. Critical pedagogy, which has been presenting scenarios to engage the individual in citizenship and social participation, has eluded the disability discourse as a genuine form of oppression. Disability continues to be equated with invisibility when it comes to participatory citizenship (author, 2015; Erevelles, 2002) and a socially acceptable form of discrimination and oppression (Ferri & Connor, 2005).

## **Theoretical Foundations: The Moral Crisis in Education**

My desire is to provide sufficient intellectual foundation to enhance the discourse of disability in critical pedagogy. I would like to frame my argument around philosophical and historical contexts as well as contemporary writings of educational theory, philosophy, research, and culture. My theoretical foundations on social justice rest broadly on the contributions on the contributions of Purpel, McLaren, Apple, Kozol, Kincheloe, and other important critical pedagogy theorists.

Purpel is one of my most important theoretical pillars of my argument. From Purpel (1989), I borrow the idea that exists a lack of a moral and ethical discourse in the education as he is keen to remind us that education has been

trivialized in technicalities. When Purpel writes about the trivializing education, he talks of the "evasion or neglect of larger, more critical topics and the stress put on the technical rather than on social, political, and moral issues (Purpel, 1989, pp. 2-3). The result is that the educational discourse, according to Purpel, is reduced to arguments regarding "merit pay and efficacy homework" (1989, p. 3)—a technical rationalization of top-down educational practices. Purpel's concept of moral education is a task that must include our most pressing cultural and social urgencies such as poverty, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, war, famine, unemployment, economic uncertainty, xenophobia, homophobia, and the corporatization of schools to name a few (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005).

For Purpel (1989), education must enable society to encounter these pressing issues, as disability has not eluded such trivialized path. Ever since President Gerald Ford signed the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (better known as Public Law 94-142) into law in 1975, academics have wrestled with the question of the success – or lack of success – of special education (Kauffman & Hallahan, 1995). Thirty years later, we continue to argue about the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of inclusion (Osgood, 2005). Therefore, I am borrowing from Purpel the need to include disability studies within a social and cultural context, recognizing the fact that the disabled is outside the margins of our outside the margin as an oppressed group (Ferri & Connor, 2005).

Peter McLaren pays keen attention to broaden our discourse in our classroom to critically challenge the capitalistic forces within our classrooms. McLaren

(2003a) makes it clear that current capitalistic practices in school are forms of exploitations. As a result, for McLaren (2003b), capitalism has become a force that does not allow challenges to the innumerous practices of human subjugation that globalization imposes on society. Therefore, I am borrowing the notion that the teachers are reduced to a mere "toolbox" implementing a pre-described and pre-fabricated curriculums developed by "freemarketeers" committed to the "bussinessification" of the schools (2003b, p. 27). This reductionism of the teaching practice is what impede a critical dialogue in the classroom, preventing the questioning of a system of economic-based school system that promotes economic the economic exploitation of cheap labor, outsourcing, a disregard for workers welfare, the disproportionate amassment of wealth by the corporate elite, and the destructive invalidation of a sound political debate (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005).

McLaren makes it clear in asserting that what is needed, here, is a bold conviction to challenge the current contradictions of the political system and explore the "larger geopolitical context" that shape our lives (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005, p. 276). Critical pedagogy is an act of understanding the political and economical forces shaping our lives. It is, ultimately, the notion that we must understand political and economical systems that does not serve humanity's best interest that we must challenge, which McLaren promotes. It is crucial to understand how the capitalistic system works for the disabled. It is important to understand how the disabled must navigate and survive in the sea of deception that

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capitalism has become, and understand how cheap labor, outsourcing, and the lack of job security, for example, also affects the disable (Erevelles, 2002).

Joe Kincheloe has become an excellent example of what critical pedagogy must undertake at its chore foundation. From Kincheloe, I borrow the notion that we are living in complex times, or as Kincheloe (2002) refers as hyperreality, virtuality and social vertigoes. We have become accustomed to constantly defining and redefining our version of life, death, evil, sin, pleasure, sadness, happiness, heaven, goodwill, family, friendship, love, marriage and the list goes on. The "new" in whatever shape or form this "new" might be is no longer feared but even welcomed. We also have been living for a while in the age of triviality. What is bad for me is not bad for you? What is despair for me is joy for you? What is sin for you is not for me? Indeed, polarization, contradiction, and trivialization in this nation is at an all time high. This is the age of rhetorical evasion, neglected discourses, apathy and technicalities. It is from Kincheloe (2005) that I borrow the notion that our world is too complex to continue using a Cartesian model of explaining our lives. Critical pedagogy arises as a tool to understand the bipolar nature of the world—a world that is complex, which cannot be explained through simplistic modes. Kincheloe argument coincides with Baglieri and Knopf (2004) in asserting that disability study is hijacked by a Cartesian model preventing deeper moral questions regarding disability (Howe & Miramontes, 1991).

Other pillars of my theoretical backbone are Kozol (1992, 2005), Apple (2005) and Anyon (2005). From Kozol (2005), I borrow the idea that much needs to be done to end the apartheid system in this nation. This apartheid system also

includes the disabled (Ferri & Connor, 2005). From Apple (1995), I am borrowing the notion that education is a political exercise and a tool that must be used to challenge the current state of our schools and society. From Anyon (2005), I take the affirmation of a government that have actually placed mechanism that does not serve the minorities well and actually have seriously hindered their ability to rise out of poverty. For years, I have contested the notion that poverty, as one example, is a moral flaw. Anyon (2005) has tremendously helped me in that sense. It is on their contribution that I base my argument to explain how the disabled also face poverty, disenfranchisement, and economic inequality (Erevelles, 2002).

#### **Disability Studies in the Trumpian Era**

For many, disability studies was the social justice answer for the disabled (Ciullo, Falcomata, & Vaughn, 2015; Gabel et al., 2013). Dominated by the medical model, (Longmore, 1995), discourses in disability in terms of culture, society, history, and economics have not been given the proper spaces where to flourish (Valentine, 2007). At the core, education and disability continue to be technically rationalized, numerically analyzed (*author*, 2017). Void are the spaces where a meaningful, deep praxis can take place (author, 2013).

So, what will disability studies and social justice for the disabled will look like during the age of Trump? Liss (2003) reminds us that beauty often lies in the question, not in the answer. Therefore, it is hard to answer what a Trump era will mean for anyone in education, much less for millions of disabled student. How-

ever, we can look at other sectors of the population and education system to make safe conclusion about the plight of the disabled during Trumpian times.

Unfortunately, the disabled face many social obstacles. People with disabilities are more likely to drop out of school, suffer academic failure, be unemployed or sub-employed, and/or live on welfare (author, 2015; Erevelles, 2000). Moreover, compared to other forms of discrimination, injustices towards the disabled does not spark the same social outrage (Ferri & Connor, 2005); on the contrary, it is safe to say that it is socially acceptable (Author, 2013). In addition, students with disability are more likely to receive a sub-standard education (author, 2015). Unfortunately, it appears that the current atmosphere of uncertainty and social anguish will continue during the current political landscape.

### The Revision of K-12 Federal Law

From the implementation of *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) to *Every Student Succeed Act* (ESSA), we saw our fair share of federal legislation over the last 17 years, which have regulated public schools in this country. It is safe to say that federal law for K-122 will be revised and rewritten again. This revision will definitely include free lunches, school accountability, Title I funding, and highstake testing (Richmond, 2017). The question is not whether these measures will fail or not. We already know the answer to that: failure. The bigger question is by how much it will fail, and how far this will affect the disabled.

Purpel (1989) stated very clearly the reasons why school reforms often fail: more often than not, school reforms are technocratic, top-down impositions

of bureaucratic rules. Missing in the federal law that regulates public school, it is a deep understanding of how schooling and the learning environment really and truly work (Miller, 1990). When it comes to special education, this has translated into a series of cookie-cutter techniques with jargonized literature and outdated clinical procedures that often ignore the reality of the disabled student in the classroom (author, 2013; Valentine, 2007).

It is safe to say that with the Trump administration and the Republican dominated congress we will be revisiting NCLB and ESSA. We can safely predict that states will be asked to double-down in their relentless effort to implement standardized testing and mandated curriculum. For the disabled student, this will mean the continued implementation of standardized procedures that will resemble very little their educational reality. If anything else, during the last decade and half, we witnessed the complete watered-down of the curriculum for disabled students.

## Less Federal Oversight

Michelle Obama wasted no time in making her own personal imprint in the White House. Immediately, her office took on the important challenge of school nutrition and obesity. Her tireless effort to improve the food quality for millions of students put her on the national spotlight. However, it is safe to say that things will be dramatically different during the Trump administration. We are already seeing concerted efforts by lawmakers to scale back federal oversight and regulations for things such as school nutrition (Richmond, 2017). The lack of federal oversight can have very serious effects for the disabled student. Almost a decade ago, Texas lawmakers implemented an arbitrary cap on the number of students that receive special education, which was based on very little research and scientific data (Rosenthal, 2016). While the national average is 13% for the number of students receiving special services, Texas implemented an artificial cap at 8.5%. This has created a serious strain on schools, families, and special need students. Although, according to state officials, this is a mere policy suggestion and not a state mandate (Rosenthal, 2016), the reality is that schools and districts in the state are under increased pressure to meet this demand. It is a safe prediction to believe that federal oversight will be severely scaled back during Trump administration, giving states significant leeway to implement ad-hoc special education policies as they see fit—policies that will have very little research to support it. For the disabled, this can mean a complete removal of safeguards and procedures when it comes to education.

## For Profit Education

With nomination of Betsy DeVos as the Secretary of Education, the Trump administration sent a very clear message across the national landscape: marketdriven reforms are the new normal in education. If anything else, this will be the golden opportunity for Republicans at the federal and state level to promote school vouchers, tax credits, and funding for charter schools. However, it is very well documented that private, market-driven school reforms have failed repeatedly over the years (Knee, 2016). However, when it comes to disabled students, it

should not be the failure of market- driven reforms that should worry us. Rather, it is the complete absence of federal regulations that should be our biggest concerns. Private and charter schools do not have to follow federal regulations and the Individual with Disability Educational Act (IDEA) (Taylor, 2005). They are free to do whatever they want.

As current legislation moves forward with the promotion of privatized schooling, it is also safe to predict that there will be a desire to scale back the implementation of special education services for students with need. Although, we can expect that nothing will happen in the immediate future. Perhaps, the bigger danger is not how many students will be denied special services in private schools, but how many states and public school districts will be demanding a more lazes-faire and emulating approaches to the education of special need students that we see in private and charter schools. Perhaps, it is the idea that less and less will need to be done that will be emanating as Republicans at the federal and state level move forward with their desire to scale back on laws and regulations. If anything, this will mean an extra burden for taxpayers as private schools often rely on local school districts and public schools, at the expense of public funds, to serve their special need students (Taylor, 2005).

## Lack of Safe Spaces

Let us not be fooled by the Million Women March that took place in January of 2017. The current political climate of vitriolic rhetoric has actually encouraged a climate of silence and fear among many sectors of the population

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(Richmond, 2017). In the last year and a half, we have witnessed the relentless attack on immigrants, disabled, the LGTBQ community, and religious groups. The refusal of our current president to decry his association with white supremacist David Duke or publicly denounce anti-Semitic acts in cemeteries, coupled with his attacks on Muslin, misogyny comments about women, and vilification of immigrants, can signify a new era of a desensitized society that no longer cares to scrutinize our public officials and hold them accountable for their actions. In an era when the horrible comments that a presidential candidate can make about grabbing a woman by her intimate parts can pass as *casual locker-room talk*, the disabled will be especially vulnerable.

Purpel (1989) remind us that the social actions of the 1960s and 1970s did not radically challenges the core cultural beliefs of the hegemonic political establishment. Instead, these were passive attempts to bring minor changes to a rigid public system (author, 2011). For the disabled, this can only mean one thing: a renewal when it comes to the collective, social insensitivity in regards to their treatment and the social roadblocks that their encounter.

#### Parting Words: The Social Education of Disability Studies

For some, the current political atmosphere signifies the great American revival, which was long overdue. For others, this is the beginning of very uncertain times. And for the disabled, this is indeed the beginning of very uncertain times. History has not been kind the to the disabled (Eisenberg, Griggins, & Duval, 1982; Nathanson, 1998; Skrtic, 2005). In the current political climate, the welfare of the disabled is in danger. The only solution for all of us is to be vocal

and brave. Zinn (2003) reminded us that there is no such a thing as an impartial view of politics, culture, and society. Indeed, social actions are driven by deep-seated personal beliefs (Chomsky & Macedo, 2000).

In the current political atmosphere, there will be very few arenas more hotly contested than in disability studies. The society's silence when it comes to the mistreatment of the disabled is very pronounced and visible (Baglieri & Knopf, 2004; Ferri & Connor, 2005). The new challenge for social justice advocates for the disabled will be to maneuver these social roadblocks, which are often paired with a total disregard of this urgency from the academia (author, 2013), at a time when regulations and safeguards become less common.

Perhaps the answer to this dilemma can be found in what academics in disability studies have been so reluctant to accept and so fervent to reject: *social consciousness* (Freire, 1970). For all the decry about social justice, it is very well documented that social disability scholars have operated well within the hegemonic margin of the political spectrum and restrictive boundaries of clinical academia (author, 2015), focused mostly on the materialistic view of impairment (Feely, 2016), rarely investigating the voices within the disabled (author, 2013). And perhaps, it is within the long-overdue *conscientization* (Freire, 1970) of disability studies where the disabled can start to experience and envision safe spaces where to claim a voice. Unfortunately, the bold act of vocally challenging the status quo, which has loudly occurred in the rest of academia (Artiles, Bal, & Thorius King, 2010; Chomsky & Macedo, 2000; Giroux, 1988; McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2004), has not properly taken

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place among academics disability studies. And perhaps, it is here where the disabled can once again regain hope for a more just and loving pedagogy. Reference:

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