Looking in the Mirror: Attitudes Toward Disability

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Abstract: This paper serves as a foundational piece, aiming to investigate the potential of critical disability theory (CDT) and disability critical race theory (DisCrit) in shedding light on students' perceptions of their own exceptionalities and how this can impact their educational achievement in subjects like math, physical education, and English. While there is a substantial body of research focusing on CDT, teacher attitudes, and non-identified student attitudes towards disabilities, there is a lack of research exploring the connections between CDT, DisCrit, and students' attitudes towards their own exceptionalities. It is crucial to acknowledge how students perceive their own exceptionalities, as internalizing ableist prejudice and discrimination can lead to students viewing their exceptionalities as hindrances or barriers, which can detrimentally affect their academic development. However, by embracing the activist work of CDT and DisCrit scholars and shifting ableist perspectives towards a strengths-based approach that highlights individuals' resilience and fortitude. This shift in mindset has the potential to enhance students' overall academic success.

Keywords: disability critical race theory, critical disability theory, disability, exceptionalities

Introduction

Internary equity and inclusive education policies have been developed and implemented to ensure that students identified with exceptionalities have equal access to educational opportunities in the same manner as their non-identified peers (Freer, 2021). In this paper, the terms "exceptionality" and "disability" are used interchangeably, encompassing the diverse range of abilities and experiences of individuals. In June 1994, over 300 representatives from governments around the globe and other various international organizations gathered in Salamanca, Spain for the *World Conference on Special Needs Education,* to discuss major policy amendments regarding inclusive education. The statement from the conference concluded that:

> Regular schools with [an] inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society, and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system (UNESCO, 1994, p. 3).

Though continued efforts have been put into place to help students with exceptionalities feel more included within mainstream classrooms (i.e., resources and provincial policies developed to foster inclusive developments since the Salamanca Conference; UNESCO, 2020), it has been over 26 years since paramount shifts in policy regarding inclusive education have been discussed globally (Whitley & Hollweck, 2020). In that time, organizational biases and systemic barriers have remained a concern (Equity and Inclusive Education, 2014). Disability-specific barriers may include inadequate knowledge educators and peers may have about various disabilities (Ontario Human Rights Commission, n.d.), uncertainty about how to properly support identified students (Lindsay et al., 2018), insufficient training or professional development opportunities for educators (Hodge et al., 2009), and negative attitudes or perceptions of students with exceptionalities (Cologon, 2013). Previous research has found that negative attitudes toward students with exceptionalities can lead to social exclusion and poor academic performance (Chapman, 1988; Schwab et al., 2021). For instance, Hen et al. (2014) conducted a study that revealed post-secondary students with learning disabilities (LD) scored lower on academic self-efficacy and higher on academic procrastination compared to non-LD students. Additionally, there is evidence indicating that students with exceptionalities might be vulnerable to stereotype threat, which refers to the awareness of societal stereotypes about one's intelligence and its potential negative impact on performance when internalized (Aronson et al., 2002). Zhao et al. (2019) discovered that high school students with exceptionalities who experienced vulnerability to stereotype threat exhibited lower academic performance. Furthermore, other research has demonstrated that some instructors have continued to show little concern for the challenges students with exceptionalities face in the classroom and are often hesitant or unwilling to modify or adapt the way they teach or assess students (Pavone et al., 2019).

While there is a wealth of research that focuses independently on critical disability theories (Annamma et al., 2013), teacher attitudes (Cook et al. 2000; Cook 2001; Krischler, 2019), and non-identified student attitudes toward disabilities (Freer, 2021), a notable research gap remains concerning the intersections of critical disability theory (CDT), disability critical race theory (DisCrit), and students' attitudes toward their own exceptionalities. This represents a crucial deficiency, as internalizing ableist prejudice and discrimination (which stems from the biased

belief that able bodies are superior and serve as the standard or norm), can significantly impact students' self-perceptions as well as their overall academic development. CDT, DisCrit, and similar activist scholarship has the potential to shift ableist outlooks to view exceptionality through a more strengths-based lens, supporting students with exceptionalities to put more prominence on their individual strength and resilience, which in turn may help them to be more successful in their overall academic performance.

To gain insights into individuals' perceptions of their own exceptionalities, it is crucial to examine the dynamics of ableism and disablism within educational environments, guided by critical theories such as CDT and DisCrit. This paper serves as a foundational piece within a larger context, recognizing that it represents a part of a wider discourse on this subject. The primary goal of this paper is to explore the role of CDT and DisCrit in influencing how students perceive their own exceptionalities amidst societal perspectives and the subsequent impact on their educational achievement. By exploring the attitudinal barriers associated with disability, this paper hopes to foster dialogue and deeper understanding of the challenges faced by individuals with exceptionalities, thus promoting inclusivity, equity, and improved educational outcomes. This research acknowledges the multifaceted nature of the topic and invites further exploration and engagement to address the systemic barriers and biases that hinder the full participation and success of students with exceptionalities.

This paper commences with an introductory overview of Critical Disability Theory, establishing a foundational understanding of the concept. It then proceeds to explore the distinctive challenges faced by individuals with exceptionalities within the sports and fitness industries, placing particular emphasis on students in the context of physical education. Furthermore, the article delves into the concealed facets of ableism inherent in educational initiatives, shedding light on their implications for students with exceptionalities.

Subsequently, the paper introduces Disability Critical Race Theory, providing a clear definition of the concept and elucidating the seven key tenets it encompasses. The impact of both racism and ableism is examined to illustrate how certain students are disproportionately labeled within special education classrooms.

Critical Disability Theory

Critical Disability Theory (CDT) focuses on analyzing disability by engaging in discussions around power structures and by criticizing social constructions and norms that exclude individuals with exceptionalities. Rather than thinking of disability as an *individual* impairment, critical disability theorists regard disability as a *system of exclusion* (Goodley et al., 2018; Hirandani, 2019).

Sometimes referred to as the social model of disability, the primary tenet of this model is that it shifts responsibility from the individual to society and was developed in response to the critique of the medical model (Lang, 2001). "A further central tenet of the social model is that, irrespective of the political, economic and religious character of the society in which they live, disabled people are subject to oppression and negative social attitudes, that inevitably undermine their personhood and their status as full citizens" (Lang, 2001, p. 4).

The medical model on the other hand regards individuals with exceptionalities as needing to be 'fixed' through medical intervention (Arstein-Kerslake & Black, 2020). Additionally, the medical model continues to be the relied upon method of identification used within educational systems in Canada (Hutchinson & Specht, 2021). While the medical model provides clear criteria for identifying students, this model tends to focus on "counting the numbers of people with impairment or reducing the complex problems of disabled people to issues of medical prevention, cure or rehabilitation" (Shakespeare, 2010, p. 267). The authors also note that the language of disability is problematic and 'othering.' Person-first language affirms the personhood of those with exceptionalities, although some in the critical disability movement regard identifying with their disabilities first as affirming. Dunn and Andrews (2015) outline both perspectives. Using the term 'disabled person' or 'autistic person' is an attempt to de-stigmatize disability. Person-first language may imply that something is negative about having a disability and that distancing the person from the language is necessary.

Devlin and Pothier (2006) contend that deep structures of inequality experienced by individuals with exceptionalities constitute a form of unequal citizenship (dis-citizenship). The authors further criticize efficiency and productivity discourses that are ableist and relegate students with exceptionalities to the margins (Devlin and Pothier, 2006).

Further, Minich (2016) suggests that critical disability studies should be considered a methodology as opposed to an area of study. As a methodology it "involves scrutinizing not bodily or mental impairments but the social norms that define particular attributes as impairments, as well as the social conditions that concentrate stigmatized attributes in particular populations" (para. 6). To explore attitudes toward exceptionalities on an individual level, it is important to first analyze how disabilities are perceived systemically. By examining ableist perspectives through the lens of CDT, the aim of this analysis is to understand whether these perspectives can help provide a foundational understanding of how individuals may perceive their own exceptionality.

Over the years, there have been many attempts to create a sense of 'normalcy' for students with exceptionalities by integrating them into mainstream classrooms. However, simply placing students in conventional classrooms does not guarantee understanding, empathy, or social integration (Brown, 2017; Mateja et al., 2022; Söder, 1990). This is because societal attitudes toward disability are deeply seated, and not easily changed with slight reconfigurations to which students are in which classrooms. Negative attitudes toward disability seem to overshadow positive ones and therefore pose obstacles for these individuals (Söder, 1990). One of the core objectives of CDT is to confront negative attitudes toward disabilities, which are typically exhibited by able-bodied individuals (Hosking, 2008).

A recent study by Saxton (2018) explored the complex views around the sports/fitness industries for individuals with disabilities. The study included sixty-seven adults with exceptionalities aged 19-78 who either identified as an athlete or dancer, taught, or participated in fitness classes, or who did not engage in any type of fitness activity.Within the participants' responses, a recurring theme emerged – the perceived division between disability and fitness. One participant specifically mentioned that "when a person becomes disabled, there's a new rule: I'm not included in that kind of activity. That's especially true of sports" (p. 29). Another participant shared their experience, stating, "after my accident, I just sat still for about six years because I had no idea what to do in a disabled body" (p. 29). These statements highlight the prevailing perception that individuals with exceptionalities often encounter barriers and limited opportunities when it comes to participating in sports and fitness activities.

Another recent study conducted by Tanure Alves et al. (2021) explored how ableism persists within physical education (PE) classes. In this study, three educators who taught an inclusive PE class, consisting of students with exceptionalities as well as their non-identified peers, participated in a focus group as well as kept a reflective journal regarding their teaching experiences. The three themes that emerged from the data included, ableism regarding the way in which PE curriculum is developed, physical environment, and teacher expectations. For example, a teacher expressed support for inclusion by encouraging a student with exceptionalities to join their PE class without making curriculum adjustments. They cited an instance where a student in a wheelchair faced challenges due to their caregiver's assistance (Tanure Alvez et al., 2021, p. 9). This example suggests that PE curriculum expectations are intended for able-bodied students. Teachers are expected to adapt their lessons to accommodate students with disabilities, but this may not always happen (Tanure Alvez et al., 2021). Further, the authors conclude that "the exclusion of disabled students in PE classes seems to be deeply associated with PE culture, built over ableism established on traditional sports" (Tanure Alvez et al., 2021, p. 11). These findings highlight the urgent need for transformative changes within PE education to promote inclusivity and address the underlying ableist attitudes and practices that hinder the full participation of students with exceptionalities.

By examining these accounts and delving into the complexities of the participants' narratives, this study sheds light on some of the challenges and experiences faced by individuals with disabilities within the realm of sports, fitness, and physical education classes. Such insights can contribute to a deeper understanding of the need for inclusive and accessible practices within these industries, ultimately fostering more inclusive and equitable opportunities for individuals with disabilities. These studies also highlight the negative perceptions that participants had regarding their own ability to engage in fitness and sports activities based on their experiences. These perceptions are harmful because they contribute to the negative internalization of their abilities that occurs within an ableist society (Ahram et al., 2019). These harmful perceptions surrounding the opinions of society related to fitness and sports can have damaging effects on students' views regarding their bodies. Physical education is a mandatory subject within many school curricula and can only be avoided with special documentation (Giese, 2018). Therefore, it is imperative that students with exceptionalities feel comfortable and accepted when engaging in physical education activities alongside their able-bodied peers. For students with exceptionalities, feelings of belonging and approval are considered a core human need and are especially important in fostering an inclusive environment (Maher et al., 2022).

In exploring the efforts to provide equitable opportunities for students with exceptionalities, it becomes evident that hidden elements of ableism may persist within educational initiatives, perpetuating the segregation of these marginalized populations. Timberlake (2020) sheds light on this issue in a study that investigated educational initiatives which were meant to provide equitable opportunities for students with disabilities, but inadvertently contained hidden elements of ableism. For example, when teachers were asked about supporting students with disabilities, one teacher remarked that "when they go in [to general education] the classroom rules apply to everyone. If they become disruptive to the classroom, then we leave" (p. 91). Another teacher expressed the belief that simply placing students with disabilities in regular classes would be ineffective, stating, "we can't just dump them in regular classes where everything is over their head, and they won't get anything out of it" (p. 91). These examples strongly indicate that students with disabilities are often 'othered' and viewed as a liability by educators who may lack the knowledge or resources to effectively support these students in a mainstream classroom. The ramification of such 'othering' views can have detrimental consequences on the academic performance of students with exceptionalities, especially if they are isolated from their peers and deprived of equitable opportunities (Borerro et al., 2012 as cited in Saltaga 2017). Furthermore, if teachers unintentionally or intentionally engage in practices that ostracize students, they may not receive appropriate supports, leading to self-doubt when compared to their non-identified peers. Internalizing these ableist perspectives may ultimately result in students developing negative self-perceptions, leading to poor academic outcomes.

Disability Critical Race Theory

Delving into the intersections of race and disability and comprehending the profound impact on students' educational experiences is paramount because it illuminates the intricate factors that mold their learning paths. An illustrative example from a study conducted by Petersen (2006), highlights this significance. Petersen's study examined the educational experiences of African American women labeled with an exceptionality. The overarching findings revealed that "each woman persistently and continually engaged with the world around them in order to negotiate, evade, and resist the dominant ideologies surrounding the discourses of race, gender, disability, and class" (Petersen, 2006, p. 3). This underscores the imperative need to examine and address these critical intersections in educational contexts.

Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) is a framework that encompasses analyses of both critical disability theory and critical race theory to further understand the intersectionality between racism and ableism (Annamma et al., 2013). There is evidence that Black and other racialized students are disproportionately identified and labelled as requiring special education (Conner, 2017; Fish, 2017). Referred to as the 'racialization of special education', the researchers in the area identify racism and bias on the part of teachers as a potential factor in the identification (Fish, 2017; Hibel et al., 2010).

DisCrit accounts for this overrepresentation by positing that individuals may experience double barriers of racism and ableism that permeate educational institutions (Annamma et al., 2018). As Annamma and colleagues (2013) explain, "DisCrit seeks to understand ways that macrolevel issues of racism and ableism, among other structural discriminatory processes, are enacted in the day-to-day lives of students of color with dis/abilities" (p. 8). This interconnected theoretical framework is composed of seven tenets (Annamma et al., 2013):

1. DisCrit concentrates on how race and ability have been used together to ostracize particular groups of people.
2. DisCrit focuses on intersectionality.
3. DisCrit looks at how race and ability are socially constructed while not neglecting the fact that labels can have a significant psychological impact.
4. DisCrit empowers marginalized populations.
5. DisCrit looks at how legal and historical facets of dis/ability and race play a role in the rights of individuals.
6. DisCrit confronts whiteness and dis/ability through 'interest convergence.'
7. DisCrit necessitates advocacy and liberation.

According to the tenets of DisCrit, the combined impact of racism and ableism are used to explain the disproportionate labelling of racialized students with exceptionalities compared to their Caucasian peers (Annamma et al., 2013; Beratan, 2008). For over forty years, there has been an issue of racialized students being unevenly represented in special education classes, as highlighted by Annamma et al. (2013). This is problematic because it illustrates the very divide that labels cause for students with exceptionalities (e.g., mainstream versus special education), and the additional segregation caused by incorrect labelling of racialized students (e.g., at-risk) based on biased perceptions of their race. As established by labeling theorists, the assignment of labels creates stigmas, shaping how individuals internalize and subsequently act based on societal perceptions associated with those labels (Shifrer, 2013).

Ladson-Billings (2017) argues that low-income, urban African American children are perceived to have cultural deficits and a 'culture of poverty' that shapes how educators may evaluate them. These beliefs in a 'culture of poverty' are reflected in many studies that attempt to uncover the reasons for the disproportionate assessments. Deficit beliefs on the part of educators may lead them to label such students with non-gifted exceptionalities.. For example, a Canadian study conducted by James and Turner (2017) found that Black students in the Toronto District School Board were more likely to be identified with non-gifted exceptionalities compared to White or other racialized students.

A study conducted by Ahram et al. (2011) aimed to uncover the reasons behind the persistent imbalance in the placement of racialized students in special education classes. This study was carried out in two school districts in New York State, where a notable overrepresentation of mislabeled racialized students was identified. When educators within these districts were questioned about the factors contributing to these disproportionate representations, their responses included perceptions related to the low-income status of the students, students' limited access to resources, a lack of faith in education among both students and parents, stereotypes associated with the students' cultural backgrounds, and, notably, the notion of "linguistic diversity" (Mahon-Reynolds et al., 2016, p. 149). These beliefs are consistent with Ladson-Billings' (2017) argument regarding biased perceptions of cultural deficits. This study's findings further validate the notion that teachers' attitudes, biases, and cultural beliefs significantly influence their assessments of students' academic abilities.

The overrepresentation and mislabeling of racialized students in special education programs is still ongoing (Ahram et al., 2021; Bartlett et al., 2020). Previous research has found that when educators were asked about the indicators that predicted how they labelled a student with an exceptionality or how they placed them in special education classes, their answers included, race, linguistic diversity, place of birth, family history and socioeconomic background (Ahram et al., 2021). In other words, rather than placing students in classrooms according to their educational needs, some teachers explained that they used race, socioeconomic class, and other factors to determine students' educational futures.

Another factor that contributes to injustice regarding the disproportionate representation of racialized students in special education classrooms could be due to the lack of in-depth findings that qualitative studies demonstrate. Cruz et al. (2021), takes on a DisCrit and critical quantitative (QuantCrit) lens to describe the absence of a comprehensive conceptual understanding, which analyses of qualitative research delves more into. Quantitative studies may provide a generalized overview of the number of marginalized students being misplaced into special education classes. However, analyses may be incomplete and important findings missed regarding *why* racialized students are being overrepresented in special education programs. It is important go beyond just numbers and really try to understand the reasons behind this problem and the impact that educators' perceptions and prejudices have regarding the mislabeling of marginalized students and further, how this could ultimately affect their attitudes toward themselves.

Being mislabeled within a school system based on cultural biases, racism, or other unrelated factors poses additional problems for students receiving the appropriate supports they need to flourish in school. This mislabeling can hinder their access to resources, interventions, and accommodations that are essential for their educational success. Further, the stigma associated with these labels can profoundly impact students' perceptions of their disabilities. When students are placed in at-risk or special education classes due to mislabeling, they may internalize the notion that their disabilities are deficits or shortcomings. This internalized stigma can undermine their self-confidence, motivation, and overall academic achievement.

Conclusion

In essence, the key ideas this article highlights are the critical need to address and dismantle barriers, biases, and stereotypes that hinder the full participation and success of students with exceptionalities, especially those at the intersection of race and disability. It underscores the potential for transformative change through critical theories and informed educational policies and practices. Additionally, this article stresses the importance of examining ableism and disablism within educational environments using critical theories. It aims to foster dialogue, understanding and inclusivity while acknowledging the multifaceted nature of the topic.

CDT is a complex, interdisciplinary framework consisting of many layers. Examining and analyzing disability within other theories, shifts the conceptual framework to reinforce our understanding of how these diverse structures intersect, work to redefine dominant views, and also account for one another (Garland-Thomson, 2002). The aim of these interwoven theories is to empower marginalized populations and raise awareness of the injustice perceptions that continue to exist today. Therefore, it is not enough to simply articulate a desire for inclusion; it is essential to dig deeper by questioning assumptions and lean into unsettling conversations regarding both intentional and unintentional biases, and the damaging impact that racism and ableism continue to have for racialized and marginalized populations within educational systems. It is imperative to work together to unlearn, shift our mindset, and ultimately empower these individuals by seeking out guidance from CDT and DisCrit theorists (Annamma et al., 2013; Goodley, 2013; Hosking, 2008) among many others, to raise awareness about and address these ongoing issues regarding attitudes and perceptions of disability.

Additionally, educators, policymakers, and researchers can apply the insights gleaned from this foundational research to guide their practices and policies in several crucial ways. First, this paper highlights the specific challenges encountered by students with exceptionalities, particularly those navigating the intersection of race and disability. Educators, school administrators, and policymakers can utilize this information to champion and formulate more inclusive educational policies tailored to address these specific challenges. Secondly, the content within this article underscores the utmost importance of equipping educators and other school personnel with the training and professional development necessary to comprehend and effectively support students with exceptionalities. Policymakers can seize this opportunity to allocate the requisite resources and establish training programs that target these specific educational needs. Thirdly, policymakers and educators can draw upon the concept of intersectionality, as illuminated by DisCrit, to grasp how students may grapple with multiple layers of discrimination. This paper can serve as a foundational resource that informs the creation of more precise support systems. Lastly, these findings can serve as a cornerstone for advocacy efforts aimed at dismantling systemic barriers within educational systems. Advocacy groups can leverage these insights to drive changes in practices that advance principles of equity and inclusivity.

Finally, understanding how students perceive their own exceptionalities is important to how their learning is impacted. If students are internalizing ableist views, they may be more likely to have a negative attitude toward their disability. However, through these emerging discourses, CDT and DisCrit scholars aim to confront ableist opinions in hopes of empowering individuals with disabilities. The objective of this paper was intended to introduce how pieces of CDT and DisCrit, such as the interplay between racism and ableism, contribute to students' attitudes toward their own disability. By introducing these theoretical frameworks to help support students with exceptionalities, the goal then is to benefit dialogue not only for educators, but to shift and deepen prevailing perspectives in all areas of scholarship. Additionally, by considering attitudes toward disability through a critical lens as well as fostering conversations around additional theories (e.g., Crip theory and feminist disability theory), the hope is to shift academic discourse and work toward eradicating inequalities for racialized and marginalized students. This paper establishes a foundation for examining and intersecting critical theories related to attitudes and perceptions of disabilities, with a focus on contributing to future research in justice-focused inclusive education.

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