chapter **5**

Disability Studies in Inclusive Education

Understanding Disability Studies in Education

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Chapter learning outcomes

After completing this chapter, you will be able to:

✓ Motivate for the Disability Studies in Education (DSE) theoretical framework for understanding of disability in the educational context.

✓ Argue for inclusive education as a means of promoting equity and social justice for learners with disabilities.

Preparatory activities

WATCH: Disability. Dance. Artistry.

Creator: Simi Linton
Date: 2016
Duration: 2 minutes

WATCH: I'm not your inspiration, thank you very much

Creator: Stella Young
Date: 2014
Duration: 9 minutes

READ: Social model of disability: Easy read

Author: ShapeArts.org.uk
Estimated reading time: 10 minutes
File size: 4.3 MB

> **REFLECTION**
>
> What are some of the issues that people with disabilities would like to bring to the attention of the general public regarding the way that they are perceived?

Introduction

In Chapter 3, we talked about the right to education and how exclusion operates, with a specific focus on disability. We came to understand that children with disabilities are currently being excluded from education and we explored some of the reasons why this might be happening, recognising at the same time that disability is not the only reason for exclusion.

In this chapter, we will begin to move into building an understanding of how education has been provided historically in different contexts and how we might understand this through adopting a DSE framework. We will then explore the differences between inclusive and special education and argue for an inclusive education system as a means for achieving social justice for people with disabilities. As you can see, there is a lot to cover, so we will provide additional resources which you can refer to in your learning journey. But before we begin the discussion, we need to start with reflecting on the voice of people who are directly affected by these issues. Think about Jacqui and Matthew's story that you read in Chapter 4 and keep it in mind as you think about disability in education.

> ▶ **WATCH: What is Disability Studies in Education and why does it matter?**
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> **Creator:** Danielle Cowley
> **Date:** 2021
> **Duration:** 11 minutes

This video engages with the discipline of Disability Studies and how it forms the basis for the DSE approach, which helps us to understand the actual practices of schools and how our understanding of disability can affect the way that we see education.

Firstly, we will have a brief discussion of Disability Studies and then apply this to DSE.

Understanding Disability Studies

As you will have seen in Chapter 2, Disability Studies moves from understanding disability as something that is **wrong** with a person, to examining the social context where a person with an impairment functions. The Society for Disability Studies, one of the first associations to promote the discipline, states that: "Disability Studies recognizes that disability is a key aspect of human experience, and that the study of disability has important political, social, and economic implications for society as a whole, including both disabled and non-disabled people".

According to Ferguson and Nusbaum (2012) there are three important aspects of Disability Studies that we need to think of for understanding inclusive education. The first one is that **the study of disability must be social.** Essentially, this means that disability is not solely viewed as a deficit or problem to be fixed; but is instead a complex interaction between a person and their social environment. In this interactionist view, the problem does not lie within the individual, but rather on the interaction between the environment and the person with an impairment. This idea of an interaction is reflected in the definition of disability used by the World Health Organization (2001) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), both of which acknowledge the importance of recognising environmental barriers. In the education context, this means that we do not only look at the learner as being unable to cope, but rather at the environment and the learner. What is the fit and how do they interact together? How can we modify the learning environment to ensure the full participation of people with disabilities?

A second concept explored by Ferguson and Nusbaum is **that the study of disability must be interdisciplinary**, similar to other established fields such as gender studies or ethnic studies. Disability Studies is concerned with disability in its totality and must be interdisciplinary in nature if it is to flourish and truly affect change in schools. Special education has dominated the discourse of disability in the context of education and continues to hold the authoritative position in terms of what it means to educate students with disabilities. The idea of special education requiring "expert" knowledge has discouraged engagement with people with disabilities, as it implies that there is special knowledge that is needed to work in this area. However, if we intend for disability to be part of the fabric of diversity, then its study must be interdisciplinary in nature. Our understanding can draw on multiple disciplines and is not confined to health sciences, rehabilitation or special education.

The third important concept is that **the study of disability must be participatory.** Students with disabilities and their families must be positioned as active participants in teaching, as well as research. To Ferguson and Nusbaum (2012) this means not only driving the questions that get asked, but also thinking about who gets to ask those questions. As practitioners in the field

of inclusive education, we might want to ask ourselves questions such as:
What is my position as regards disability? How do I promote the voice of people with disabilities and address power imbalances that are deeply entrenched in our society? How can I support and mentor teachers and students who identify as disabled so that they are able to succeed and flourish as teachers and learners? How do I ensure that we value the voices of disabled people, even young disabled people, so that learners with the most complex disabilities or communication needs have a say in their education, see themselves in the curriculum, and feel a sense of belonging in their schools and classrooms?

Disability Studies allows us to ask different questions about disability, while cementing disability as a natural part of the human experience. Disability Studies also pushes inclusive education beyond just another set of practices or a programme. An inclusive schedule is not enough. It's not enough for the child with a disability to just go to music class with her non-disabled peers. True inclusion requires us to not only ask new and difficult questions about the meaning of disability, but to take action to look at our schools, communities and workplaces and challenge sites of exclusion. Disability Studies tells us that it is not enough to technically put inclusive practices in place, as practices and schedules can easily be undone without an ideological commitment to an understanding of true inclusion and belonging.

Disability Studies in Education

WATCH: Making sense of special and inclusive education

Creator: Danielle Cowley
Date: 2021
Duration: 30 minutes

Now that we have placed Disability Studies at the centre of our understanding of disability, we can begin to apply it in the field of education. This will help us to make sense of special and inclusive education and to understand how DSE informs the work of inclusive education. Traditional special education differs from DSE because its proponents believe that the purpose of special education is to change students through improving their performance or "correcting" their deficits. This reflects a medical model of understanding disability. However, within DSE, while it is recognised that enhancing performance is valuable, a greater focus is placed on adjusting environmental limitations, such as the curriculum, instruction and the classroom climate. While traditional special educators believe that special education prepares students for the post-school world, DSE proponents aim to create a caring society that accepts human difference (**Baglieri et al., 2011**).

In becoming critical inclusive educators, students need to not only see the oppression of exclusion and ableism, but also to develop concrete ways to create change and remain resilient. Two common frameworks DSE practitioners commonly use to ground their classroom practices include the **least dangerous assumption** (Donnellan, 1984) and **presuming competence** (Kliewer et al., 2006). The concept of least dangerous assumption is focused on linking poor student performance to instructional inadequacy, rather than perceived student deficit. The criterion of least dangerous assumption holds that in the absence of conclusive data, educational decisions ought to be based on assumptions, which, if incorrect, will have the least dangerous effect on the likelihood that students will be able to function independently as adults. Donnellan (1984) asks us about the consequences of our assumptions. One can easily look to the past as evidence of our society's dangerous assumptions regarding people with disabilities, considering institutionalisation, sterilisation and euthanasia, just to name a few. But we can look to the present for evidence as well. What are the consequences of excluding students with disabilities from general education classrooms, peers and curriculum? Are they not more dangerous than the alternative?

Author reflection

One example of the least dangerous assumption and action happened to me several years ago when I was asked to work with a segregated school for students with disabilities on how they could become more inclusive. A group of very well-meaning teachers were taking me on a tour when we came across a very large and organised space on the lower level of the building. The teachers were very excited to tell me about this new, "pre-vocational space" for their first-graders. They showed me all the bins of items to be sorted and the little timecard punch in the wall, where students would, "clock in and out". I began to get panicky when in this room, as I had recently left my position working with youth at a sheltered workshop and this was bringing back too much trauma. I had to leave when a teacher mentioned isn't it great how we are preparing them for their future and sheltered work. That is a very dangerous, but unfortunately very common, assumption to be made for kids with complex learning needs. Instead of focusing on accessing communication, expanding language or learning in a text-rich environment, the curriculum for these little first-graders was boxes, bins, mittens and time clocks. (Danielle Cowley, 2021)

Biklen and Burke (2006) describe the ways in which the least dangerous assumption results in a framework for understanding student engagement called **presuming competence**. To presume competence requires teachers, parents and others to support the person in demonstrating their agency. As the authors further note, presuming competence means approaching students with disabilities as thinking people with ideas about their lives, giving them the benefit of the doubt and looking really hard for evidence of competence. This means that teachers unconditionally accept the participation of students with disabilities in general education classrooms and problem solve when troubles arise through dialogue with students and families, and adapt the learning environment to meet the diverse needs of all students. As you can imagine, there are many ways to put this belief into practice.

Baglieri et al. (2011) argue that strategies related to accommodations and modifications are oftentimes viewed as only necessary for students with disabilities. This can result in stigma, a conceptualisation of such practices as extra work for both teachers and students; it also perpetuates the segregating labelling of student need in terms of either special or regular education. Instead, the authors offer Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as one approach to try to change our practices. Rather than changing our students and helping teachers align themselves with a DSE frame of thought, UDL is intended as an approach to all teaching situations which anticipates the diversity of learners, not only due to disability but on other dimensions of difference as well.

We will go into much more depth on the practice of UDL in **Chapters 10**, **11** and **12**. For now, it is important to note that UDL is not without its trouble spots. While the central focus of UDL is on diversifying access to the general education curriculum, the framework falls short when diversifying actual content. The white, able-bodied, middle-class perspective remain central. Baglieri et al. (2011) argue that the content addressed through UDL must focus on alternate curricular content that repositions the identities of marginalised learners as content worthy of instruction. They argue that UDL should closely account for both content and skills taught so that students are able to assert their racial, ethnic, language and ability identities.

Inclusive and special education

In this section, we draw on the paper by Slee, Corcoran and Best (2019), entitled "Disability Studies in Education: Building platforms to reclaim disability and recognise disablement". They argue that DSE poses a necessary challenge to traditional discourses of special education because: "Special education has proven its resilience and willingness to appropriate the discourse of inclusive education in order to adapt and sustain its core assumptions about children with disabilities and their education" (p. 3).

Slee et al. (2019) point out that the drive to provide education for people with disabilities has traditionally been conditional on their being placed outside of the mainstream education system, enabling the development of "co-dependence between the regular and the special school in the identification, calibration and management of diverse student populations" (p. 5). They position DSE as anchored in the promotion of the right to education for children with disabilities and, therefore, adopting a political position, which is in contrast to what they term "the advancing appropriation of inclusive education by neo-special education" (p. 7). DSE, as we discussed in relation to Disability Studies above, is necessarily interdisciplinary and draws on a wide range of methodologies that serve to challenge the oppression of people with disabilities in education.

In adopting a DSE approach, the notion of segregation on the basis of diagnostic categories is rejected and the impact of school culture, pedagogy, assessment practices and other aspects of the learning environment are foregrounded in research and practice. While the focus is on disability, there is an acknowledgement that there are complex interactions between different forms of marginalisation that need to be addressed. In this context, it remains the case that research from the Global South remains under-represented. Finally, there needs to be a broader understanding of education as lifelong learning, not just as schooling (Slee et al., 2019).

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have taken a step back from the practice of inclusive and special education to question the assumptions that underlie these approaches. We have done this with reference to Disability Studies and DSE. What emerges from this exploration is that it is not enough to just include learners with disabilities in classrooms with adaptations. We need to commit to the right to education for these learners and ensure that their voices are heard. We have shifted the focus firmly to the education environment and the kind of support that is needed, but we have also indicated that this environment must change fundamentally to be a place where the least dangerous assumption is made and competence is presumed.

In the last section of this chapter, we noted that there is less research on the topic from the Global South than from the North. As practitioners in South Africa and in Africa, we need to make a critical reading of these texts and ask ourselves how they apply in our contexts and what the salient differences between these contexts are. We will further explore a decolonial perspective on DSE in Chapter 9.

This chapter has drawn extensively on the following references and we recommend that you take the time to read and understand the original versions. Try to summarise the author(s) central point. What was their "take-away" message? What did you learn from this reading? Did you gain a new insight and/or was anything familiar?

READ: Disability Studies in Education: The need for a plurality of perspectives on disability

Author: Susan Baglieri, Jan W. Valle, David J. Connor & Deborah J. Gallagher
Year: 2010
Estimated reading time: 2 hours
File size: 271 KB

READ: Disability Studies: What is it and what difference does it make?

Author: Philip M. Ferguson & Emily Nusbaum
Year: 2012
Estimated reading time: 1.5 hours
File size: 1.3 MB

READ: Defining school inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities: What do experts say?

Author: Diane Lea Ryndak, Lewis Jackson & Felix Billingsley
Year: 2000
Estimated reading time: 2 hours
File size: 106 KB

References

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