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Title: From Eugenics to the School-To-Prison Pipeline: Disabled Students and the Continuum of Carceral Practices

Transcript:

"I've titled the next 15 minutes From Eugenics to the School-To-Prison Pipeline: Disabled Students and the Continuum of Carceral Practices. In my time I mean to trace a line from historical logics, laws, and methods of so-called correction, to the ongoing legal, educational, and social reinforcement of the construction and acceptance of disability. Further, and importantly, I will bring in examples of material manifestations of these dominant and prevailing discourses, focusing our time in the classroom.

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"A content note before I continue, I see it's important to mention that this presentation will include talk of violence, as well as what some may consider coarse language.

"So to begin, the classroom is a site of violence - a place where the segregation, removal, and incarceration of students, and specific to this talk, disabled students to special education classrooms and alternative schools is enforced, justified and taught through specific narratives masked in objectivity. The classroom as a site of violence teaches and enforces particular normative expressions that, when not recognized and challenged, simultaneously reinforce the 'normal' and punish the 'abnormal' behaviors, desires, people...

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"Stephanie Spoto writes: "The education system has become perhaps the greatest site for the reinforcement of hierarchies and oppression, and so must become a primary site of our struggle."

“But before we get into the struggle, we first need to recognize that disability is created and maintained by our mainstream understandings, treatments, and teachings through a medical model. With this, disability is classified as a biological category - as a fixed, pathological abnormality based in medically acceptable, doctor provided and insurer approved diagnosis of symptoms, as articulated by Alison Kafer. And this medical model specifies a 'normal', generalized physical, mental, emotional expression that serves to classify and categorize disorder. Yes, expressions differ, but it is the categorization and pathologization of difference that maintains and normalizes violence on people with disabilities. The current meanings and interpretations of disability as biologically deviant and altogether undesirable are socially constructed one's, and expose the value given to, or withheld from, certain people.

“Also known as the Individual Model, the medical model of disability maintains disability as a solely individual medical experience. The emphasis is on treatment and cure of the person with the disability, who, as written on the crippledscholar blog, **(NEXT SLIDE)** is expected to become non-disabled or at least strive to their closest approximation, which reifies the distinction between what is valued and what, or who, is not.

“Our struggle comes in both individually and collectively imagining and re-imagining unfixed possibilities to change dominant narratives of what needs to be 'fixed', away from non-conforming, so-called 'abnormal' lives, and on to the systems that create and maintain the idea that some lives are worth more than others. An alternative, the social model of disability, describes disability as a socially constructed category, one that among many, that derives meaning and social significance, or insignificance, from what Nirmala Erevelles describes as the 'historical, cultural, political, and economic structures that frame social life'. 'The social model' as Dan Goodley adds, 'was and remains a powerful example of counter-hegemonic thinking'.

“Yet 'fixing' or 'curing' is what has been and continues to be the overarching prerogative of dominant systems that conceive of disability as a lack, as a deficiency that is inherent in non-normative people - systems that we exist within and, when not challenging our indoctrinations, perpetuate and strengthen. Liat Ben-Moshe further elaborates with the addition that "The power of normalization is cloaked by medical notions of illness...The history of treatment and categorization of those labeled as 'feeble-minded', and later 'mentally retarded', is also paved with cobblestones of notions of social danger."

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“These notions of protecting 'normal' students from Others remain steadfast throughout the history and treatment of people with disabilities, and the justifications for ongoing stigmatization, segregation and isolation of students with special education needs have remained constant in and out of the classroom.

“Classified on the presumption of biologically-based deficits and inferiorities within the framework of the medical model, this social construction of people who are 'normal' and others that are 'abnormal' follows a history of eugenic logic. Here I'll define eugenic logic with the help of Mitchell and Snyder who write of the science and ideology of the elimination of human 'defects'. Ben-Moshe again adds that "prominent eugenicists tried to 'scientifically' establish that those whom they characterized as 'feeble-minded' had a tendency to commit violent crimes. In the late 19th century, as the eugenics movement gained momentum, it was declared that all 'feeble-minded' people were potential criminals."

“In Disability Incarcerated, **(NEXT SLIDE)** Chapman, Carey, and Ben-Moshe write that "the rationality of eugenics was protecting society from social danger, and in many ways it was about criminalization, classism, sexism, racism, and homophobia as centrally as it was about disablism." In the chapter Crippin' Jim Crow from Disability Incarcerated, **(NEXT SLIDE)** Nirmala Erelles points out that 'disabled people mark, with their different bodies and minds, the boundaries of normalcy". Even among critical circles or in radical social theory, disability continues to be perceived as the natural site of abnormality and fearsome difference. Erelles articulates a lack of surprise in this distancing from disability - even any

thoughtful discussion of disability because, as she writes "disability remains the acceptable line of separation between 'us' and 'them'".

"This boundary of normalcy manifests in a continuum of eugenic and carceral practices - such as in the moral geography of schooling with segregated Special Education Needs classrooms and schools, the disproportionate rates and measures of punishment for Special Education Needs students, the pathologization of behavior considered unruly, or policies that patrol and criminalize students who cannot or will not fit an increasingly surveilled, controlled, and competitive school system, which describes the school-to-prison-pipeline.

"Carceral practices do not just consist of police and criminals, as if anything is ever that simple - but the ever increasing police presence in schools is a large contributing factor to the criminalization of students with policies like zero tolerance, or no excuses, which disproportionately affect disabled and/or racialized students in a US and UK context. These zero tolerance policies are often pushed as a measure of protection of pupils and staff - a familiar rationale. These apparently justified practices often times push out, push students out of schools and into the criminal justice system, and the unforgiving authority of zero-tolerance takes everyday student infractions and makes them into criminal offenses. As Aull IV is cited in Crippin' Jim Crow, zero tolerance policies have evolved into a "nondiscretionary approach that mandates a set of often severe, predetermined consequences to student misbehavior that is to be applied without regard to seriousness of behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context."

"Quickly, just a few other aspects of the continuum of eugenic and carceral practices include, but are not limited to the institutionalization, isolation, forced sterilization, and permanent incarceration of women in order to, again, protect society from another generation of 'feeblemindedness', of which we can see justified through the medical and judicial becoming increasingly intertwined. Not only does this logic and mentality persist, but so do these physical practices.

“Our medical and rehabilitative models are a continuation of eugenic logic, and another common justification around disability is with the concept of 'improvability'.

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“By this I mean that the discourse about disability and people with disabilities, are placed in hierarchies of whether or not they are seen as 'improvable' - this is in historical writings and current mainstream writings, and measures and assesses how close to the current ideal of 'normal' people with disabilities can come - emphasis on 'current'.

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“Baynton clarifies the mainstream understanding of 'Improvable' - as 'capable of being educated, cured, or civilized'.

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“Mitchell and Snyder help us further along our path by clarifying that these dominant biomedical and rehabilitation sciences, which still frame people with disabilities in deficit models, were developed within and as substantial 'proofs' for eugenic science - a eugenic science that neither started nor ended in World War 2 Germany, which adopted legislative tactics, sterilization policies and practices, and the co-opting of institutions as research domains well after France, the US, Canada, Britain, and elsewhere. Europe and North America were host to international academic conferences and publication opportunities, and in the US, over 80 universities had programs, majors, and departments. All part of the 'eugenics endeavor'.

“Predating World War 2, even when students were measured to be in a high position on this hierarchy of improvability, such as people who can better 'pass' as non-disabled, there is still no place free from forms of violence. For instance, Deaf children in the US at the end of the 19th century were allowed in schools, yet, as Baynton notes, they were forbidden to use sign language with the justification to supposedly make them more like 'normal' people and less like 'savages'.

“Mitchell and Snyder write about contemporary Eugenics Erasure through a "lack of serious engagement with the hegemony of eugenic science and thinking in the west." This lack of serious engagement includes scholars persisting in framing eugenics as 'quack science' or a 'bad idea' which solidifies eugenics simply as a seemingly historical anomaly, separate and unthinkable from anything in modern society. But this is not the case.

“An example is something that we've all likely participated in - standardized and IQ testing. Eugenicians, through the bolstering of empirical science, conflated the strength of one's intellect and morality, believing both were physiologically, hereditarily and genetically measurable, testable. From this, bodies and cognition came to be increasingly assessed in comparison to the so-called normative characteristics - this practice continues today largely uncontested.

“I'll end by again bringing up the school-to-prison-pipeline, a term that started in the US but is now also used here in the UK. We can expand our initial definition into the multidimensional process of policies, laws, and rules that patrol, criminalize, and push large numbers of minority students who cannot or will not fit in with the increasingly surveilled, controlled, and competitive school system into the adult prison system. The justifications put forth are the same justifications that I've discussed earlier - for eugenic practices such as forced sterilization, for eugenic logic such as desirable and undesirable traits, for forced institutionalization, for segregation, isolation, criminalization...all for your protection. For the protection of society from dangerous bodies and minds, which is determined by the dominant, individual medical model.

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“Erevelles emphasizes a wide social acceptance of a false biological basis for labels like disability, at-risk, emotionally unstable, or unruly bodies. It is our collective acceptance of a 'moral us' and a 'depraved them' that continues to uphold and strengthen the very real walls of the prison, the very real consequences of zero tolerance, the very real manifestations of the school-to-prison pipeline. Writing of

material consequences along the school-to-prison pipeline, Erevelles explains how students can "move from segregated classrooms to alternative schools to becoming school dropouts to becoming completely alienated from the labor market and the wider social world and eventually many find themselves in prison".

“Along the path to the eventual end of the oppressive school-to-prison pipeline and the practices that create and maintain it is our recognition of these ongoing realities, our learning of these eugenic logics that we probably largely benefit from, and unlearning our often well-intentioned but still oppressive thoughts, behaviors, and acceptances. Yet, we know this is not enough. As I finish, **(NEXT SLIDE)** I'm reminded of *Accomplices Not Allies: Abolishing the Ally Industrial Complex*, in which a very direct question is asked - "should we desire to merely 'unlearn' oppression, or to smash it to fucking pieces, and have its very existence gone?" I intend to heed this provocation and end my talk with that question lingering. Thank you.”