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# DISABILITY HISTORY: HUMANITY WORTH DEFENDING

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## **Abstract**

The authors consider the potential impact of teaching disability history and awareness in social studies classrooms. Social studies educators are encouraged to use disability history to move the concept of disability beyond Individualized Education Program (IEP) labels and medical pathology, allowing students to study and better understand the evolving social and cultural context of disability. An examination of disability “models” and the historical evolution of disability language is followed by strategies and resources for incorporating disability history and awareness in the social studies classroom. Ohio social studies educators are encouraged to support a Disability History and Awareness week or month in their state.

*“If you believe people have no history worth mentioning, it’s easy to believe they have no humanity worth defending.”*

William Loren Katz

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) civic mission calls for the inclusion of students with exceptional learning needs. Today more than 90% of exceptional learners receive their social studies instruction in a general education setting (NCSS, 2010; Schweder, 2011). However, providing students with disabilities a seat in the general education classroom does not ensure full access to the curriculum or positive social experiences with peers. Despite potential challenges that exist, inclusive schooling for exceptional learners is setting the stage for social studies educators to critically examine disability within our curriculum and classrooms. In this article, we propose that a good place to begin this examination of disability is to consider how social studies educators might address disability history in their classrooms. Studying disability history moves the concept of disability beyond Individualized Education Program (IEP) labels and medical pathology, allowing students to study and better understand evolving social and cultural perspectives. To begin this process, we examine the conceptual framework of disability. We also consider how the language of disability historically evolved. Next, we provide resources for incorporating disability history and awareness in social studies classrooms. Finally, we call on Ohio social studies educators to provide students with disabilities an opportunity to advocate for a Disability History and Awareness week or month in their state.

## **Framing Disability**

The concept of “disability” is an abstract one where scholars find little agreement in a single definition (Kudlick, 2003). Table 1 (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011; Linton, 2006; Shakespeare,

2006) provides a framework for two “models” of disability that social studies educators should understand before teaching disability history.

**TABLE 1**  
**Medical Model Versus Social Model**

| <b>The Medical Model of Disability</b>  | <b>The Social Model of Disability</b>   |
|---|---|
| Child has a medically diagnosed disability that is preventable, curable, or improved with rehabilitation.   | The child’s disability is a complex condition affected by context and largely a consequence of prejudice and marginalization.           |
| Focus on diagnosis, labeling, and the impairment first.   | Focus on the person first with an emphasis on strengths, needs, and ways to address challenges.   |
| Emphasis on educational environment that improves the impairment, which may mean alternative services and settings instead of inclusive settings. | Emphasis on inclusive educational environment first with consideration of alternative settings only after exhausting inclusive options. |
| Society sees disability as not the norm and sees people with disabilities as needing to adapt and fit in.   | Society evolves to question the definition of normal and how society can change to better include people with disabilities.             |

Within our schools, educators frame disability from a medical perspective, addressing the biology of disability. Federal law focusing on how pathology and impairment affect daily life drives this “medical model” of disability. The focus on medication, prevention, cure, or rehabilitation limits emphasis on the complex social issues affecting people with disabilities in daily life (Shakespeare, 2006). Classroom instruction in special education is a series of interventions and targeted strategies to improve below-average student academic performance and addressing social and behavioral issues that do not fit school norms. The focus is frequently on what students fail to do as opposed to what they do well.

In contrast to the medical model, many disability advocates and scholars frame disability from a “social model” perspective. The social model defines disability as a construction created by societal interactions and norms. This model recognizes people with disabilities as vital contributors of society, not as burdens or challenges (Ware, 2005). The linguistic representation of the word “disability” is seen as negatively positioning the ability of an individual and only seeing someone from a limitations perspective, demonstrating how society marginalizes people not considered to be “normal” or able-bodied (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011). Those who

support the social model propose that people without disabilities are defining and judging normality, and frame much of what is assumed about disability through their own eyes without considering the lens of people who actually experience disability (Foucault, 1977). The social model challenges these “able-bodied” assumptions, encouraging recognition of those excluded in the past (Wolbring, 2008). It brings into question how normality is defined in society and focuses on how people with disabilities enrich and contribute to society, instead of highlighting potential challenges they face.

In addition to the medical and social models of disability, there is also a “minority group” model, suggesting that the historical challenges people with disabilities faced are similar to challenges of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or age (Jones, 1996). Supporters of full inclusion for students with disabilities embrace the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* decision addressing segregation in public schools. Nonviolent protests modeled after the civil rights marches of the 1960s led to passage of the American with Disabilities Act (ADA). Blatt and Kaplan’s (1966) *Christmas in Purgatory: A Photographic Essay on Mental Retardation* underscored the horrific conditions of institutions in this country and how people with intellectual disabilities were treated as noncitizens (Blatt & Kaplan, 1966). Ed Roberts and “The Rolling Quads” of Berkeley paved the way for the admission of students with more significant disabilities to higher education (Independent Living Directory, 2008). Events such as these eventually led to the independent living movement and greater accessibility to public facilities for people with disabilities.

### **Language of Disability**

Another outcome of the discussion regarding the medical and social models is the evolution of disability language (Padden & Humphries, 2005). Debates about how language defines people as individuals abound. One example involves people identified as deaf or hearing impaired that align within a culturally Deaf community. The capitalized word “Deaf” identifies this cultural alignment (Schultz, Lieberman, Ellis, & Hilgenbrinck, 2013). Deafness becomes part of a larger shared historical context, a shared form of communication through American Sign Language, and a general way of life, as opposed to a term describing perceived challenges defined by the hearing community (Ladd & Lane, 2013). This form of “identity-first” language is also evident with people identified on the autism spectrum. Organizations such as the Autism Self Advocacy Network argue that autism is part of an individual’s identity and should be embraced (Brown, 2013).

Another movement in contrast to “identity-first” is the use of person-first language. The argument made with person-first language is that the disability descriptor aligns with the medical diagnosis, and people generally do not define themselves or others by medical diagnoses in conversation (Snow, 2009). It is not a matter of political correctness; rather, it is simply respecting human dignity. People with disabilities are not that different from people without disabilities, so why emphasize those few differences? Table 2 provides a short list of suggested ways to change how we address disability in our conversations and our writings.

**TABLE 2****Examples of People-First Language**

| <b>Say:</b>   | <b>Instead of:</b>                                     |
|---|--|
| People with disabilities.   | The handicapped or disabled people.                    |
| He has an intellectual disability or is a person with an intellectual disability. | He is mentally retarded or a mentally retarded person. |
| He has Down's Syndrome.   | He's Down's; a mongoloid.                              |
| She has a learning disability.  | She's learning disabled.                               |
| She's of short stature/she's a little person.                                     | She's a dwarf/midget.                                  |
| He uses a wheelchair/mobility chair.  | He's confined to or is wheelchair-bound.               |
| She receives special education services.  | She's in special education.                            |
| My students with IEPs.  | My IEP students.                                       |
| Children without disabilities.  | Normal, healthy, or typical kids.                      |
| He has a brain injury.  | He's brain damaged.                                    |
| Accessible parking or hotel room.   | Handicapped parking or hotel room.                     |

Adapted from Kathie Snow, "People First Language Chart," *Disability Is Natural*. 2009, [www.disabilityisnatural.com/images/PDF/pfl09.pdf](http://www.disabilityisnatural.com/images/PDF/pfl09.pdf).

Not only has disability language evolved in daily writing and communication, it also changed in federal and state law. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, laws described children with disabilities as defective, backward, or subnormal. Children with physical disabilities were "crippled" and those with intellectual disabilities were "retarded." Recently, "mental retardation" changed to "intellectual disability" as a more respectful way to refer to a person with cognitive challenges thanks in part to Rosa's law (Diament, 2010).

The way we understand and communicate about disability and special education impacts how we teach exceptional learners. As social studies educators, we appreciate the historical impact of language, labeling, prejudice, and perception on marginalized groups in society. In addition to clear challenges associated with learning, students with disabilities must also negotiate the prejudices and perceptions that underlie the school environment. To create an inclusive environment in our schools for all students, we must continue to address the academic, social, behavioral, and physical challenges that influence learning. We must also consider how our schools include or exclude students with disabilities through labels, daily language, and the perceptions we hold. Understanding the conceptual foundations of disability and special education is a necessary first step to developing an environment that enables positive academic and social experiences for exceptional learners.

## Teaching Disability History

Disability advocacy associated with the social and minority group model is beginning to focus attention on curriculum taught in social studies classrooms and the absence of disability discussions. It is safe to say disability history is not currently embedded within social studies curriculum, which is not a phenomenon that has gone unnoticed by historians (Baynton, 2001). There may be a historical or contemporary figure identified with a disability or a specific event related to disability, but one must dig deep to find these references (Burch & Sutherland, 2006). An examination of the Ohio Revised Standards in Social Studies (Ohio Department of Education, 2013) revealed no specific mention of disability topics or historical individuals with disabilities. However, this does not mean that Ohio social studies educators are without opportunities to include disability history within their curriculum. Table 3 identifies potential disability history topics to address in the revised Ohio social studies standards.

**TABLE 3**  
**Integrating Disability History with Ohio Standards**

| <b>Subject</b>            | <b>Topic</b>                               | <b>Disability Connection</b>  |
|---------------------------|--|---|
| U.S. History              | Social Transformation in the United States | Address how the struggle for racial and gender equality led to an extension of civil rights for people with disabilities.   |
| Government                | Civic Involvement                          | Include examples of interest groups that promote and protect the rights of people with disabilities. Also, address how local communities and organization support people with disabilities. |
| Modern World History      | Achievements and Crises (1900-1945)        | Address the treatment of people with disabilities during Nazi Germany and how the Nazis used U.S. eugenics laws to justify their actions during the Nuremburg Trials.                       |
| Contemporary World Issues | Technology                                 | Provide examples of how advances in communication and accessibility benefit people with disabilities.   |

Fortunately, disability history is gaining traction as states adopt awareness weeks and months to bring attention to disability. Since 2006, more than half the states across the United States adopted disability history and awareness weeks or months, primarily in October, to educate citizens about the history of individuals with disabilities (Disability History Week, n.d.). Youth with disabilities developed the legislation leading to these weeks and months, highlighting effective and informed participation in our democracy. A disability history week or month encourages teachers to integrate disability topics into lessons and address stigmas and negative stereotypes.

### **Bringing Disability History and Awareness to Ohio**

Social studies teachers are always looking for ways to encourage youth interest and involvement in the political process. An excellent exercise in grassroots community involvement would be to have students develop legislation for a disability history week or month in Ohio. The information we provided regarding the models of disability, language of disability, and Web links highlighting disability history are all useful materials for lesson plans to begin the education process. Once students have a firm grasp of the content associated with disability history, utilize the resources on the Disability History Week Web site (<http://disabilityhistoryweek.org>) and the National Consortium on Leadership and Disability for Youth (<http://www.nclld-youth.info/index.php?id=43>) to learn the steps other states followed to gain passage of disability history and awareness legislation. Students then apply these ideas to a simulation of how a bill becomes law in the Ohio general assembly. If there is enough interest and time, the students could even contact their local representative and move from a simulated exercise to actual citizen advocacy.

Another way to address disability history in the classroom and at the state level is to encourage students to compete in the National History Day in Ohio sponsored by the Ohio Historical Society. The theme for 2013-2014 is "Rights and Responsibilities," allowing opportunities for students to explore how the rights of people with disabilities changed over time and examine how people with disabilities fit within the concept of "citizen." Teachers can learn more about the contest by visiting the *Ohio Historical Society* contest information (<http://www.ohiohistory.org/education/national-history-day-in-ohio/contest-information>).

We began this article quoting William Loren Katz because we firmly believe that disability history has an important place in social studies classrooms. It is a "history worth mentioning" and "worth defending." People with disabilities represent the largest minority group in the United States and a group that will include many of us at some point in our lives. We hope the information and insights provided in this article encourage more social studies educators to increase awareness and understanding of disability through the inclusion of disability history.

### **Author Note**

Portions of this article will appear in a National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) Bulletin tentatively titled, *Social Studies and Exceptional Learners*. This bulletin addresses the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for social studies educators to support the academic and social needs of exceptional learners. It also provides resources including detailed lesson plans for elementary, middle, and high school social studies classrooms.

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