Critical Disability Studies and ‘Inclusive’ Early Childhood Education: The Ongoing Divide

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Abstract

Critical Disability Studies (CDS) provokes the field of early childhood ‘inclusion’ to reflect on its own complex history in order to identify how ableism has played a central role in the field’s development. However, the fields of early childhood ‘inclusive’ education and CDS remain largely distinct. This paper explores the ongoing separation between these fields in the context of the United States. I begin by providing a brief overview of the history of CDS and early childhood ‘inclusive’ education as distinct fields. Then, I discuss the divide between these two fields, analyzing their contemporary states, and describing the factors that facilitate the distance between them.

Keywords

Critical Disability Studies – Early Childhood Education – Inclusion

1 Introduction

As a pre-service teacher in an early childhood program that prioritized ‘inclusive’ education, I learned the evidence-based and developmentally appropriate practices for supporting children with disabilities in the general education classroom. Later, as a preschool teacher in a variety of ‘inclusive’ settings, I applied these strategies in order to facilitate the progress and full participation of students with and without disabilities. When my students with disabilities transitioned into the general education classrooms for their kindergarten
year, I helped to facilitate this transition by providing their new teachers with information about each child’s strengths and challenges. At times, I had the opportunity to aid in these transitions by supporting students in their new classrooms. As I observed the ‘inclusive’ kindergarten classrooms, I noticed that children without disabilities often asked questions about why others needed assistive technology to communicate, or wheelchairs to move around the classroom. These questions were often ignored, and brushed aside with a quick redirection. I began to wonder: When questions about difference are ignored, what do young children with and without disabilities take away from this interaction? What message does this send about disability and difference? These questions led me to reflect on my own teaching practice, and quickly expanded my line of questioning: What meaning is given to disability in the ‘inclusive’ classroom, in the special education system, and in society? How does this meaning shape the experiences of children in the classroom?

A search for others who took a critical stance toward the field of early childhood ‘inclusion’ led me to the field of Disability Studies, and later, to Critical Disability Studies (CDS). Through the lens of Disability Studies, a field that claims disability is socially constructed, I came to understand how the field of early childhood ‘inclusive’ education continues to frame disability as something “to be fixed, cured, remediated, and shaped into the mold of normalcy at all costs” (Connor, Valle, & Hale, 2015, p. 1). Critical Disability Studies, a field that “shifts attention away from ‘the disabled’ onto ‘the abled’” (Goodley, 2013, p. 640), allowed me to consider how ideas of the normal child position certain students as already included, others as requiring inclusion, and some as incapable of being included (Watson, 2018). When viewing the field of early childhood ‘inclusive’ education through a CDS framework, it became clear that the challenge for the field is not to improve ‘inclusive’ strategies, but to “detect, understand and dismantle exclusion as it presents itself in education” (Slee, 2013, p. 905).

CDS provokes the field of early childhood ‘inclusion’ to reflect on its own complex history in order to identify how ableism has played a central role in the field’s development, and to consider the implications for future practice. However, the fields of early childhood ‘inclusive’ education and CDS remain largely distinct (Franck, 2018; Watson, 2018). This paper will explore the ongoing separation between these fields within the context of the United States. I will begin by providing a brief overview of the history of CDS and early childhood ‘inclusive’ education as distinct fields. Then, I will discuss the divide between these two fields, analyzing their contemporary states, and describing the factors that facilitate the distance between them.
2 Theoretical Position

I take a critical stance toward traditional practices of early childhood ‘inclusive’ education. Viewing the ‘inclusive’ classroom through a CDS lens shifts “the gaze of scrutiny away from the individual child and their diagnosis, toward the ‘including’ group” (Watson, 2017, p. 13). First, I identify the categorization of the normal and abnormal child as a seemingly inevitable and taken-for-granted practice (Hacking, 1999) that is actually the result of specific ideas about “what is desirable, and what should be achieved” (Watson, 2017, p. 17). The beliefs associated with the normal child are used within the ‘inclusive’ classroom “to provide the means of identifying abnormality and the rationale for intervention” (Rose, 1999, p. 133). Second, I critique the field of early childhood ‘inclusive’ education for its “symbiotic relationship” with the field of special education, which relies on categorizing students and conducting research to provide interventions that will “make the abnormal individuals normal” (Gallagher, 2010, p. 35). Third, I call attention to the field of early childhood ‘inclusive’ education’s lack of attention to “historical, political, economic, and professional frames of reference about both education and disability” (Sapon-Shevin, 1989, p. 93). As Foucault (1983) explains, “we have to know the historical conditions that motivate our conceptualization. We need a historical awareness of our present circumstance” (p. 209). Specifically, the history of early childhood ‘inclusive’ education illustrates how race and social class are intertwined with ideas of normal and abnormal child development (Kliweuer, 2016).

I draw on CDS in order to consider how “turning the gaze of scrutiny away from the individual child and their diagnosis toward the ‘including’ group changes understandings” (Watson, 2017, p. 13). Goodley (2013) explains that CDS offers a framework “through which to think though, act, resist, relate, communicate, engage with one another against the hybridized forms of oppression and discrimination that so often do not speak singularly of disability” (p. 641). Karen Watson’s (2017) application of CDS to the field of early childhood ‘inclusive’ education results in the following questions:

Would it be possible to give up all references to things being ‘normal’ or ‘natural’? Would it be possible to take seriously the notion that everything (people, categories, classrooms, diagnoses, etc.) is continuously made, and that we are all implicated in this making? Would it be possible to interrupt the privileging and power of cultural and historical discourses? (p. 201)
Following Watson’s (2017) lead, I utilize a CDS approach in order to analyze the history of early childhood ‘inclusive’ education, and the construction of the normal child. The results of this analysis drive my description of the persistent distance between the fields of early childhood ‘inclusion’ and CDS. In discussing the separation of early childhood inclusive education and CDS, and in presenting a CDS approach to early childhood ‘inclusive’ teacher education, my aim is to describe how CDS can move from theory into practice. My hope is to respond to Barton’s (2001) call for:

a political analysis which is inspired by a desire for transformative change and that constitutes hope at the centre of struggles ... At both the individual and collective level a crucial task is to develop a theory of political action which also involves the generation of tactics or strategies for its implementation. This is a difficult but essential agenda. (p. 3)

3 The Field of Critical Disability Studies: A Brief History

Hacking (1999) explains that social construction arguments are often made when something, such as disability, is viewed as an inevitable category, object, idea, etc., but is actually not inevitable at all. Of course, such an argument is only made when there is a perceived need to raise awareness, reframe, or remove the category, object, or idea. In the case of Disability Studies, it is argued that disability seems to be inevitable within our current society. However, as Oliver and Barnes (2012) point out, the meaning attached to disability and the resulting societal response is not consistent across time periods or cultures. Nielsen (2012) provides an example of this, describing how some indigenous North Americans interpreted disability in a manner that positioned individuals as disabled, “only if or when a person was removed from or was unable to participate in community reciprocity” (Nielsen, 2012, p. 3). Alternatively, early European colonizers did not define disability in terms of physical difference, as these were common “due to disease, accident, or birth” (Nielsen, 2012, p. 20). Rather, the concept of disability was linked to an individual’s lack of economic productivity, and an acceptable level of economic productivity was linked “to one’s race, class, gender, and religion” (Nielsen, 2012, p. 27). Halfon, Houtrow, Larson, and Newacheck (2012) provide a childhood-specific example, explaining that while childhood disability in the 1960’s might have been associated with “the iconic image of ... a child with polio,” today’s representation might focus on “a child with autism” (p. 14). The fluidity of disability across time and space indicates that the category of disability, as it is presently defined
and understood, was not inevitable, but a result of “specific histories, legal practices, industrialization and development policies, educational-access histories, tax structures, ideologies, and more” (Nielsen, 2012, p. xvi). In addition, a brief look at historical and contemporary societal responses to disability demonstrates the need to raise consciousness and reframe disability. For example, Massachusetts’ *Body of Liberties*, the first code of laws established by New England colonists in 1641, demonstrates the role that disability played in early concepts of citizenship (Whitmore, 1890). The eleventh liberty states, “All persons which are of the age of 21 yeares, and of right understanding and meamories ... shall have full power and libertie to make their wills and testaments, and other lawfull alienations of their lands and estates” (Whitmore, 1890, p. 35). The emphasis on “right understanding” reveals the link between specific ideas about ability and an individual’s rights as a citizen. Following the American Revolution, the focus shifted to “transform(ing) the questionable citizen into a good one and confin(ing) those either refusing or incapable of transformation” (Nielsen, 2012, p. 51) through institutionalization, medical intervention, and education. Disabled people in the United States have been subject to oppression in many forms, ranging from the denial of full citizenship and rights, to the dehumanizing practices of institutionalization, to the able-bodied norms that serve as a basis for policies and practices (Nielsen, 2012). The wide acceptance of disability as a natural category, and the clear need for raising consciousness about the oppression faced by disabled individuals served as the basis for the field of Disability Studies.

Disability Studies emerged out of an effort to transform the meaning attributed to disability, and to remove the disabling conditions faced by individuals with impairments (Gabel, 2005). In the 1970s, disabled activists and advocates in both the United Kingdom and the United States campaigned for rights, including “comprehensive disability income and new living options” (Oliver & Barnes, 2012, p. 178). The grassroots movement resulted in an academic field that “focused upon the ways historical, social, cultural, political, and economic framings of disability came into play with other discourses of disability ...impacting the degree of access that people with disabilities have to all aspects of society” (Connor, Valle, & Hale, 2015, p. 1). In the United States, the minority model of disability drew on the civil rights movement in order to argue that individuals with disabilities are an oppressed group (Gabel, 2005). For example, Bogdan and Bilken (1977) used the term “handicapism” to point out “the assumptions and practices that promote the differential and unequal treatment of people because of apparent or assumed ... differences” (p. 15). The disabled people’s movement in the United Kingdom resulted in the social
model of disability (Gabel, 2005). The Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation, founded in 1972, explained the primary principle of the social model: “In our view, it is society which disabled physically impaired people. Disability is something that is imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society” (p. 3). While the social model of disability has received numerous critiques, Oliver and Barnes (2012) state that it provides an important alternative to the individual model of disability, which frames disability as a “personal tragedy” and a medical problem to be fixed (Oliver, 1986, p. 16). The social model of disability argues that an impairment may or may not result in disablement (Tremain, 2005). In other words, an individual with an impairment experiences disablement as a result of socially constructed ideas, attitudes, practices, and policies. The notion that disability is socially constructed is often viewed as “nonsensical,” but as Baglieri, Valle, Connor, & Gallagher (2011) explain, “the fact that some people cannot walk, hear, or see is not what is being questioned. What is being questioned is the significance or meaning that we, as educators, place on those biological differences” (p. 271). Hehir (2005) demonstrates the social construction argument using the example of a primarily deaf community in Martha’s Vineyard in the 1800’s, in which the majority of the population used American Sign Language (ASL) to communicate. He explains that members of the community who were not deaf learned ASL in order to experience full social participation. In this environment, being deaf arguably resulted in a significantly lesser degree of disablement than one would experience in an environment where ASL is not valued or widely used (Hehir, 2005).

Framing disability as a social construct provided the foundation for the field of Disability Studies, and the basis of arguments used to advocate for policies that provided support and removed barriers for disabled individuals (Gleeson, 1997). While the social model of disability proved to be a useful tool for bringing about real change, it is “not a social theory” (Oliver & Barnes, 2012, p. 23), and has received criticism for failing to develop a social theory of disability (Gleeson, 1997). Early social theories of disability draw on materialism, emphasizing the disability/impairment distinction, in order to demonstrate how the meaning attached to disability results in specific material barriers to the inclusion of disabled individuals (Oliver, 1990; Barnes, 1997; Gleeson, 1997). Materialist approaches suggest that disabling barriers may be removed by making changes to “cultural processes and policy frameworks” (Watson, 2012, p. 194). However, materialist views of disability are critiqued for a lack of attention to individual, embodied experience (French, 1993; Crow, 1996). Utilizing a feminist approach to disability, Crow (1996) argues against the disability/impairment distinction: “As individuals, most of us simply cannot pretend
with any conviction that our impairments are irrelevant because they influence every aspect of our lives" (p. 7). In other words, a materialist social model does not account for the experience of impairment, which "is a predicament and can be tragic" (Goodley, 2013, p. 634). Social theories of disability began to shift focus “away from an emphasis on the primacy of material factors in the creation of disability toward a more nuanced focus on culture, language and discourse” (Oliver & Barnes, 2012, p. 180). This shift resulted in a growing use of the term ‘Critical Disability Studies’ by scholars (i.e., Tremain, 2005; Erevelles, 2005; Roets & Goodley, 2008) who critiqued Disability Studies for relying on materialist analyses and the impairment/disability binary. Specifically, Tremain (2005) argues that “if the identity of the subject of the social model is actually produced in accordance with these political arrangements, then a social movement that grounds its claims to entitlement in that identity will inadvertently extend those arrangements” (p. 10). At the same time, CDS recognizes the important contributions of materialist scholars, whose work led to the politicization of disability, and “sought to address material needs via increased socio-political participation” (Goodley, 2013, p. 633). How do CDS scholars theorize disability? As CDS takes an interdisciplinary approach to theorizing disability, there is no single answer to this question (Goodley, 2013). For Shakespeare (2006), CDS allows the experience of impairment to be considered, an experience that might begin at birth, occur later in life, remain a stable condition, or change over time. Tremain (2005) conducts a Foucauldian analysis of disability, and states that by defining disability as socially constructed, and impairment as a natural condition, the social model “obscures the productive constraints of modern (bio)power” (p. 11). This argument suggests that both disability and impairment are constructed by the “historically and culturally specific language-games in which we understand them and with which we represent them” (Tremain, 2005, p. 32). Similarly, Franck (2018) proposes that in order to move beyond binary ways of thinking about disability, CDS allows us to “regard disability, impairment, and ability as inherently unstable and fluid categories, akin to the instability of the concept of identity” (p. 248). What seems to unite CDS scholars, is a desire to extend the social model of disability in order to examine the construction of normalcy, and “its discursive impact on societal responses to impairment” (Oliver & Barnes, 2012, p. 180). Meekosha and Shuttleworth (2009) describe the field of CDS, and its relationship to Disability Studies:

CDS will necessarily be eclectic and will continue to include materialist analyses, such as the political economy of disability. It will inevitably build on the work of the early pioneers in disability studies and continue
to employ relevant aspects of social models of disability. The politics inherent in disabled people’s lived experience and the multiple socio-cultural factors that can constrain their agency, so difficult to theorise in terms of strict materialism, constitute a central area for CDS. (p. 65)

CDS includes the social model of disability initially developed by the field of Disability Studies, but incorporates “a more complex conceptual understanding of disability oppression” (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009, p. 50). I draw on the work of CDS scholars as well as Disability Studies scholars who are engaged in “unpacking and illuminating the complex nature of disability” (Goodley, 2013, p. 641).

4 Early Childhood ‘Inclusive’ Education: A Brief History

The field of early childhood ‘inclusive’ education was initially defined as the provision of ‘services for young children with disabilities in a setting with their typically developing peers’ (McLean, Sandall, & Smith, 2016, p. 15). The term ‘young children’ refers to preschool or kindergarten students between the ages of three and five. More recent definitions of early childhood ‘inclusive’ education tend to incorporate a “social justice narrative” while simultaneously viewing inclusion “as a means to an end ... as an instructionally useful way to raise standardized test scores for disabled students” (Danforth, 2015, p. 595). While a complete history of early childhood ‘inclusive’ education is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to consider how the field’s origins continue to shape ideas and practices of ‘inclusive’ education. I will use a CDS lens to problematize the field’s “normalization of ‘childhood’ as ‘stages of development,’” and highlight how the field “produced ‘others,’ whose protection was not guaranteed” (Baker, 1998, p. 139).

The history of early childhood ‘inclusive’ education is often described as the product of “philanthropic activity” (Rose, 1999, p. 129) designed to “enrich the lives of America’s youngest citizens” through schooling (Kliewer, 2016, p. 106). This version of history states that daycares emerged in tandem with the field of child development, resulting in the identification of children who did not exhibit ‘normal’ patterns of development (Kliewer, 2016; Rose, 1999). In order to meet the needs of these abnormal children, separate daycare classrooms with specialized curricula were developed, creating the field of early childhood special education (Kliewer & Raschke, 2002). Eventually, a number of educators grew critical of this segregated system of educating young children, and proposed a merger of the two fields. This merger resulted in the beginning of early childhood ‘inclusive’ education (Kliewer & Raschke, 2002).
Kliewer (2016) analyzes the history of early childhood ‘inclusive’ education through a Disability Studies lens, and critiques this oversimplified version of events, stating, “early childhood special education originated neither out of benevolence nor as a legitimate scientific response to so-called detached notions of non-normality, but as a direct result of the destructive eugenics movement that swept America beginning in the late 1800’s” (p. 108). During this time period, immigrants came to the United States at increasing rates in hopes of economic opportunity. Eugenicists associated immigrants with poverty, and poverty with ‘feeblemindedness,’ a term used to refer to an absence of both intellectual ability and morality (Kliewer, 2016). By 1910, 26% of the paid labor force was made up of women, creating a specific set of “moral panics … social anxieties concerning threats to the established order and traditional values…” (Rose, 1999, p. 125). The panic over working mothers, who were unable to fulfill their “primary responsibility” to “raise and nurture,” (Kliewer & Raschke, 2002, p. 48), presented a social problem. The solution, devised by women from middle and upper class backgrounds, was to develop day nurseries. While the provision of child-care for working mothers can be viewed as a positive development, the day nursery constructed young children from low-income families as ‘at-risk’, and provided care that aimed to compensate for the negative effects of the child’s background (Kliewer, 2016). Additionally, middle and upper-class children began to attend nursery schools, often attached to universities, which provided a very different model of care, focused not on compensating for perceived deficit, but on “enrichment and actualization” (Kliewer & Raschke, 2002, p. 51).

Simultaneous to the development of day nurseries, an increasing reliance on “expert notions of normality” (Rose, 1999, p. 133) allowed for new ways of categorizing individuals and populations. Franck (2018) explains, “As the human body and mind is made quantifiable, an individual can be seen as falling beneath a standard and positioned in a category other than the perceived norm” (p. 248). Measurements were utilized to establish normal and abnormal patterns of child development. However, the measurements used to establish these norms “reflected the experiences of the privileged classes and pathologized people who were poor or from non-majority racial and ethnic backgrounds” (Ferri & Bacon, 2011, p. 138). For example, psychologist G. Stanley Hall (1904) “believed that studies of individual, upper class children, when accumulated, would yield universal principles of normal development against which all children could be judged” (Kliewer & Raschke, 2002, p. 49). Hall’s child-study research served as the basis for the field of child development, and resulted in a construction of the ‘normal’ child that was highly enmeshed with racist, classist, and ableist ideologies (Ferri & Connor, 2006). Once the ‘normal’ child was clearly defined, the field of early childhood special education was
developed to solve to the problem of the ‘abnormal’ child (Kliewer, 2016). Children in special education classrooms were subject to “functional' curriculum, behavior modification, and clinically-focused remedial instruction and therapies” (Kliewer, 2016, p. 138).

In the mid-1940s, debates over whether children with disabilities should be educated in segregated classrooms, or in classrooms with their non-disabled peers, began to gain traction in academia (Kliewer & Raschke, 2002). Still, the rationale for educating all students in the same classroom communicated a deficit view of disability, as articulated by Robb (1945–1946) who wrote, “Under plans of segregation pupils suffer from a feeling of inadequacy ... They are deprived of social experiences that would be stimulus for further development” (p. 240). Over the next thirty years, parent advocates and progressive educators fought for legislation that would guarantee children with disabilities the right to education in a non-segregated setting (Kliewer & Raschke, 2002). In 1972, Congress passed the Economic Opportunity Amendment (P.L. 92–424), requiring Project Head Start to enroll children with disabilities in ten percent of all classrooms. Just a few years later, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (P.L. 94–142) required that children between the ages of 5 and 21 be educated in the least restrictive environment. It was not until 1986 that the act was amended to include preschool children with disabilities (P.L. 99–457). Kliewer and Raschke (2002) critique the least restrictive environment mandate for creating “an ‘escape clause’ to dilute and often subvert the presumption of a child’s right to inclusion” (pp. 45–46). Indeed, by requiring a least restrictive environment, the act necessitated restrictive environments, and made it acceptable for students with disabilities to be educated in environments other than the general education classroom. In order for disabled students’ least restrictive environment to be the general education classroom, they would have to demonstrate an ability to conform to standards of normality (Kliewer & Raschke, 2002). Those children determined to be too different to ‘include’ continued to be educated in separate settings, a practice Cologan (2014) critiques, explaining “even the most well-meaning suggestion that ‘special’ provision might be ‘better’ for the (so labeled ‘special’) child avoids addressing issues of how children are constructed, taught, and assessed” (p. 380). The history of early childhood inclusive education reveals that while the activists who fought for the educational rights of children with disabilities based this argument on a “moral case” (Danforth, 2015, p. 583), the concept of ‘inclusion’ was originally synonymous with integration, and made no critique of the “normal curve as a model of human diversity” (Dudley-Marling & Gurn, 2010, p. 20). Through the lens of CDS, it becomes clear that a critique of the concept of normality upon which ‘inclusion’ is based is necessary to challenge the practice of “equating
difference with deviance and diversity with exceptional” (Dudley-Marling & Gurn, 2010, p. 20).

5 Critical Disability Studies and Early Childhood ‘Inclusion’: The Divide

The purpose of this section is to describe why the fields of early childhood ‘inclusive’ education and CDS have remained separate. Specifically, I suggest that early childhood ‘inclusive’ education, despite adopting contemporary policies and practices that articulate a shift towards broader notions of ‘inclusion’, “has failed to interrogate the normative assumptions that shape it” (Watson, 2018, p. 142). In other words, the field of early childhood ‘inclusive’ education falls short of truly grappling with the questions a CDS approach would raise. However, it would not be fair to explain the gap between the two fields solely as a failure of the field of early childhood ‘inclusive’ education. The field of CDS has also been critiqued for presenting a social theory of disability without clear implications for policy or practice, making it difficult for the field of early childhood ‘inclusive’ education to integrate a CDS perspective (Watson, 2012; Oliver & Barnes, 2012). In order to analyze the ongoing separation of inclusive early childhood education from the field of CDS, I will begin by examining the work that has taken up a Disability Studies or CDS approach towards early childhood ‘inclusion’, making suggestions as to why this work has not made a significant impact on practice. Then, I will discuss how ‘inclusion’ is currently defined and implemented within early childhood classrooms, and why this interpretation of ‘inclusion’ prevents the field from embracing CDS. Based on this analysis, I will suggest that keeping early childhood ‘inclusion’ separate from CDS is seemingly necessary in order to maintain the field of ‘inclusive’ education. Finally, I will propose a path forward, suggesting how CDS may be applied to the teacher education for early childhood ‘inclusive’ education, and describing how this approach is different from current models.

6 Critical Disability Studies: Encounters with Early Childhood ‘Inclusive’ Education

While the work of Disability Studies and other CDS scholars in the field of education is encouraging, Kliewer (2016) reminds us that, “Disability Studies has unfortunately had little influence on the experiences of young children with disabilities, their families, or the course of early childhood education”
In order to understand the ongoing lack of discourse between the fields, it is important to examine the work that has attempted to bring a CDS perspective to early childhood ‘inclusion’. This work, which I will summarize in this section, falls into three categories: (1) CDS theorizations of early childhood ‘inclusive’ education, (2) early childhood practices analyzed through a CDS lens, and (3) CDS-based (early childhood) teacher preparation programs.

A number of scholars have used CDS in order to trouble the current field of early childhood ‘inclusive’ education, or to suggest the implications of CDS for the field. For example, Karen Watson (2018) suggests that CDS is particularly useful for challenging ‘inclusive’ early childhood education as it provokes us to “shift the focus of ‘inclusion’ from the individual subject to the ‘normal’ group of subjects and trouble the way the discourses produce these subjects” (p. 154). Nick Watson (2012) draws on Disability Studies and childhood studies in order to suggest a “new approach to the study of disability in childhood” (p. 200), which would involve: (1) centering the contributions of disabled children, (2) allowing for heterogeneity of disabled experiences, (3) allowing for variation as children grow older, (4) examining the many categories of disability, and (5) challenging and eliminating ableist and exclusionary practices. Similar ideas are found in Davis’s (2012) chapter on merging theoretical perspectives from the fields of Disability Studies and childhood studies. Specifically, Davis (2012) explains that postmodern interpretations of disability require an approach that incorporates the fluidity of disabled children’s identities as they interact with the physical and social environment. Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2010) explore the application of CDS and ‘inclusion’ to a theory of disabled childhood. They suggest that queer teaching, which responds to “the ways in which disabled children demand imaginative and responsive forms of educational provision” (p. 287), has the potential to foster an approach to education that “responds well to difference and has inclusion at its very core” (p. 288). Taken together, the theoretical work that takes a CDS approach to early childhood ‘inclusive’ education supports Kliwer’s (2016) idea:

Disability Studies has much to contribute to discussions of early childhood education, particularly in fostering full democratic participation on the part of people with disabilities. Such participation must start early in the child’s life- in preschool- and Disability Studies holds the key to theorizing and pushing the paradigm of full participation for all citizens. However, for Disability Studies to impact the texts of disability in early childhood, scholars must extend theory into action. (pp. 113–114)
Michael Oliver also discusses his desire for researchers to apply disability theory, describing it as “a tool that we should use to try and produce changes in the world, changes in what we do...” (Allan & Slee, 2008, p. 88). He goes on to express the importance of utilizing a social theory, and explaining “what we did with it and ... whether it worked or not” (p. 88). A number of scholars have applied CDS to their studies of early childhood ‘inclusive’ classrooms (Nowicki, Brown, & Dare, 2018; Burke, 2015; Watson, Millei, & Petersen, 2015; Naraian, 2011; Orsati, 2014; Wiebe Berry, 2006). These studies highlight what a CDS framework allowed the researchers to understand about dis/ability in the early childhood inclusive classroom. Burke’s (2015) study of how playgrounds are used by children with and without disabilities indicates that children are “divided into separate cultural groups by spatial arrangements” (p. 17). Her study suggests not only the importance of considering physical accessibility, but also the need to ensure that accessible play spaces and equipment are designed to be used by all children. Burke (2015) analyzes how children interpret inaccessible physical environments, suggesting that non-disabled children may begin to “accept social segregation for people with impairments as a ‘normal’ part of life” (p. 18). Watson, Millei, and Petersen (2015) also investigate the interplay between physical objects and social interactions within an ‘inclusive’ early childhood classroom, providing an illustration of “how exclusive ‘inclusive’ practices can be as the marked child is contained, limited and positioned as in need of remediation by a category dispensed to them” (pp. 275–276). Elaborating on the idea of exclusive practices, Naraian’s (2011) analysis of the discourse used within an early childhood inclusive classroom indicates that teacher discourse “sought to impose one ‘right’ narrative of disability... acceptance and membership ... delivered to students in a form inaccessible to collective inquiry” (p. 105). Wiebe Berry (2006) also describes the social interactions in an elementary ‘inclusive’ classroom, illuminating the importance of “resist(ing) placement as a proxy for inclusion without understanding exactly what students experience as a result of their placement” (p. 521). These studies are important not only for demonstrating the need for a CDS approach to early childhood inclusive education, but also for pointing to the specific practices that require a CDS-based intervention, such as teacher discourse and definitions of ‘inclusion’.

Scholars in the field of education have presented a case for incorporating a CDS or Disability Studies approach into teacher preparation programs (Cosier & Pearson, 2016; Gilham & Tompkins, 2016; Ashby, 2012; Ferri & Bacon, 2011; Oyler, 2011). Connor (2008) states “unless the (mis)representations of disability are addressed within the curriculum, most students’ understanding will be
informed by the hegemonic domain of the media” (p. 376). Similarly, Samsel and Perepa (2013) explain that teachers rated media representations as “good sources of knowledge because they show first-hand experience of an impairment” (p. 142). A CDS approach to teacher education would provide pre-service teachers with the tools to question their ideas about dis/ability, offering a “theoretical framework that situates access to general education curriculum and content not as simply ‘best practice’ but a basic civil right for students with disabilities and other marginalized groups of students in schools” (Cosier & Pearson, 2016, p. 3). Oyler (2011) provides one example of such a teacher education program that aims to “challenge mainstream narratives of disability as stigmatizing, of difference as pathological, and of classrooms as places that run most smoothly when everyone is ‘on the same level’” (pp. 201–202). This program exposes all students, not just those interested in special education or ‘inclusion’, to scholarship from the fields of Critical Disability Studies, Critical Race Theory, and Queer Theory, in order to engage students in conversations about “who is at the center (normal), who has been relegated to the margins... and how these ‘others’ have been regulated” (Oyler, 2011, p. 213). Ferri and Bacon (2011) point to the importance of Disability Studies for the field of early childhood education, as it provides the tools to critique traditional methods of identifying, labeling, and fixing children. They explain that while troubling constructions of dis/ability is important across grade levels, early childhood education is particularly focused on the “production of and hunt for different forms of disability, unreadiness, and at-risk-icity” (Baker, 2002, p. 673). As early childhood teachers are under increased pressure to make choices about whether or not to make disability referrals for students, Ferri and Bacon (2011) argue that it is essential for pre-service teacher to understand and question “the construction of these categories” (p. 145).

The research that brings a CDS perspective to early childhood ‘inclusive’ education highlights the importance of questioning the role that ability plays in policy, practice, and classroom interactions. In other words, a CDS framework allows us to see the ideology of ability at work in the early childhood ‘inclusive’ classroom. Reid and Knight (2006) draw on Althusser (1971), defining ideology as “systems of representations- beliefs, images, and myths- that mediate our understanding of every aspect of life in profound but often unconscious ways” (Reid & Knight, 2006, p. 18). Siebers (2008) expands on this concept in the following way:

The ideology of ability is at its simplest the preference for able-bodiedness. At its most radical, it defines the baseline by which humanness is determined, setting the measure of body and mind that gives or denies human
status to individual persons. It affects nearly all of our judgments, definitions, and values about human beings, but because it is discriminatory and exclusionary, it creates social locations outside of and critical of its purview, most notably in this case, the perspective of disability. (p. 8)

Brantlinger (1997) also points out the ideology of “special education traditionalists” (p. 448), and reminds us that a critical approach is not ideology-free; however, this type of “ideology can be considered organic, in that it dwells on emancipatory or transformative ideas for eliminating oppression form social structures” (p. 448).

A CDS approach pushes educators to engage in ongoing reflection about how ‘the normal child’ is constructed within their classroom, school, and society. While a growing number of scholars are theorizing and applying a CDS approach to early childhood ‘inclusion’, this work has made relatively little impact on teacher education, or classroom practices (Kliwer, 2016). Why does this gap remain? Watson (2012) critiques CDS, questioning its potential to have a true impact on the field of early childhood, stating, “it is hard to see how the approaches it advocates can promote, improve, reform or radically engage with the inequalities, injustices and misery experienced by millions of disabled people around the world” (p. 198). Similarly, Oliver and Barnes (2012) write that CDS provides “little or no insight into how the problem of disablism might be resolved in terms of politics, policy or practice” (p. 181). They also suggest that CDS scholars tend to use language that “disables rather than enables those without an academic background” (Oliver & Barnes, 2012, p. 182). I agree that making clear connections between theory and its application to policy, research, and practice are important next steps for the field of CDS. However, it is also important to understand how the discourse of ‘inclusion’, as it is presently defined and implemented, works to maintain the distance between CDS and early childhood ‘inclusive’ education.

7 Early Childhood ‘Inclusive’ Education: Defined and Implemented

The field of early childhood suggests a more critical approach by communicating a broader definition of ‘inclusion’ (DEC/NAEYC, 2009). I argue that by adopting a seemingly more progressive interpretation of ‘inclusion’, the field of early childhood ‘inclusion’ suggests that there is no need for a more critical approach. However, as I will further explain, the ways that ‘inclusion’ is defined and implemented fails to address the “difficult problems that disability studies tended to shy away from” (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009, p. 66). The Division
for Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) define early childhood ‘inclusion’ in their joint position statement:

Early childhood inclusion embodies the values, policies, and practices that support the right of every infant and young child and his or her family, regardless of ability, to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members of families, communities, and society. The desired results of inclusive experiences for children with and without disabilities and their families include a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and development and learning to reach their full potential. The defining features of inclusion that can be used to identify high quality early childhood programs and services are access, participation, and supports.

DEC/NAEYC, 2009, p. 2

While the concept of ‘inclusive’ education has been critiqued for pertaining solely to a physical placement (Ferri & Bacon, 2011), the DEC/NAEYC position statement indicates that ‘inclusion’ should incorporate practices that physically, socially, and academically include students. This shift is also reflected in the development of the Inclusive Classroom Profile (ICP), a tool designed to measure the quality of ‘inclusion’ in early childhood classrooms (Soukakou, 2012). The ICP is described as reflecting, “some of the most current research syntheses and theoretical perspectives on early childhood inclusion” (Soukakou, 2012, p. 480). Specifically, the work of Buysee (2012), Buysee and Hollingsworth (2009), and the National Professional Center on Inclusion (NPCI, 2009) are cited as representing these perspectives on inclusive education. This body of work does include ideas that suggest a more expansive definition of ‘inclusion’. For example, Buysee (2012) discusses the use of Universal Design, a concept promoted by Disability Studies scholars (Wilson, 2017; Mitchell, Snyder, & Ware, 2015; Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012; Smith, 2010; Argondizza, 2005), to support “the access of children with disabilities to many different types of environments and settings through the removal of physical and structural barriers” (p. 488). Additionally, the NPCI’s (2009) research synthesis includes articles that investigate teacher perceptions of ‘inclusion’ (Dinnebeil, McInerney, Fox, & Juchartz-Pendry, 1998), an important component of deconstructing beliefs about dis/ability, and the impact that these beliefs have on inclusive practices. However, the ICP does not draw on any work from the field of CDS, and in doing so fails to address a number of taken-for-granted ideas about childhood and dis/ability. For example, the second principle of the ICP explains that, “The desired goals of children with and without...
disabilities included in preschool classrooms include a sense of membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and support to maximize their learning potential" (Soukakou, 2012, p. 480). Looking at this principle through the lens of CDS, three questions arise. First, who determines the desired goals of children? Scholars in the field of childhood dis/ability advocate for allowing dis/abled children to participate in the determination of goals, “enabling them to identify what they see as being the most important” (Watson, 2012, p. 199). Instead, the ICP lays out a set of pre-identified goals said to be desired by all children. Second, how are the ideas of classroom membership and positive relationships defined? In order to assess the extent to which children with disabilities experience membership within the classroom, the ICP “assesses the extent to which children have equal opportunities to assume social roles and responsibilities in the classroom” (Soukakou, 2012, p. 482). While it is certainly important for dis/abled children to be given equal opportunities to access and engage in classroom activities, the work of Naraian (2011) and Wiebe Berry (2006) suggests that this provision alone does not necessarily result in an experience of membership for dis/abled children. Naraian (2011) found that when teachers frame disability as something to be accepted without question, students have no platform for discussing difference, and the formation of relationships is ultimately limited. Wiebe Berry’s (2006) ethnographic classroom study further complicates the idea of classroom membership, demonstrating that even when students in ‘inclusive’ classrooms appear to be “included, engaged, and interactive ... a closer look at these interactions provides indications about whether inclusion had actually occurred for a particular student ... in this particular time and this particular context” (p. 522). Third, what does the realization of a child’s learning potential look like? It is important to consider the manner in which children are expected to learn, as well as the content of the curriculum. Children with disabilities are often subject to interventions targeting deviant behaviors that are not necessarily a hindrance to the child’s development or education (Hehir, 2005). For example, children with “variations in small motor skills” are often subject to “endless rounds of fitting beads onto a string” (Mitchell & Snyder, 2006, p. 8). As Hehir (2005) explains, “ableist assumptions become dysfunctional when the educational and developmental services provided to disabled children focus inordinately on the characteristics of their disability to the exclusion of all else” (p. 16).

Barton and Smith’s (2015) book, The Preschool Inclusion Toolbox: How to Build and Lead a High-Quality Program, provides additional insight into how the field of early childhood education interprets the concept of ‘inclusion’. The authors describe the research that supports the ‘inclusion’ of young children with disabilities in the general education classroom, explaining, “High-quality inclusive classrooms with adequate ratios of more competent peers, in
particular, are related to positive outcomes for children with disabilities” (Barton & Smith, 2015, p. 34). The dichotomy created between ‘competent peers’ and ‘children with disabilities’ in this description of ‘inclusion’ serves to create “sharp boundaries between the able and disabled, rigid expectations regarding the behavior and abilities of the disabled, static views that deny... the dynamic nature of disability” (Carey, 2013, p. 160). Rausch’s (2015) section in the book seems to draw on CDS ideas, discussing why the language used to describe disability is important, and arguing for “ongoing evaluation of existing power structures, discourse, and culture” (Rausch, 2015, p. 84) within the field of early childhood ‘inclusive’ education. However, a closer look at the specifics of Rausch’s (2015) argument demonstrates a lack of discourse between the fields of CDS and early childhood ‘inclusion’. Rausch (2015) calls for the use of person-first language (i.e., child with a disability), explaining the use of disability-first language (i.e., disabled child) “can cause devastating long-term effects on children when their families, teachers, and peers recognize their limitations before acknowledging their individuality as young children” (p. 83). The use of person-first language has been heavily debated within CDS, and ultimately person-first language is criticized for suggesting that disability is “a contingent add-on” rather “than a fundamental element in the production of identities” (Shildrick, 2012, p. 40). The field of early childhood inclusive education communicates the idea that ‘inclusion’ needs to describe more than the physical placement of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Instead, the field advocates for strategies that support the physical, social, academic, and environmental ‘inclusion’ of young children with disabilities. However, this seemingly broader interpretation of ‘inclusive’ education fails to question the taken-for-granted norms about dis/ability, how these norms intersect with race, class, and gender, and how the field of early childhood ‘inclusive’ education has played a role in constructing the ‘child with a disability’, as well as the able-bodied child.

8 Tensions between CDS and ‘Inclusive’ Early Childhood Education

The field of CDS is criticized for theorizing disability in a way that is unlikely to have a real impact on the lives of disabled children (Watson, 2012). However, as (Goodley, 2013) explains, CDS provides “spaces for the development of praxis: the inter-twining of activism and theory” (p. 641). Indeed, the work of Burke (2015), Naraian (2011), Watson (2016; 2017; 2018), and Wiebe Berry (2006) demonstrates the potential of CDS not only to highlight problematic aspects of ‘inclusive’ early childhood education, but also to suggest how a CDS approach could contribute to defining and practicing ‘inclusive’ education. The field of
‘inclusive’ early childhood education is criticized for communicating a shift towards a more critical approach to ‘inclusion’, while only making incremental changes to practice (Ferri & Bacon, 2011). In doing so, the field fails to take into consideration “that disabled people are undervalued and discriminated against and this cannot be changed simply through liberal or neo-liberal legislation or policy” (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009, p. 65). While claiming to participate in, “ongoing evaluation of existing power structures, discourse, and culture” (Rausch, 2015, p. 84), the field does not engage in reflection on its own history. This type of reflection would lead to a number of questions about how the ideology of ability influences what it means to practice ‘inclusion’. Watson (2016) suggests that such a reflection would lead to the questions: “Who is included? Who is not? Who needs to be included? Who or what decides? What is the role of the Normal? What are its effects on the developing identities of children and inclusion” (p. 2)? Instead of grappling with these questions, the field of early childhood ‘inclusion’ adopts an approach that suggests “a narrative of progressive transformations” (Shildrick, 2012, p. 37); however, as Shildrick (2012) explains, “we can identify a thoroughgoing governmentality at the heart of policy initiatives... that indicate they are never as positively progressive as they claim or may seem” (p. 38). Graham and Slee (2008) make a similar point in their analysis of ‘inclusive’ education:

We argue that limited notions and models of inclusion, such as those realised through resourcing mechanisms that ensure the objectivisation of individual difference, result not only in an ever more complex and insidious exclusion but arguably work to refine schooling as a field of application for disciplinary power. (p. 280)

While the field of ‘inclusive’ early childhood education has recognized the need to expand the way that ‘inclusion’ is defined and implemented, and the field of CDS provides a framework through which to reimagine ‘inclusive’ educational practice, the two fields remain separate. Shildrick (2012) describes CDS as “an approach marked by a true transdisciplinarity” (p. 37). While CDS might pose a threat to the field of early childhood ‘inclusive’ education, as it presently exists, it provides a platform for re-conceptualizing the field in order to shift the focus from the Other onto the Normal.

Moving Forward: A CDS Approach to Early Childhood ‘Inclusion’

In order for the fields of critical disability studies and early childhood ‘inclusion’ to work together toward developing a new approach to ‘inclusive’ education,
both fields must address the barriers that presently prevent such an alliance. Critical disability studies must respond to the call for practical application, and early childhood ‘inclusion’ must be willing to engage in self-reflexivity. Akemi Nishida (2019) suggests three principles of “critical disability praxis”, which include: “dismantling the knowledge hierarchy; practi(c)ing holistic access and developing intimate community-academia relationships, and engaging in action” (p. 241). I argue that by following these three principles, the fields of critical disability studies and early childhood ‘inclusive’ education can break down the barriers that impede their collaboration. First, the field of critical disability studies must work to “dismantle the knowledge hierarchy established and maintained by academia” (Nishida, 2019, p. 241). This means that the experiences of educators, students, caregivers, and service providers must contribute to the conversation about what a critical disability studies approach to ‘inclusion’ can and should mean. From the side of early childhood ‘inclusion’, a critical reflection of the history of child developmental norms and its role in present day practices is essential. Second, both fields must commit to developing a space in which “learning occurs communally and all participants are valued as knowledge holders and to practi(c)e accessibility beyond physical access” (Nishida, 2019, p. 243). The work of critical disability scholars must be available, both in terms of access and content, to those in the field of early childhood ‘inclusion’. Additionally, scholars need to spend time in ‘inclusive’ early childhood classrooms, as “building intimate relationships, as well as trust, is necessary for beginning to engage in more meaningful collaborative tasks” (Nishida, 2019, p. 244). Early childhood ‘inclusion’ must critique normative ideas about who counts as knowledgeable, as well as practices that communicate accessibility while requiring conformity. Third, both fields must “be action oriented” (Nishida, 2019, p. 245), engaging in ongoing self-reflection in order to answer the questions: What issues are being encountered in the ‘inclusive’ early childhood classroom? How can we learn more about these issues through academic-classroom community relationships? After this process of information gathering, both fields can work together in order to better understand and address real issues encountered in daily practice, policy, and research, to enact critical disability studies-informed early childhood ‘inclusive’ education.

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