

[Dis]Ableing Educational Inequities: A Disability Studies in Education Perspective

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Abstract: Disability Studies is often viewed as only relevant to those with disabilities. What is forgotten or overlooked is that, at its core, schooling is about defining, locating, measuring, and remediating *ability*. This essay offers *[dis]ableing* as a lens for exploring and questioning the ubiquitous ways *ability* has increasingly become defined and constructed by notions of individualism, competition, and economic productivity. We begin with a description of the key principles borrowed from disability studies in education and apply a *[dis]ableing* lens to inaugural discussions of *Race to the Top* federal educational reforms in the United States in order to examine the hidden consequences for all students. This article concludes with new understandings about how educational inequities are perpetuated by the policies and practices that purport to dismantle them.

Keywords: Ableism, Neoliberalism, Race to the Top

Overview of the Issue

In a 2012 statement of business owners' interest in education policy, Chris Kershner, vice president of public policy and economic development for the Dayton (Ohio, U.S.A.) Area Chamber of Commerce, said:

“The business community is the consumer of the educational product. Students are the educational product. They are going through the education system so that they can be an attractive product for business to consume and hire as a workforce in the future.”[i]

Mr. Kershner's evaluation is unusual only in how openly he connects the assumed purposes of education to the interests of American business. He offers a local version of an understanding of students that is characteristic of international neoliberal reforms that equate students with products and that the purpose of education is to prepare students for the workforce (Barton & Slee, 1999; Goodley, 2007; Slee, 2011; Liasidou, 2013). Though it is important to note that national and local versions of these market-based reforms differ in how neoliberalism is shaped by particular cultural and political contexts (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Dudley-Marling & Baker, 2012). While many others have recently written about the destructive effects of neoliberal logic on education globally and within the United States (e.g. Gulson & Pedroni, 2011; Hursh & Henderson, 2011; Furlong, 2013; Berliner and Glass, 2014; Ravitch, 2014) and particularly the impact of neoliberalism on the education of students with disabilities (e.g. Roulstone & Prideaux, 2008; Runswick-Cole, 2011; Dudley-Marling & Baker, 2012; Penketh, 2014), in this article we call scholars' attention to the use of ideas drawn from Disability Studies in Education for provoking new lines of inquiry about contemporary education inequities. We examine discourses drawn from President Barack Obama's July 24, 2009 introductory remarks for his \$4 billion Race to the Top federal funding reform to highlight how contemporary

education reform in the United States brings together ableism and neoliberalism. The Race to the Top is a grant competition for states to reform K-12 educational programs to align with federal educational policies calling for performance-based assessments for teachers and schools, standardization of curriculum, expanding the privatization of education with charter schools, high-stakes testing for students, and the implementation of statewide data collection systems to track students, teachers, and schools. This U.S. reform movement that launched in 2012 is a continuation of neoliberal efforts to redefine what it means to be able, basing it on what one can contribute to a capitalist society and not on what one can contribute to social democracy.

This article introduces “[dis]ableing”[ii] for exploring and questioning the ubiquitous ways ability has increasingly become defined and constructed by notions of individualism, competition, and economic productivity. In what follows, we will describe the components of what we are calling “[dis]ableing.” Reminiscent of Balkins’s (1987) discursive deconstruction toolkit, [dis]ableing is a collection of strategies and principles for examining ableist inequities – the ways we use taken-for-granted understandings of ability and disability that privilege those constructed as abled while perpetuating discrimination and bias toward people identified as disabled. We attempt to “[dis]able the Race to the Top” in the sense that we expose, denaturalize and disrupt key underlying ableist assumptions revealed in President Obama’s introductory comments to the reform.

Assumption of disability attaches not only to those marked as physically disabled. Sexed, raced, gendered, classed, ethniced, and otherwise marginalized bodies are likewise deeply marked by ableist inequities (e.g. Campbell, 2009; Söder, 2009; Collins & Valente, 2010; Valente & Collins, 2010; Erevelles & Minear, 2010; Valente, 2011a; Artiles, 2011; Baglieri et al., 2011; Valente and Boldt, 2015). Educators concerned about inequities experienced by traditionally marginalized communities are keenly aware of the long history of educational “tracking” in this country. So too are they aware of the cultural resistance to changing this and other school sorting practices which on the surface are argued to be about “accountability” and “equity” and “meritocracy” yet are known to result in the over-representation of students from racial and ethnic minority groups, students from lower income families, and bilingual students considered “English Language Learners” in special education and “lower track” classes (Ferri 2009; Ferri & Connor 2005a, 2005b; Oakes, 1995; Oakes, Wells, Jones & Datnow, 1997). Deficit perspectives of race, disability, gender, class, sexuality, and language inform how *ability* and *disability* are defined as well as how these definitions are used to place and displace people in marginalized, exclusionary, and even abusive educational settings (U.S. Office of Civil Rights, 2012, 2014)

These cultural beliefs about deficits and differences also inform teaching practices and school policies that are coming under much scrutiny as of late. For instance, the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (2012; 2014) reports on special education revealed long-hidden evidence about the widespread abuses and mistreatments experienced by black and Hispanic students, who in 2010-2011 made up over 70% of the students arrested or referred to law enforcement officials. 44% of the students subjected to mechanical restraint were black students. Nationwide half of the third and fourth graders being left back were black students. In an *Education Week* special issue analyzing and reporting on this Office of Civil Rights data, U.S.

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan responded, “We are not alleging overt discrimination. These are long held patterns of behavior. Many educators may not even be aware of these discrepancies” (Education Week, 2012). To this, many critics would also add policymakers such as President Obama and Secretary Duncan, both never classroom teachers themselves, are misguided in their belief that *Race to the Top* policies will level the playing field for minority students.

Critics call attention to research on the historically large number of minority group student populations deemed to be in need of “fixing” or remediation as evidence of the long held patterns of discrimination. Educational anthropologists point to almost a century of ethnographic studies describing the cultural politics of educational underachievement in an American educational system that is hyper-competitive and where students are compelled to not only learn but also learn more and more efficiently than their classmates (e.g. Erickson, 1987; Jacob & Jordan, 1987; D’Amato, 1987; Artiles & Trent, 1994; Varenne & McDermott, 1999; McDermott, Goldman, Varenne, 2004). This melding of ableist assumptions with neoliberal principles of competition to create winners and losers defines education in ways that impact all students (Bowles & Gintis, 2002; Runswick-Cole, 2014). This will be evident in our discussion of selected public artifacts from phase one of the *Race to the Top* competition.[iii]

Framing Disability Studies in Education and [Dis]ableing

The field of Disability Studies in Education (DSE) is an international and applied subfield of disability studies that addresses the socio-political constructions of *ability* and *disability*, rejecting the deficit perspectives that historically pervade special education deriving from the conformist agenda of behaviorism, cognitivism, and more recently neoliberalism (Gabel & Danforth, 2006; Ware, 2006; Barton & Armstrong, 2007; Connor, et al 2008; Gabel & Danforth, 2008; Valle and Connor, 2011; Wills, Morton, McLean, Stephenson & Slee, 2014). Varenne and McDermott (1999) smartly note “culture, the great enabler of humanity, is also in the same movement the great disabler” (p. 142). Disability Studies in Education works to examine the ways cultural teaching practices enable and disable students.

Scholarship in Disability Studies in Education calls attention to the problems of schooling becoming increasingly more about defining, locating, measuring, and remediating *ability*. The concept of [dis]ableing culls from disability studies in education and emerging scholarship that focuses on the cultural politics and denaturalizing of *ability* and *disability* as well as schooling (Artiles, 2003, 2011; Valente, 2011b; Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, & Morton, 2008; Danforth, 2009; Dudley-Marling & Gurn, 2010; Ferri and Connor, 2006; Gabel, 2005; Snyder, Brueggemann, & Garland-Thompson, 2002; Skrtic, 1995; Collins, 2013; Boldt & Valente, 2014). Our use of the term *[dis]ableing* also draws from and parallels critical race theorists’ application of *raceing* (Morrison, 1992) and queer theorists’ use of *queering* (Warner, 1993). Most notably these works attempt to take a seemingly esoteric theoretical stance and make it applicable to specific issues. A [dis]ableing lens can make disability studies in education scholarship a useful and accessible tool for scholars who may not be as familiar with questioning ableist thinking.[iv]

It is important to note [dis]ableing is not meant to be conceptualized as a rigid set of procedures but instead as a fluid framework open to borrowing from the vast array of diverse disability studies in education and likeminded scholarship, with its rich tradition of traversing disciplinary boundaries. Readers need to be cautioned against reading [dis]ableing as a fixed set of analytic procedures for looking at ableist policies and practices in neoliberal times. The examples we describe herein are not an exhaustive review of *Race to the Top* but a snapshot of the inaugural public moments of *Race to the Top*. However these examples do serve to illustrate how systemic an issue the newest version of ableism is and they point to the implications such a redefinition has for all students and schools. In their ethnographic analysis of sociocultural factors going into the assembling and disassembling of educational policy and its implementation in *No Child Left Behind*, Koyama and Varenne (2012) inscribed the term “policy as productive play” to recognize the complexities and uncertainties of the inevitably “temporal, incomplete, and always-becoming processes” going into interpretations and enactments of these educational policies and practices as they are experienced by students and their teachers (p. 157).

In what follows, we describe four core components of what makes up a [dis]ableing perspective for use in generating provocations to serve as a useful blueprint for future use of the [dis]ableing for those who are interested in understanding the ways ability and disability are discursively constructed in public and policy discourses. We illustrate the application of [dis]ableing to generate questions about the discourses circulating around *Race to the Top*. We will conclude with suggestions for future lines of making use of the [dis]ableing lens that offer possibilities for uncovering the hidden ways educational inequities are constructed, reproduced, and contested by the realities of ableist policies and practices.

Key Components of [Dis]Ableing

Four key principles compose and guide our application of the [dis]ableing lens. It is hoped these principles together can comprise a “habit of mind” to position the [dis]ableing researcher to counter assumptions about *ability* and *disability*. [Dis]ableing does not solely explore the language or semiotic representation at hand, but the ways in which these discourses shape the potential for human action and social identities. This [dis]ableing lens is designed to disentangle the planes of influence (Rogoff, 1990) on the text while also making visible the possible ways in which a text acts on (or shapes the action of) human subjects.

Tool 1: Defamiliarizing the Familiar

Postcolonial scholar Julia Kaomea (2003) explains that “defamiliarization” originates with Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky and that it is a literary tool to “force[s] us to slow down our perception, to linger, and to notice” as we read texts and phenomena (p. 15). Defamiliarization in Russian is *ostraneniye*, which translated into English means “making strange” (p. 15). Following Kaomea (2003), we will attempt to defamiliarize the familiar by looking into how the most recent educational policy of the *Race to the Top* put forward by the Obama administration discursively constructs students as well as their educational potential and future possibilities.

Tool 2: Destabilizing Ability-Normative Constructs

Valente (2011a) explains regulative and normative artifacts are a result of cultural climates. These regulative and normative artifacts are materialized in institutionalized and symbolic classification and codification systems (Valente, 2011a). For example, when dichotomous constructs such as fe/male, non/white, homo-hetero-bi-trans/sexual and dis/abled are denaturalized, they show their material selves to be ubiquitous, vague, and idealistic (Butler, 1999; Valente, 2011a). The “ideal” fe/male, non/white, homo-hetero-bi-trans/sexual and dis/abled person is non-existent – unachievable (see also Haraway, 2004; Valente, 2011a). We assert that *ability-normative constructs* are those that determine or prescribe -- whether through unconscious assumptions, explicit discursive statements, or visual cultural narratives -- what it means to be an *abled self* in a particular context.

Tool 3: Identifying and Disrupting Neoliberal Self-Sufficiency Myths

[Dis]ableing works to identify and disrupt neoliberal self-sufficiency myths that often are used to frame what can and should be achieved by and with an individual with a *disability*. Beth Blue Swadener’s (2003) work on decolonizing schools describes how the neoliberal stakeholder agenda can be evidenced by the “privatization” and “marketization” not only of the institutions but also of the consumers and their discourses. Swadener (2003) explains if one “survey[s] the landscape of neoliberal and conservative policies related to our field, one cannot escape the related discourse of blame” (p. 137). Rodolfo Leyva (2009) seconds Swadener’s concerns by speaking specifically about *No Child Left Behind*, writing that the “essentialist ideals of meritocracy, selfishness, and competition that are advanced by [a] neoliberal[-ist]” agenda is evidence that “the education system is largely seen as the ultimate arbiter of innate intelligence and ability, as well as the benefactor of hard-work and merit” (p. 365).

Tool 4: Locating the Inclusion/Exclusion of Narratives Shaping Discourses

The [dis]ableing avowedly privileges counter-narratives, insider accounts, and experiential knowledge. Grand narratives that unquestionably privilege the views of majority society and these dominant medical and scientific discourses can be challenged and upended by counter-narratives, which “lend a political dimension to everyday practices” (Certeau, p. xvii). Counter-narratives work against larger societal discourses by validating and valuing the lived experiences of people often categorized as *different* (e.g. Bell, 1987; Ladd, 2005; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 2006; Mutua and Swadener, 2004; Solorzano and Yasso, 2001a, 2001b). These counter-discourses are a strategic tactic for challenging assumptions of difference and superiority. *[Dis]ableing* purposefully works to locate counter-narratives to uncover tensions, contradictions, and moments where this discursive system of ableist oppression and subjugation comes to the surface.

[Dis]ableing the Rhetoric Underlying *Race to the Top*: Guiding Questions and Examples

The following section illustrates the generation of example critical questions using [dis]ableing as a lens for understanding two inaugural texts from *Race to the Top*: 1) the transcript of President Obama's announcement of the *Race to the Top* (7-24-09); and, 2) Secretary Duncan's letter to the governors of the states that competed in Round #1 of the Race (3-29-10).^[v] The purpose of this is not to provide a comprehensive of the rhetoric that underpins *Race to the Top*, but to provide a snapshot example to serve as a starting point for conversations about the consequences, intended and unintended, of contemporary reform policies and practices that dogmatically view market-based solutions as a panacea for perceived school and social ills. Perhaps more important, these *Race to the Top* policies and likeminded discourses are doing the cultural work of *creating the need* for a panacea and then *providing the solutions* that unsurprisingly benefit the neoliberal agenda (Swadener, 2003).

What Narratives are Included and Excluded that Inform or Shape the Text/Policy?

This question attempts to “defamiliarize the familiar” by making the narratives themselves strange and to uncover how they are informed and shaped by larger discourses that are then enacted as policies and practices (Kaomea, 2003). Also this question works to make familiar storylines “strange” so that their meanings and lineages are no longer taken-for-granted or masked.

In applying this question for the two sample artifacts described above, we tracked four narratives operating across both texts (see Table A).

- (1) Competition, high expectations and rewarding winners drives improvement and achievement (both for states and for students).
- (2) America's future depends on preparing students for competition in the (international) workforce.
- (3) “Data” (singularly defined as test scores) are the best way of measuring student and teacher performance.
- (4) Educational reform is a matter of equity, which is important for economic reasons.

Table A, Example of a [Dis]Ableing Analysis

<p>What narratives are included and excluded that inform or shape the text/policy?</p>	<p>What forms of positioning are enacted by those narratives?</p>	<p>How are ability and disability performed in those narratives?</p>	<p>What assumptions about physical and cognitive capacities undergird those performances?</p>
<p>(1) Competition, high expectations and rewarding winners drives improvement and achievement (both for states and for students).</p>	<p>(1) There are winners and losers. Winners are positioned as “bold” “creative” “leaders” whose accomplishments earn rewards. Losers are expected to learn from winners, modify performance, and try again.</p>	<p>(1) Ability is performed as leadership, effort, earning rewards. Dis/ability is not performed.</p>	<p>(1) Ability-normative assumptions that everyone has same resources and can and should compete on same terms.</p>
<p>(2) America’s future depends on preparing students for competition in the (global) workforce.</p>	<p>(2) Students are positioned as workers whose purpose is to serve the economic growth of the country and global economy. Teachers are positioned as trainers for corporations, not educators for a social democracy.</p>	<p>(2) Ability is performed as productive labor. Disability is unproductive.</p>	<p>(2) Ability-normative assumptions that everyone has same resources and can and should compete on same terms.</p>

(3) “Data” (test scores) are best way of measuring student and teacher performance.	(3) Positions education as a data-in/data-out endeavor. Students are to demonstrate skills and teachers and schools will be judged accordingly.	(3) Ability is performed by adherence to rules, order, re-producing knowledge. Disability is therefore a transgression.	(3) Everyone has the same set of test-taking skills and literacies.
(4) Educational reform is a matter of equity; equity is important for economic reasons.	(4) Equity is positioned as a matter of economic necessity.	(4) Ability is judged by economic productivity.	(4) Ability and disability is localized within individuals. Degree of economic reward is a reflection of hard work and intrinsic value.

Alternative description of Table A “Example of a [Dis]Ableing Analysis” showing the results from tracking four narratives operating across both texts.

This question also encourages the [dis]ableing researcher to consider the narratives that are *not included*. The two texts selected as data do not include narratives that question or reject the assumptions of these four aims listed above or raise issues (such as the Office of Civil Rights does) of educational inequities experienced by students with and without disabilities from marginalized groups. As a matter of fact, equity is hardly ever explicitly stated as a goal in *Race to the Top* artifacts but the *appearance* of equity is always front and center.

For example, in his introductory comments to kickoff the Race to the Top President Obama begins by thanking Matthew Austin, the African-American student who introduced him at the ceremonial press conference, and the President returns to reference Matthew at several points during his talk. At the time, an eighth grade honor student at Howard University Middle School of Mathematics and Science, Mathew was selected to introduce President Obama at the press conference held July 24, 2009:[vi]

“Thank you for the outstanding introduction from Matthew. And Matthew's teacher, you're doing obviously an outstanding job -- although I understand Matthew's mom is also a teacher who has also won awards for her outstanding work. So the acorn doesn't fall far from the tree. We are very proud of him...[F]ixing the problem in our schools is not a task for Washington alone. It will take school administrators, board presidents, and local union leaders making collective bargaining a catalyst -- and not an impediment -- to reform. It will take business leaders asking what they can do to invest in education in their communities. It will take parents asking the right questions at their child's school, and making sure their

children are doing their homework at night. And it will take students -- I'm not worried about Matthew, but all the other ones -- (laughter) -- including my daughters -- showing up for school on time and paying attention in class. Ultimately, their education is up to them.”

And so Matthew becomes the face for the charter school movement and for students who are constructed as abled through their taking of responsibility for their own success, complying with the educational goals of “school administrators, board presidents and local union leaders” as well as “business leaders.” Rather than providing an understanding of the realities that complicate the achievement of what is termed “taking responsibility” experienced by the majority of black students in schools, Matthew’s story is used as *support* for the neoliberal restructuring of American public schools through the language of the market. The implicit message is that all children (including the President’s) are capable of being like this well-spoken, hard-working African American middle-schooler. While we do not doubt that Matthew has worked hard, this narrative perpetuates the subtle blaming of so-called educational “failure” on teacher unions for supporting collective bargaining rights. It urges businesses to continue to invest in the massive transformation of public schools into charter schools. It suggests overly-simplified solutions to school success such as the power of parents who possess the cultural capital to navigate school bureaucracies (like Mathew’s award-winning-teacher-mother does for him) and parents who make their children do their homework and be on time for school (like President Obama does for his children), and as his mother did for him (Obama, 2004). What this sound-bite rhetoric reveals is the perpetuating of narratives of educational “failure” to be about the need for teachers, businesses, parents, and students to simply show up and *will* themselves to better schools. But all this is just the surface. The [dis]ableing lens provides a telling look at what lies beneath the surface of such policy rhetoric as President Obama’s announcement for the *Race to the Top*.

Further Provocations: To the Victor Belong the Spoils

To further illustrate what the application of the [dis]ableing perspective reveals, we focus here solely on the narrative of competition and its emphasis on rewards for “winners.” In the accompanying Table A, we provide a synopsis of each remaining narrative and its possible implications.

The narrative of competition, with its underlying message that “to the victor belong the spoils,” was evident from President Obama’s initial announcement kicking off the *Race*:

“That race starts today. I’m issuing a challenge to our nation’s governors, to school boards and principals and teachers, to businesses and non-for-profits, to parents and students: if you set and enforce rigorous and challenging standards and assessments; if you put outstanding teachers at the front of the classroom; if you turn around failing schools -- your state can win a Race to the Top grant that will not only help students outcompete workers around the world, but let them fulfill their God-given potential.”

In this announcement, the President begins immediately by thrusting American schools, communities, teachers and children into a literal race for funds and figurative race against

workers around the world. He follows with an emphasis on “rigor” and “challenging standards” which immediately positions the current school climate as deficient. As if the fundamental issue has been a lack of “rigor” and “challenging standards,” this rhetoric excludes needed discussions about inequitable distribution of resources for schools, institutional racism, or poverty in which students and their families live. Defamiliarizing this position makes evident that there is an entire context and history left out and there is no agreement as to what the terms “rigor” and “challenging standards” mean. It leaves out the entire deeply troubled history of how racism, classism, language policy, and disability have been written into the heart of being judged as abled in school through standardized testing and through assignment to tracks such as special education or gifted and talented (Connor & Ferri, 2005). It disguises the history of standardized testing and notions of rigor as they were designed and function to weed out the very students that Race to the Top (and NCLB) pretend to be supporting. The very name - *Race to the Top* – demonstrates that there will be winners and losers, since only one person can win a race. The contradiction between the market assumptions of *Race to the Top* and the rhetoric of helping all children be winners goes unmarked. Such larger discourses distract us from the real problem of inequities that come from poverty, under-resourced schools, and an educational system that only values high-stakes tests as a barometer of school and student achievement.

What Forms of Positioning are Enacted by those Narratives?

“Positioning” is derived from the work of Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré (1990). Davies and Harré use positioning to describe the process through which people are placed into different identities (roles, categories, storylines) through culturally and historically situated discursive interactions (Collins, 2011). Positioning is typically applied dialogically to social interactions, with particular attention paid to the role of response in taking up or resisting subject positions. [Dis]ableing questions work to make visible what roles are created and made available to occupy within the discourses of the text.

This constrains real possibilities for people. It hurts children who are unwilling or unable to compete in this so-called “rigorous or challenging” race, whose bodies or minds exclude them from standardized ways of knowing and being. It limits curriculum to that which can be easily quantified, leading to the much decried reduction of American school curriculum to those few content areas that are tested as well as an impoverished perspective on what is worthwhile to learn about and do with those content areas. It positions teachers who choose to work with such children as non-participants, underachievers, and generally deficient. It also sets the stage for considering “low-achieving” schools as deficient.

What Assumptions about Psychological, Physical and Cognitive Capacities Undergird those Performances?

When conducting an inquiry using a [dis]ableing perspective, it is important to identify and disrupt the taken-for-granted ways of knowing and being that are embedded in the narratives that shape the text. Assumptions about physical and cognitive traits and capacities, which undergird performances, perceived to be successful or unsuccessful need to be recognized and identified before they can be disrupted (Collins & Valente, 2010).

Both Duncan and Obama make statements that assume that all state competitors have the same resources and will to compete, that they need only “put their best foot forward,” and (like Matthew) they will become “winners:”

“To the winners, I congratulate you. To others who applied, I salute you for your hard work, and I look forward to receiving even stronger proposals. To those who have not yet applied, I invite you to put your best foot forward.” [Duncan’s letter]

Duncan and Obama’s rhetoric provides a window into the thinking of twenty-first century educational reform efforts that insist all students should be held equally “accountable” *irrespective* of how they experience (or do not experience) their education and *irrespective* of the context (e.g. well-resourced suburban or under-resourced urban schools) in which their education occurs. Obama makes these points clear during the announcement of the first round of winners:

“I am absolutely confident that if I do my part, if Arne does his part, if our teachers do their part, if you do yours, if the American people do theirs, then we will not only strengthen our economy over the long run, and we will not only make America's entire education system the envy of the world, but we will launch a *Race to the Top* that will prepare every child, everywhere in America, for the challenges of the 21st century.” [Obama’s announcement]

Elsewhere we have explained these reforms are devaluing the diverse ways humans can contribute to the world and this movement for *ability* to be judged based on the performance of productive labor (as defined by global economic interests) is ushering in a new neoliberal version of *ableism* (Collins & Valente, 2010; Valente & Collins, 2010). These educational inequities that stem from neoliberal ableism are caused by the values that this pattern of thought attaches to differences in achieving the “standard.” Baglieri and Knopf (2004) succinctly explain, “the question is not whether we perceive differences among people but rather, what meaning is brought to bear on those perceived differences” (Baglieri and Knopf, p. 525). Newer versions of educational reforms and *ability* not only demonstrate a lack of attention to how perceived differences are unevenly treated and valued but also debatably evidences a level of active complicity in furthering educational inequities purportedly in exchange for a competitive edge in the global marketplace. These reforms discount the direct link poverty and race have on academic achievement and obstinately perpetuates the belief that competition is the panacea for bringing about equity for poor and minority students.

Conclusion: New Directions

As discussed earlier, the field of disability studies can be dismissed as only relevant to those with disabilities. For instance, Lennard Davis (2006) points to the sustained growth in the scholarly literature by radical educators that deals with the production and reproduction of hegemonic practices and policies, remarking that it is troubling “critical theorists who have promoted such views, have been silent on disability, inclusion, and special education” (Davis, p. 226, 2006 citing Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Apple, 1979; Giroux, 1988; Freire, 1968, 1973, 1987). What is also often forgotten and need to be addressed is that, at its core, schooling in today’s

hyper-competitive age is becoming more about defining, locating, measuring, and remediating *ability*. We propose disability studies in education scholarship and more specifically *[dis]ableing* as a lens for examining not only how *ability* is defined and constructed in current educational policies and practices, but also for making visible the consequences that those definitions have for students with perceived differences of all types. This article uses a disability studies in education framework and *[dis]ableing* as a lens for demonstrating the need to critically examine the cultural discourses and institutional practices that lead to educational sorting, legalized segregation and other forms of educational inequities.

In an inclusive social democracy, differences are the norm. The ways schools, teachers, parents, policy makers, and citizens respond to those differences determines whether the United States lives up to his purported goal of equity for all through public schools that are educating students to be citizens in a social democracy. Narratives of competition, as noted earlier, are prevalent in the current cultural climate as evidenced by *Race to the Top* and its emphasis on competition and rewards for “winners.” Equity as illustrated by the *Race to the Top* means that everyone is allowed to compete on same field both for students and for states in competitions. Equity also means conformity – that schools and students must compete in this *Race to the Top* in a prescribed way (through high-stakes testing) or risk receiving no money and more scrutiny.

[Dis]ableing points to the presence of a narrative of competition that creates subject positions of winners and losers and non-participants. In the language of RTT documents, losers are expected to learn from winners, modify their performance, and try again. Winners accept the terms of race and are ready to compete and “to do what works.” Finally, losers are expected to be unhappy with the terms of the race and gear up for the next round. A chief concern is that the newest version of education reform pulls us away from democratic ideals of equity and citizenship toward redefining ability in schools to not be about these ideals but instead a worker in the future global economy.

The *Race to the Top* is just one example of an educational policy that *appears* to be about equity and inclusion and yet in practice works to define, locate, measure and remediate *ability*. *Race to the Top* ultimately ends up providing the logic (and funding) for a system of segregated education based on who is a “winner” and who is a “loser.” When it comes to legislative mandates that reinforce ableism, *Race to the Top* is not “new” or “special” (see for example, Beth Ferri’s analysis of *Response to Intervention* in Ferri, 2011). As we have already argued, what is new is that today’s version of reform in education brings together ableism and neoliberalism. This newest reform movement redefines what it means to be *able*, basing it on what one can contribute to a capitalist society and not on what one can contribute to social democracy. In a social democracy it is not about victors or spoils, instead it is about valuing the diverse ways in which everyone *can* contribute to the richness of all our lifeworlds.

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[i] Link: <http://wosu.org/2012/news/2014/08/25/business-groups-defend-common-core-house-hearings/>

[ii] Our use of the term [dis]abling is conceptually unrelated to the British use of the term “disabling.” For further readings see articles that appear in the *Review of Disability Studies* by Gilson & Depoy (2015), Hemingway & Priestley (2014), and Wilde (2010). In addition, see the special issue of the *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* entitled “Disabling Postcolonialism” co-edited by Barker and Murray (2010).

[iii] We recognize that there are newer iterations of *Race to the Top* competitions that focus on additional state competition phases, early childhood, teacher education, and district-level competitions, the ableist assumptions in the discourses of phase one have not changed in more recent iterations.

[iv] For a rich discussion of ableism see Fiona Kumari Campbell’s (2009) *Contours of Ableism*.

[v] A complete transcript of President Obama’s remarks is available at
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-department-education>.

Mr. Duncan’s letter to the governors may be downloaded at
<http://www2.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2010/03/03292010.html>

[vi] Video available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/video/President-Obama-on-Race-to-the-Top>