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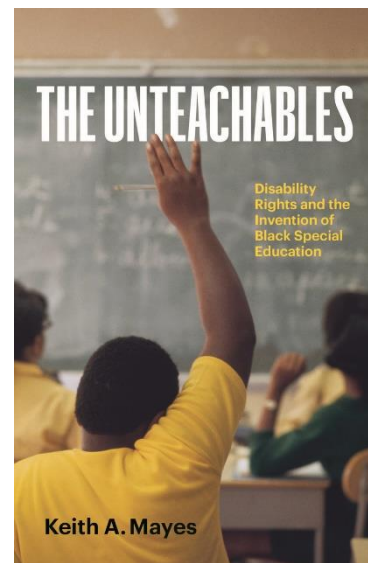
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The overrepresentation of Black students in subjective disability categories, specifically emotional/behavioral disturbance (E/BD), intellectual disability (ID)—previously referred to as educable mentally retarded (EMR), and learning disability (LD), as well as in disciplinary practices such as suspension and expulsion, is an enduring challenge within the U.S. education system (Losen & Orfield, 2002). Despite extensive efforts by scholars, policymakers, and educators at various levels, the issue continues to persist.

Keith Mayes's *The Unteachables: Disability Rights and the Invention of Black Special Education* not only contributes significantly to the ongoing discourse on racial disproportionalities in special education and disciplinary practices, but also sheds light on the historical and motivational contexts of special education programs and the creation of highly subjective disability categories such as E/BD, ID, and LD. While it may seem that racial disproportionality is a phenomenon of the 21st century, Mayes reminds readers that segregation and unequal placement have been common practices since the inception of special education. The book explores critical historical events and practices, complementing other works that examine how disability categories have been employed as tools to legitimize discrimination, including Douglas C. Baynton's (2001) *Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History* and Jay Timothy Dolmage's (2018) *Disabled Upon Arrival*, among others.

The Unteachables is a thought-provoking book that challenges the notion of disability as mere inherent individual characteristics associated with bodily, psychological, or emotional deficits. Using historical evidence, Mayes exposes



that disability is far more than an individual characteristic; it is a socially constructed category crafted by policy actors. Building on the concept of disability as a continuous cultural process of creation and labeling rather than an identity set in stone (Reid & Valle, 2004), Mayes skillfully guides readers through historical events, policies, and practices, illuminating disability as primarily a political, social, and cultural experience rather than a static identity. The author challenges the notion of disability as a scientific concept, including the alleged objectivity of psychologists and other related entities. Mayes invites readers to critically reexamine disability and special education categories, as well as the underlying purposes of educational programs intended to support historically marginalized students and families.

Mayes, who was affiliated with the University of Minnesota at the time of publication, employs a chronological historical analysis of influential policies and programs in the U.S. education system, particularly special education, from the early 20th century to the present. Mayes demonstrates how these programs were utilized as justifiable tools for further marginalizing Black students. *The Unteachables* provides detailed insights into how harm has been inflicted upon Black students and embedded into federal policies. As Mayes notes, race and disability intersect to shape the educational experiences of historically marginalized students, particularly Black students. Race and disability are both products and tools that perpetuate racism. Mayes also reminds readers that arguing against the arbitrary invention of certain disability categories does not negate the existence of disability itself. There are indeed students and individuals with disabilities who can benefit from curricular modifications and accommodations. The problem arises when arbitrary disability categories are used to justify racism and to spatially “other” historically minoritized students (Mawene & Bal, 2020).

Primarily focusing on the creation of three aforementioned disability categories of ID (previously known as EMR), LD, and E/BD, Mayes presents several key arguments. First, disability categories, particularly those of a subjective nature, are not discovered but rather invented. Throughout the book, Mayes guides readers through past policies, their motivations, and their implementation, including the development of special education categories that collectively portray Black students as “the unteachables.” The author illustrates how the category of intellectual disability, originally referred to as “feeble-mindedness,” and other terms such as “idiot,” and “imbecile,” underwent transformations through the use of intelligence testing and special classes. By the end of the 19th century, medical doctors introduced the notion of “high-grade defective” or “morons,” while educators began using the term “educable retarded” in the mid-20th century.

Related to these “inventions,” Mayes uncovers a complex intersection of ableism and whiteness in disability categories, in particular EMR and LD. Black students have been disproportionately represented in EMR since its inception. However, a problem emerged when White students, albeit in small numbers, were placed in the same EMR category as Black students. This situation led to the invention of a new category: learning disability. White

students perceived as “slow learners” were placed in this category. Mayes argues that the creation of this new disability category can be seen as an intellectual White flight from “mental retardation,” a term that carried more stigma. Privileged White parents and advocates, such as Samuel Kirk, advocated for the separation of “slow learners,” that is, underachieving White students, from EMR students. This early segregation of pathways within special education—EMR for Black students and LD for White students—exemplifies the racialization of differential education.

The invention of subjective disability categories also intersects with the Civil Rights movement. In 1954, the mandatory desegregation of schools through the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling pushed schools to spatially reorganize their educational systems. Black students found themselves entering schools that were not fully integrated, and they remained segregated within schools, moving from general education to special education programs. Disability categories provided the justification for this within-school segregation. As Mayes notes: “The justification of a separate education called “special education” created “disability.” “Disability” did not create special education” (p. 49).

Second, *The Unteachables* highlights special education program as a perpetual dumping ground for Black students within the education system. According to Mayes, since its inception, special education program has served a dual purpose, as a system for classifying individuals as well as a tracking mechanism to segregate White students from Black students. As such, the U.S. special education system became, and remains, a dumping ground for Black students who are deemed deviant bodies in predominantly White spaces. The ongoing overrepresentation of Black bodies in EMR, LD, and EBD categories signifies the persistent existence of such racial segregation practices justified by disability categories. Although the book does not delve into how LD has also evolved into a dumping ground for multilingual learners, also referred to as English learners (ELs), the overrepresentation of Black and Brown students in LD today underscores the deep historical and cultural practice of racializing disability within education settings (Reid & Valle, 2004).

Mayes identifies other contemporary policies and programs within the U.S. education system that are fundamentally racist and deficit-oriented in nature and contextualizes the motivations behind these initiatives. For example, the author explores the context surrounding the origins of the Head Start Program, which began in 1965 as a part of President Johnson’s administration and the “War on Poverty.” He argues that the precursor to this program was grounded in a deficit mindset that portrayed Black families as culturally deprived and incapable and unable to nurture their children’s development. According to Mayes, the administration—President Johnson and Sargent Shriver, the director of the Office of Economic Opportunity who led the federal government’s effort in the war against poverty—believed Black students and families were “naturally” “handicapped” “... by their racial identity, and more importantly, by the jobs they held, the houses

they lived in, the schools they attended, and the lifestyles they led” (p. 114). Therefore, the Head Start program aimed to “culture” Black children so that they would be ready to learn upon entering school. At the time, the lack of stable home environments, family support, and conducive surroundings was viewed by Shriver as a major cause of intellectual disability (see pp. 121-123). Grounded in such a deficit motivation, the Head Start program was framed as a “savior” for Black children, intended to remedy the perceived disability inherent in their cultural backgrounds. The deficit thinking underlying the program is also evident in the assignment of teacher aides or paraprofessionals to instruct Black students, while White students were taught by certified educators. Throughout my reading of this book, I found myself questioning whether these practices belonged to the past or present, as many of these issues remain visible in today’s classrooms.

While Mayes situates *The Unteachables* within the subfield of Disability Studies, this book is essential reading for not just special education teachers, but for ALL teachers and administrators, both in-service and pre-service. It is crucial to understand the historical development of the disability categories that educators utilize as tools to categorize students, which in turn, shapes students everyday learning experiences and outcomes. While I would have appreciated a more extensive section on the implications or reflections for educators who routinely employ these categories, the absence of such a section does not diminish the readability and significance of the book.

To conclude this review, I highlight an important quote from the book: “Where we are today regarding Black behavior and emotion is where we were yesterday” (p. 191). This statement holds true not only for emotional or behavioral disturbance but for other special education categories and school disciplinary practices. Black students, along with other historically marginalized groups such as Native American and Latino/a students, continue to be disproportionately represented in arbitrary special education categories. The existence of racial disproportionality in special education and school discipline is not surprising, as it was the original intention of these programs in the first place.

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