Re-envisioning Equity Research:
Disability Identification Disparities as a Case in Point

Alfredo J. Artilles, Arizona State University
Research can change society.
Research can change society. But it can also repeat injustices.
injustices.
“the social scientist played little or no role in disclosing truth”

Dr. Martin Luther King
Fast forward 60+ years...

- Science in the Age of Selfies
- Top leaders question the value of scientific knowledge
- Use of “truthful hyperbole”
- “Illusory truth” becoming a norm?
- “Citation-fishing”
- Observing patterns in new data, even if lacking any supporting theory
Our research contributions are integrally tied to our moral commitments.
This lecture is about possibility and promise.
Educational equity research...

1. must rely on a historical epistemology.

2. needs to produce collages of interdisciplinary representations of marginalized groups.

3. must illuminate the intersectional lives of marginalized people.
ELLs are disproportionately identified in certain states, particularly in middle- and high-school grades.

Discipline referrals, corporal punishment, school suspensions and expulsions are associated with disability identification disparities.

More segregated placements for African American learners compared to their White peers with the same disability diagnosis.

Blacks were overrepresented in E/BD in high-SES districts.

MIXED EVIDENCE ABOUT POVERTY

Mixed evidence about poverty. Race is a significant predictor of disability diagnosis after controlling for poverty.

African Americans and Native Americans are consistently overrepresented at national level.

Disability Diagnosis Long-term Outcomes

- Discipline Sanctions
- Drop Out Rate
- Access to College
Kanita’s story.
Kindergarten
Reports showed no signs of concern.

First Grade
Diagnosed with an LD for behavioral reasons.

Second Grade
Completed the second grade in the E/BD classroom along with 12 other students.
**Kindergarten**
Reports showed no signs of concern.

**First Grade**
Diagnosed with an LD for behavioral reasons.

**Second Grade**
Completed the second grade in the E/BD classroom along with 12 other students.

**Third Grade**
Joined the general education classroom for reading and math. Fully integrated in general education in a few months.

**Fourth Grade**
Placed in a gifted program at her previous school, though she still had the E/BD label.
Kindergarten
Reports showed no signs of concern.

First Grade
Diagnosed with an LD for behavioral reasons.

Second Grade
Completed the second grade in the E/BD classroom along with 12 other students.

Third Grade
Joined the general education classroom for reading and math. Fully integrated in general education in a few months.

Fourth Grade
Placed in a gifted program at her previous school, though she still had the E/BD label.

Fifth Grade
Experienced some difficulties for which she received counseling services.

Sixth Grade
Exited special education when she started 6th grade.
Kanita’s story...

1. Illustrated multiple and competing visions of equity as she moved from programs that provided differential and similar treatments.

2. Grounded in deficit views, as indexed in the teacher’s high special education referral rates and statements about her dysfunctional family.

3. Reflected traditional and alternative representation practices.

4. Made visible the gulf between her official labels and the ways in which adults in her life enhanced and curtailed her educational opportunities.
History shapes the present.
1. Historical epistemology
History affects perception.
not only has it been considered justifiable to treat disabled people unequally, but the concept of disability has been used to justify discrimination against other groups by attributing disability to them”

Baynton

(2001, p.33, emphasis in original)
Historical entanglements of disability with race, gender, disease, and immigration

1882
Immigration Act of 1882 denied entry to the US to the "lunatic, idiot, or any person unable to take care of himself or herself without becoming a public charge".

1903
The category epilepsy and people who "have been insane within five years previous [or] who have had two or more attacks of insanity at any time previously" were included.

1907
"Imbeciles" and "feeble-minded persons" were added to the law.

1917
Individuals with "constitutional psychopathic inferiority" were not allowed entry. These were people living "on the border line between sanity and insanity, such as ... persons with abnormal sex instincts".
Racial categories become so entrenched and ‘naturalized’ in scientific thought that, by the early-to-mid nineteenth century, medical discussion about populations—and research on their health status—without ‘racial categories became virtually unimaginable’

Krieger (2011, p. 89)
Three patterns stand out in our analyses

1. Disproportionality was linked to enduring struggles surrounding racial segregation and re-segregation that were embedded in spatial dynamics in the city and districts dating back to the 1960s and 1970s.

2. Space and history mediated the theories that local actors invoked to differentiate communities and justify disproportionality.

3. Understandings of racial disparities in special education among the majority of leaders, professionals, and educators oscillated between deficit thinking and colorblindness.
2. On the nuances of representation
What counts as disabled?

Who gets this label?

What are the consequences?
These two connotations raise questions about:

- **perspective**
  ("whose point of view?")

- **voice**
  ("who’s being silenced?")

- **consequences**
  ("to what effect?")
1. Notice
2. Referral
3. Assessment
4. Diagnosis
5. Placement
The molding of (in)competence with ephemeral tainted categories.
1. Notice
Race and culture are prominently **visible**.

2. Referral
Race and culture become **invisible** as teachers frequently claim colorblindness.

3. Assessments
Race and culture both remain **visible** and **invisible**.

4. Diagnosis
Race and culture become **invisible** yet again.

5. Placement
Race and culture subsequently become **visible**.
Race becomes raceless.
Spatial representations of opportunity and disability identification
Morally committed research is needed.
Morally committed research is needed. We can no longer delay our actions.