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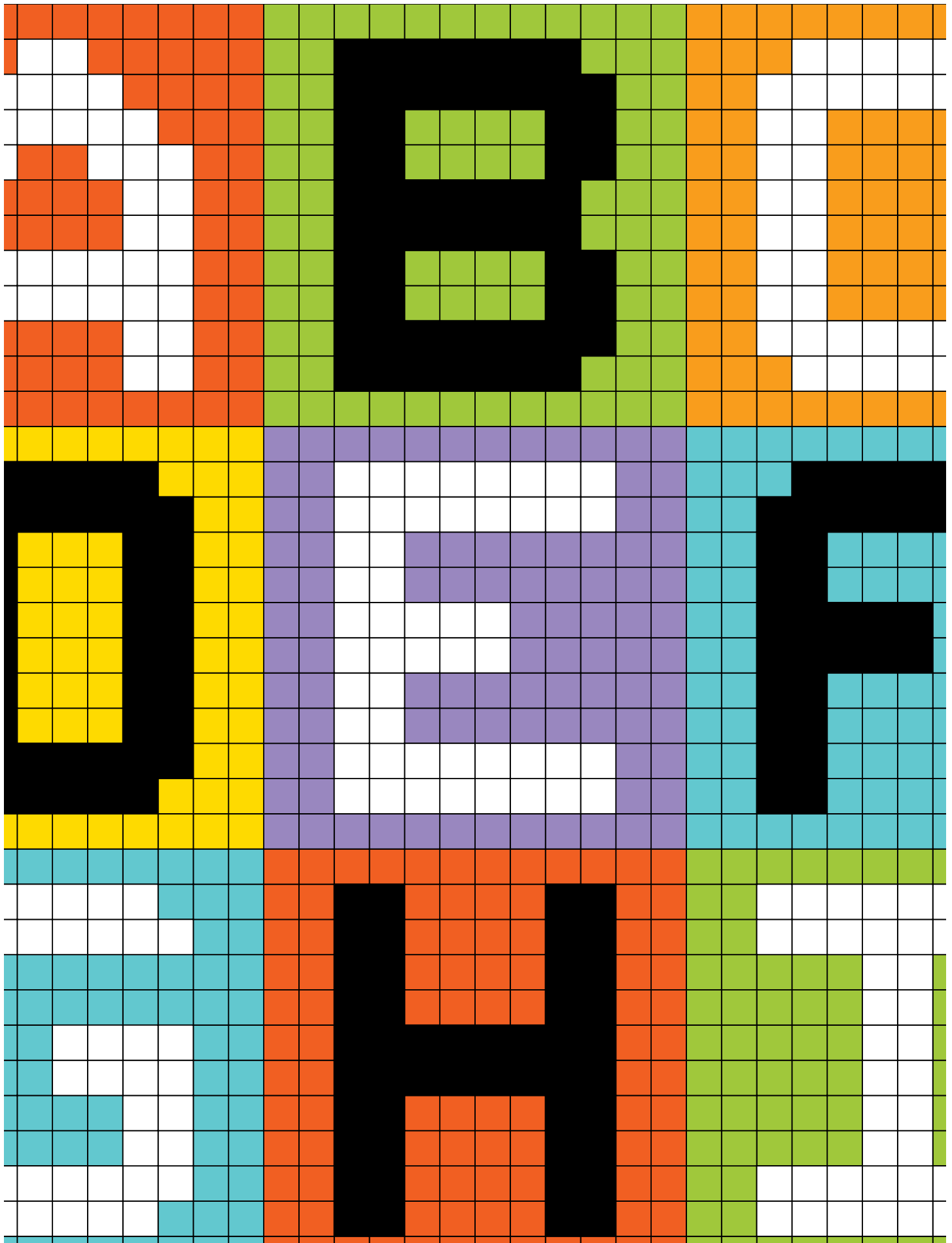
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# Lessons from Disability and Gender Studies for the K-12 Classroom

BY ANGELICA MUÑOZ

**T**HIS PAST SUMMER I WAS fortunate to attend the Institute for the Recruitment of Teachers' (IRT) summer workshop in Andover, Massachusetts. My summer was filled with challenges and motivation from the IRT as I participated in a rigorous graduate preparatory program with a group of talented and passionate individuals dedicated to dismantling educational disparities and creating an equitable society. My days consisted of graduate-like seminars and facilitation on dense theory, which challenged me academically and personally. Furthermore, I received feedback from the IRT faculty, which allowed me to reflect on my teaching methodology and practices as a future educator. Engaging with challenging text not only helped prepare my peers and me for the rigors of graduate study but served as a reminder to our motivations for pursuing higher education.

My summer days in Andover also consisted of inspirational presentations and discussions from IRT faculty and special guests. I was

given support and mentorship in advocating for the injustices I am most passionate about from the IRT faculty and my colleagues. I often found myself discussing in seminar on the inequities that students with disabilities endure in the educational system. Moreover, my IRT experience stimulated me to deeply reflect on my entire undergraduate experience in particular, my community work, research involvements, and those who have helped me along my educational journey at UCLA. Most significantly, the IRT provided me with an opportunity to critically contemplate on my future profession as a public school teacher and why to implement theory into my practice. My engagement with my peers and faculty encouraged me to me reflect on readings I encountered in my gender studies classes. Specific text that I read in my courses influenced my thought process about K-12 education, particularly in regard to students with disabilities.

I became interested in the field of disability studies after my family and I witnessed the challenges my

nephew endured. Observing his difficulties and my family's struggles in alleviating them, motivated me to learn about scholarship in the field. "A lecture in the "Bodies" seminar by Michelle Erai, Associate Professor in the Department of Gender Studies at UCLA provided me with a critical understanding of "violence" and how it pertains to societal views on disability. In the class, I began to understand how disability is often understood from a medical diagnosis and thus, a limited understanding of disability prevails (Kluth 1). Moreover, I learned people with disabilities are using a social rights model for understanding disability. This model critiques the social and physical barriers that produce inequality for individuals with disabilities. The social rights model also construes disability is a social construction (2).

Through Erai's mentorship I was fortunate to meet scholars in the fields of special education and disability studies. She introduced me to Juliann Anesi, who is a doctoral student in Special Education



Juliann Anesi (left) with Angelica Muñoz

at Syracuse University. Juliann has provided invaluable mentorship in support of my work and path to graduate school. Through Juliann's mentorship I have been able to further reflect on how the social model of disability can help to elucidate the educational inequality that students in special education endure (Gallagher et al 1).

Through the resources that Juliann provided, I learned about special education history. In 1975 the Education of All Handicapped Children Act was passed to allow children with disabilities to receive a free education (Connor and Ferri 63). Before 1975, more than 3 million children with disabilities received poor educational services (63). Additionally, 1 million did not receive any educational services (63). Despite advocacy efforts to ensure an equitable education, students with disabilities are taught in separate classrooms (Erevelles 25). It is estimated that there are over five million students with disabilities who are being taught in self-contained classrooms and kept in isolation from their peers (25).

Often unchallenged, it is understood as “standard” for educating students with disabilities. To understand and learn more about the history of segregating students with disabilities from general education classrooms, I pursued historical research on California’s juvenile justice system from young women.

During my senior year, I conducted a research project for my senior thesis under the faculty mentorship of Erai and Grace Hong, Associate Professor in the departments of Gender Studies and Asian American Studies. My research focused on California’s first female reformatory school, the Ventura School for Girls (VSG) and its establishment during the Progressive Era in Los Angeles (1910-1920). Founded during at time in the early twentieth-century when the eugenics movement was influential, the school was established for the “reformation” of young women.

My methodology for this project was archival analysis, which I learned about in “African American Women’s History,” a class taught by Sarah Haley, an Assistant Professor in the departments of Gender Studies and African American Studies. The class provided me with a unique opportunity of understanding the limitations and significance of utilizing historical documents for understanding American society. Furthermore, I was first exposed to conducting archival research in Erai’s seminar, “Queer Things.” In the seminar, my colleagues and I analyzed artifacts through various theoretical lenses. The class provided me with the supplementary support I needed to conduct historical archival research on the VSG. As I continued my research, I

learned that the school’s historical information was poorly documented. Because of sexist ideologies about gender, school officials believed that young women were permanently “morally corrupted” and could not be “reformed” (Chávez-García 10). As a result, the presence and history of the young women was inadequately documented in school records (10).

In my research, I analyzed the form of “care” that was provided in the school. Hong fostered and encouraged my curiosity for critically examining the notion of “care” in the reformatory. Throughout my research, I noticed that specific forms of “care,” punishment, and curriculum were used to “help rehabilitate” young women. The majority of these practices were dehumanizing. The young women endured various forms of institutional and gender-based violence from reformatory officials. Conducting research on the VSG allowed me to understand that studying and addressing educational disparities requires a multidisciplinary lens. Throughout my research I realized I gained a critical understanding of special education by analyzing the field through various theoretical concepts coming from disability, feminist, and postcolonial studies.

Furthermore, this project would have not been complete if it were not for the helpful mentorship and resources I received from Miroslava Chávez-García, who is a Professor and Vice-Chair in the Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies at UC Santa Barbara. Chávez-García shared with me valuable information on the school, which provided me with a historical and social understanding of the reformatory.

I was fortunate to present my research on the VSG with the support of Erai, Hong, and the Department of Gender Studies at the Society for Disabilities Studies (SDS) Conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in June of 2014. I first learned about the SDS conference from Anesi. Attending the SDS conference allowed me to network and meet scholars in disability and special education studies. Attending the conference was a delightful experience. I was able to learn about emerging issues and research in both disciplines and about disability history and the disability rights movement.

Throughout my undergraduate experience, I have also been privileged to engage with the Los Angeles community. I was a part of the Mentors Empowering and Nurturing through Education (M.E.N.T.E.) at UCLA program and the Community Programs Office Student Association (CPOSA). The CPOSA supports the development of 30 “student-initiated and student run” organizations within the Community Service Learning Center (CSLC). The CSLC is housed in the Community Programs Office, a campus entity. These organizations are located within the fields of health, education, and social justice. M.E.N.T.E. is a mentoring and tutoring program for high-school students in South Los Angeles and is part of the education group in the CPOSA. Through my involvement, I received mentorship and support from Vusi Azania and Ashley Long in leadership skills and community work in Los Angeles. These two inspired, challenged, and encouraged me to think creatively and critically

about working in the community and with my colleagues.

Throughout my participation in the M.E.N.T.E. program, I was fortunate to work with youth as they prepared for higher education. My mentoring sessions consisted of discussing college life and how to navigate institutions of higher education with young women and men. Furthermore, my colleagues and I received instrumental mentorship from Antonio Martínez, a former graduate student. Martínez provided workshops on the significance of critically reflecting on our role as mentors and our engagement with the high-school students.

My undergraduate experiences have substantially influenced my goals. I am working in an elementary school. With assistance from the IRT program, I am applying to graduate school programs in education. I am so grateful for the experiences and opportunities that I have been fortunate to receive and to those who I have met along my educational journey. I am especially thankful to the UCLA Center for the Study of Women for providing me with an opportunity to share my work with the UCLA community. All these experiences—in academia and in the community—have positively influenced my practices as a future educator. Reflecting on these experiences has made me realize the importance of inclusive education and ensuring all students have access to the general curriculum. I hope to continue carrying Constance Coiner’s vision of social change and use the classroom as a space to promote and inspire students with a critical understanding about the world in which they live.



*Recipient of the CSW Constance Coiner Award in 2014, Angelica Muñoz (shown above with her mother) graduated with a degree in Gender Studies and a minor in Labor and Workplace Studies in June of 2014. Her honors project analyzed the educational curriculum at the California School for Girls during the early twentieth century in Los Angeles. While at UCLA, she was also involved in the M.E.N.T.E. program and Community Programs Office Student Association. With the motivation from her family she plans to pursue graduate study in education with a focus on disability studies.*

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