Introduction

In this chapter we trace some of the intersecting discourses of race and ability in US history and their impact upon schools. In particular, we focus upon on how the emergence of specialized forms of education served to shore up notions of competency and normalcy in times of increased diversity and social change. Through this retelling of special education history, contextualized through a much wider lens than is typically brought to bear on the subject, we highlight the broad concept of disability as an elastic, shifting classification saturated in racial, ethnic, and class divisions, influenced by powerful societal notions of what constitutes a “normal”/desirable citizen. In many ways, this version of history appears in stark contrast to traditional renderings of special education as a field that is benevolent, progressive, and undergirded by science (Dorn, Fuchs, and Fuchs). By placing the history of special education in the context of myriad social forces, we illustrate how it performed important cultural work in demarcating the line between normalcy and difference in an increasingly divided social landscape. In researching how race, ethnicity, and class influenced notions of difference, and the growth of disability categorizations from their inception to the present day, we trace the roots of current practices of special education, showing the interconnected logics for how students of color became disproportionately placed within special education classrooms. We also explore how segregated special education settings served to
contain “difference” and therefore maintain longstanding culturally established norms.

We present this history in a series of snapshots that, although appear independent or separate, are nonetheless interconnected across time and context. Each snapshot therefore engages with earlier legacies, revealing them in the form of traces of other histories of exclusion and marginalization. We settle not on one history or example for very long, but instead rely on the stacking up of these moments to illustrate the ways that the power often replicates itself, reproducing diverse forms of exclusion and marginalization that reverberate across temporal and physical contexts and cut across disability, race, and class.

Touring the Terrain of Disability and Race

People with disabilities have always existed, common to all cultures throughout time (Stiker). However, each culture’s response to human difference that constitutes a disability has varied enormously and continues to do so (Linton). The institution of special education in the United States as we have come to know it, including its array of legally defined disability labels, did not arise from a within a vacuum. It materialized, rather, in response to many varied forces, all arising in relation to specific cultural and historical contexts. By contemplating these forces across time, we see how special education performed important cultural work in demarcating and emphasizing the line between normalcy and difference in a socially divided landscape.

From the outset we must consider that all developments within schooling occurred within a highly racialized society and its attendant hierarchy. People of European descent were poised at the top of the pyramid, people of African descent were placed at the bottom, and all others positioned somewhere on a continuum between them. This was seen as a natural and normal world order (Gould). For the majority of US history, notions of racial superiority and inferiority remained largely unquestioned by those who upheld and therefore benefitted from this understanding, including the government and its policies, most religions and their practices, and educational institutions and their knowledge claims.

Of interest to the histories of disability and race is the shared subjectification of people through the use of “scientific knowledge” to justify how society interprets difference (many instances will be described in this chapter). In hindsight, such instances of