The Society for Disability Studies is a non-profit organization that promotes the study of disability in social, cultural, and political contexts. In our presentation, we build on the foundational work of disability studies, disability studies in education, and critical special education scholars, including Nirmala Erevelles, Sami Schalk, Therí Alyce Pickens, Subini Annamma, Mercedes Cannon, and Kathleen King Thorius, to examine and nuance the ways in which disability and race interact with special education law and policy to produce inequitable outcomes that are not only prohibitive of just schooling systems, but also antithetical to the spirit of access, inclusion, and civil rights in schools.

Emma, Regina, and I examined these issues in our Special Education Methods course. We began the course by listening to a podcast on Hidden Brain called, “Emma, Carrie, and Vivian.” This podcast episode provides an abbreviated history of the eugenics movement in the United States, and describes the ways in which decisions about sterilization essentialized people with disabilities, and resulted in the violation of their basic, human rights. In, class, we followed the legacy of eugenics through the 20th Century, to the passage of the Civil Rights Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act: the key piece of federal legislation that guides special education. Following this cultural and historical trajectory from relatively contemporary history helped us understand, together, what narratives of disability, disability activism, and disability justice we have access to, where special education fits in those narratives, and where there is a need to surface, and disrupt, harmful narratives around disability in schools.

After the course ended, Emma and I met over the summer for coffee to discuss her experience with an organization that focuses on higher education access for students with autism. Emma had so many really great questions: who is writing the research she’s being asked to read, what practices are actually helping, which aren’t, what practices support student autonomy and agency, and which practices subjectify them to processes that are not actually helpful and do not provide real access. As we talked through her questions, I thought about some reading that might be helpful for her begin to examine the issues she was already thinking about. Emma reached out to Regina, and we began discussing, over e-
mail mostly, what Kathleen King Thorius refers to as special education’s “cloak of benevolence”: the ways in which special education is adopted as something helpful, but then works in insidious ways to objectify and limit students’ access, agency, and autonomy.

We also discussed how the cultural capital students bring with them into formal educational settings can impact the ways in which students access certain mechanisms of special education law and policy to promote their learning. Importantly, when we talk about cultural capital, what we are talking about is, often, the intergenerational wealth, knowledge, and language around navigating systems that is passed down, and that students are able to access when petitioning for services. Especially in urban schooling contexts, this implicates race as accessing the rights embedded within special education law from the intersection of race and disability is linked to legacies of Jim Crow laws, redlining, segregated schooling, and now, in some urban contexts, relatively rapid gentrification and the re-segregation of public schools. Importantly, white students with disabilities are often educated in settings that are less restrictive than students of color, and even when special education services are implemented as a means of “support.”

These are major ideas and concepts to be thinking and writing about, but there has been substantial and important work done by disability studies and critical education scholars that serve as our foundation. We are excited to build on that work, and to build the critical literacies of teachers who are graduating from the IUPUI School of Education: to develop a praxis of critical consciousness around inclusion and access at the intersection of race and disability, and to engage in activism that encourages teachers to seek out those students who are being excluded, and to find ways to ensure their classrooms, curriculum, and instruction are inclusive and accessible to every student, especially those at risk of marginalization.