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Why Is There Learning Disabilities? A Critical Analysis of the Birth of the Field in Its Social Context

Christine Sleeter

Abstract

This chapter presents an interpretation of why the category of learning disabilities emerged, that differs from interpretations that currently prevail. It argues that the category was created in response to social conditions during the late 1950s and early 1960s which brought about changes in schools that were detrimental to children whose achievement was relatively low. The category was created by white middle class parents in an effort to differentiate their children from low-achieving low-income and minority children. The category offered their children a degree of protection from probable consequences of low achievement because it upheld their intellectual normalcy and the normalcy of their home backgrounds, and it

suggested hope for a cure and for their ability eventually to attain higher status occupations than other low achievers.

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