

Chapter 59

Abilities Before Disabilities: The Educational Challenges and Triumphs of a Blind Individual

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will discuss the importance of inclusion for all students in and outside of the classroom from the author's experiences in the K-16 educational systems as a blind student. Her chapter will offer personal examples of the negative impact exclusion and ableism can have on a person with a disability. Additionally, she will recount instances of inclusion that have shaped who she is. This chapter will offer advice for educators on how to ensure social justice for students with disabilities so that it is central in their classroom pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

As a completely blind woman, my lived experiences have impacted how I view the world. I was born three and a half months premature and as a result of being given too much oxygen, I am totally blind. While each situation expounded in this chapter is my own, the general sentiment is not unlike other people with disabilities whom I know. My hope in sharing my story is to get the message across that all students deserve a high-quality education. Highlighting experiences of ableism and inclusion, the aim of my chapter is to illustrate how including people with disabilities is a social justice imperative.

Inclusion

Inclusion is a topic that demands importance in the classroom and beyond the walls of any classroom. My blindness has given me the opportunity to write about this subject in great detail. It appears to be an easy concept for certain people exposed to disability, yet difficult for much of society to understand. Perhaps at the most basic level, inclusion is important because every student, with or without disabili-

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ties, deserves dignity and opportunity. I believe inclusion is an action-based concept. Inclusion, or lack thereof in my experience, also ensures the presence and participation from students with disabilities in and outside the classroom. We need to talk about negative experiences just as much as we should speak about positive ones. If we avoid discussing negative perceptions and experiences surrounding disabilities, change will not happen. This pervasive cultural attitude not only impacts students academically but emotionally as well.

The Negative Impact of Ableism

Ableism, a term coined by the disability community, is the oppression and exclusion that people with disabilities face due to structural and societal barriers. In an article, *Confronting Ableism*, Thomas Hehir writes, “Society’s pervasive negative attitude about disability—which I term *ableism*—often makes the world unwelcoming and inaccessible for people with disabilities” (2007, p. 9). Hehir (2007) continues, “Negative cultural attitudes toward disability can undermine opportunities for all students to participate fully in school and society” (p. 9).

Throughout my educational career, I have had to overcome quite a bit of discrimination because of my blindness. I was met with both ableist attitudes and ableist institutional structures. From an early age I found that professionals saw my blindness before my intellect. In school I often did not have materials accessible to me in a timely fashion. This lack of equality I have faced has motivated me to improve the lives of other students. I did not have a Braille printer in public school, so my teaching assistant had to create Braille materials by hand using our manual Braille machine. This was anything but an easy task for her. Teachers would often not give her materials ahead of time for the week so she would work extra hard to stay on top of all of my assignments. Even though my teaching assistant Brailled my materials with short notice, I never missed assignments. I did not fall behind in my work until I entered college where many of my assignments were not accessible to me.

Advocacy

Advocacy skills are essential for students with disabilities to be successful. When someone advocates for a person with a disability, this means they are defending that person’s needs. These needs will be different for each person, because not all students require the same accommodations. When disabled students are young, their family, friends, educators or specialists advocate on their behalf. My mother advocated for me when I was a child in all areas of education. When students are in a public school setting with unique needs, it can be difficult to fit every service they need into the school day. In my case, this meant I would be taken out of classes to work with a resource teacher or Braille instructor on subjects like math and science. This time away from the others in the class exerts a negative impact on students because they end up missing the material being taught in the classes from which they are temporarily removed. I would also be removed from classes for special services such as physical therapy and mobility when it was available to me. To my dismay, sometimes my school would have me miss recess in order to fit in the special services I needed. My mother advocated for me, saying that I could not be overworked and that playing is a form of education. Mobility is an exercise in which an instructor uses landmarks or certain objects or sounds to help a blind person safely navigate their surroundings. Some school years I did not receive any mobility because there was no one to teach me. Therefore, when I was in middle school, I needed to teach myself the layout of the floor of my eighth-grade building.

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