

By Seema Bahl, M.A., M.I.A.

## Introduction and Purpose:

Disability is prevalent in society, now documented as impacting one fourth of the U.S. adult population (CDC, 2018). Considering that the disabled population is the largest minoritized group in the United States, an important step in advancing educational equity and inclusion in our K-12 school system would be to gain a basic understanding of the Critical Disability Studies framework and the emergence of the Disability Justice Movement. This brief provides an overview of disability as a social category and an introduction to the Disability Justice Movement, which can guide and inform inclusionary practices in the K-12 classroom.

## Ableism and Disability Language

*Ableism* can be defined simply as “discrimination in favor of the able-bodied” (Linton, 1998) or more specifically as “oppression, prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination against disabled people on the basis of actual or presumed disability and the belief that people are superior or inferior, have a better quality of life, or have lives more valuable or worth living on the basis of actual or perceived disability” (Brown, n.d.). Ableism is systemic and widespread in our society, and like racism, sexism, heteronormativity, and xenophobia, ableism has unfortunately been a grounding principle through which our schools have made decisions about how to incorporate students with disabilities into K-12 classrooms, either via segregation into special education classrooms or maladapted inclusion into the general education environment. As noted by Baglieri and Lalvani (2020),

The very existence of separate classrooms reinforces the idea that some people are different enough that they cannot be educated in the same space as everybody else....These separations among children with and without disabilities allow ableism to proliferate by reinforcing disability stigma and preventing natural opportunities for interaction among ability-diverse children.

Crucial to the dismantling of ableism is the need to adopt respectful language that has been vetted by disability community leaders (including disability studies scholars and disability activists) when referring to students with disabilities in the classroom. For example, Simi Linton, Lydia Brown, and others assert that instead of referring to students as “confined to wheelchair,” “suffering from Down Syndrome,” “handicapped,” and “differently abled,” disabled students should be referred to as “using a wheelchair,” “living with Down Syndrome,” “has Down Syndrome,” or simply “disabled or living with a disability” (Linton, 1998; Brown, n.d.). As noted by disability studies scholarship, the category of disability is both a social construction, i.e., its meaning is fluid and dependent upon societal determinations within a given historical moment (Annamma, Connor, and Ferri, 2013; Wendell, 1996), and an identity to be proud of, due to societal gains achieved by the Disability Rights Movement (Longmore, 2003). In this regard, the term has been claimed by the disability community as a sociopolitical category as opposed to a medical identifier.

The disability community makes a clear distinction between person first (“person with a disability”) and identity-first (“disabled person”) language. Disability pride and Disability Justice movements tend to favor identity-first language, as the claiming of disability identity (“I identify as a disabled person”) attaches a socio-political meaning to a person’s lived experience. In other words, disability is central to the core being of the so-labelled person and is the primary attribute that situates that person culturally and socially (Simonsen and Mruzcek, n.d.). In this way, claiming disability as a primary identity allows for a strong claim of disability pride and call for disability rights and disability justice.

## ***Medical Model and Social Models of Disability***

One of the most important developments in disability history was the introduction of the Social Model of Disability. Disability had historically been understood in the medical realm; as a biological reality and an individual tragedy to be overcome (Shakespeare, 2010; Oliver, 1990). This lens through which disability was viewed was termed the Individual Model or the Medical Model of Disability (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2010). According to this model, which is still the dominant view of disability in special education today (Valle and Connor, 2019), those with physical, sensory, and cognitive impairments were considered “lesser beings,” and “functional deficits” necessitated medical intervention to treat or “cure” individuals in order to render them fully rehabilitated, whole, and contributing members of society (Shakespeare, 2010; Oliver, 1990). However, the Medical Model of Disability failed to consider the extent to which the built environment excluded disabled people simply by being physically inaccessible. The recognition of these failures led to the conceptualization of the Social Model of Disability, which evolved from the work of physically disabled white male activists in Britain calling themselves The Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation

(UPIAS) (Shakespeare, 2010). According to Social Model of Disability proponents, disabled people are a marginalized group, oppressed by society’s artificially constructed barriers to participation. In their 1975 manifesto, the UPIAS claimed:

In our view, it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments; by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society. (Shakespeare, 2010)

## ***Actionable Steps and Recommendations:***

Baglieri and Lalvani (2020) note the vital importance of addressing ableism in schools:

We...have witnessed, through our personal experiences and work with those who have experienced seclusion from society or marginalization in schools, not only the damaging outcomes of society’s failure to question the oppression of people with disabilities, but also the power of these ideas when people have an “a-ha” moment that changes understandings of disability for self and others.

It is imperative that staff and teachers of all subjects are trained to understand the importance of the disability studies framework so that they can incorporate this framework into their curriculum and pedagogy. This would include<sup>1</sup>:

- a. Training staff and teachers on the importance of using language that is not ableist inside and out of the classroom, in addition to teaching staff and teachers to understand the difference between person-first versus identity-first language.
- b. Having conversations in all classrooms about societal barriers to participation for disabled people. This could include implementing classroom activities that look at physical accessibility and teaching students about universal design.

---

<sup>1</sup> Recommendations adapted from Valle and Connor (2019).

c. Emphasizing that disability exists on a spectrum and that its meaning is fluid and socially constructed.

d. Normalizing disability as a natural part of society and human experience. This would call for a regular focus on disability in the classroom through positive stories and affirming examples of disabled people in lessons.

e. Centering disabled people's experiences, and not shying away from conversations about IEPs, paraeducators, and special education classrooms (while preserving confidentiality and rights of self-disclosure).

## **Disability Rights Movement**

The Independent Living Movement, and the larger Disability Rights Movement, emerged during the 1960s with inspiration from the growing successes of the Civil Rights Movement (Nielsen, 2012; Longmore, 2003; Baglieri and Lalvani, 2020). The Disability Rights Movement was intent on achieving equality in society and eliminating discrimination against disabled people through the passage of laws and policies that would protect the civil, political, and economic rights of disabled people in the United States. Led primarily by white, educated, middle-class activists with physical disabilities (Frederick and Shifrer, 2018), disability rights activists were interested in eliminating societal barriers to access so that they could fully participate in society.

As powerful and urgent as the Disability Rights Movement has been, it became clear that not all disabled people were adequately served or represented by the demands and victories of this movement. Disabled people who were also Black, Indigenous, or other people of color, LGBTQ<sup>2</sup> people, poor and unhoused individuals, and undocumented

---

*“ableism works hand-in-hand with other forms of oppression and stresses...”*

---

and other racialized immigrants faced unique and compounded discrimination that could not be rectified by the implementation of the laws and policies that were hard won by the Disability Rights Movement (Sins Invalid, 2019).

## **Community and Activism: What is Disability Justice?**

There was an urgent need for those disabled people who also experienced oppression and exclusion based on additional “othered” identities, or “multiply-marginalized” individuals, to be recognized as having an experience of societal discrimination that was distinct from that faced by the mainstream disability movement. In this vein, the Disability Justice Movement was born. The Disability Justice Movement was a liberation-focused, cross-movement framework created in 2005 by Sins Invalid<sup>3</sup>, which explicitly centered Black and Brown, LGBTQ, poor, and undocumented racialized disabled people to counter and challenge the whiteness and single-issue focus of the mainstream Disability Rights Movement. Disability Justice insisted that, in the words of Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha and Stacy Park Milbern, “ableism works hand-in-hand with other forms of oppression and stresses that multiply-marginalized disabled people get to create movements and organize out of their strengths, vulnerabilities, body/minds and genius” (Northwest Health Foundation, 2018).

---

<sup>2</sup> Acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer

<sup>3</sup> Sins Invalid is a Bay Area, California-based performance and liberation project that centers disabled Black and Brown, LGBTQ, poor and neurodivergent artists and activists.

# **Actionable Steps and Recommendations: How to Inform Inclusion in the Classroom Leading with the Ten Principles of Disability Justice**

The founding voices of the Disability Justice Movement, Patty Berne and Sins Invalid, put forth an important guiding list of principles in their Disability Justice Primer entitled “Skin, Tooth, and Bone.” In order to fully empower disabled students, especially those with intersectional marginalized identities, we would benefit by looking at these principles, and a disability justice framework in general, to guide our classroom management. Below are three of the ten principles, along with suggestions on how to implement these principles of disability justice in the classroom.

## **1. Intersectionality<sup>4</sup> -**

We are not only disabled, we are also each coming from a specific experience of race, class, sexuality, age, religious background, geographical location, immigration status, and more (Sins Invalid, 2019).

If we are striving for fully inclusive curriculum incorporating a disability justice lens, we should prioritize content that is intersectional, culturally competent, antiracist, and antiableist. We should see disabled and LGBTQ students of color in a positive light in textbooks, on classroom walls, and in movies and videos shown in class. Disability Justice should be a guiding theme across all curriculum - English, math, social studies, science, physical education, and art.

## **2. Leadership of then most impacted -**

“By centering the leadership of those most impacted, we keep ourselves grounded in real-world problems and find creative strategies for resistance” (Sins Invalid, 2019).

Full inclusion would also recognize the need for multiply-marginalized disabled students to see themselves represented in positions of power. This could be addressed by committing to hiring staff, teachers, and paraeducators who are also intersectionally disabled, people of color, and LGBTQ.

These role models could have greater empathy due to the lived experience that mirrors the lives of multiply-marginalized disabled students. Schools could also institute mentorship programs and school-based clubs for multiply-marginalized students that could be led by multiply-marginalized adults and teen community mentors who would advocate for and empower these students.

## **3. Interdependence -**

Sins Invalid states that “we meet each other’s needs as we build toward liberation....”

Disabled young people should know that disability is a valuable identity, and that disabled people have contributed and served each other and society throughout history. Teachers can support full inclusion by supporting every individual’s need for accessible spaces; teachers begin class sessions by stating their own access needs (not necessarily due to disability) and model what it looks like to normalize and destigmatize access and accommodations in the classroom.

Another way that school staff and teachers can normalize access and interdependence for multiply-marginalized disabled students is by empathetically and compassionately responding to the specific needs and challenges of their lives. For example, if there is stress and hardship at home, leading to difficulties at school (absence, lack of focus, etc.), teachers and staff can focus on access, care, listening and encouragement, rather than sanctions and punishment.

---

<sup>4</sup> Intersectionality was a term coined by Black feminist scholar Kimberle Crenshaw.

## References

---

- Annamma, S.A., Connor, D. & Ferri, B. (2013). Dis/ability critical race studies (DisCrit): Theorizing at the intersections of race and dis/ability. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 16:1, 1-31, DOI: 10.1080/13613324.2012.730511
- Baglieri, S and Lalvani, P. (2020). *Undoing Ableism*. New York: Routledge.
- Brown, L.X.Z. (n.d.). Definitions. Retrieved from: <https://www.autistichoya.com/p/definitions.html>
- Brown, L.X.Z. (n.d.). Ableism/Language. Retrieved from: <https://www.autistichoya.com/p/ableist-words-and-terms-to-avoid.html>
- Center for Disease Control. (2018). CDC: *1 in 4 US adults live with a disability*. Retrieved from: <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2018/p0816-disability.html>
- Frederick, A. and Shifrer, D. (2018). Race and disability: from analogy to intersectionality. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332649218783480>
- Linton, S. (1998). *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*. New York: New York University Press.
- Nielsen, K. (2012). *A Disability History of the United States*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Northwest Health Foundation. (2018). The Disability Justice Leaders Collaborative: An introduction. <https://medium.com/striving-for-disability-equity/the-disability-justice-leaders-collaborative-an-introduction-afdb1e4bd121>
- Longmore, P. (2003). *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Oliver, M. (1990). The Individual and Social Models of Disability. Paper presented at *Joint Workshop of the Living Options Group and the Research Unit of the Royal College of Physicians*.
- Shakespeare, T. (2010). The Social Model of Disability, in *The Disability Studies Reader* (ed. Davis, L.) New York: Routledge.
- Simonsen, M. and Mruzek, C. (n.d). *Person-first vs. identity-first language*. <https://educationonline.ku.edu/community/person-first%20vs.%20identity-first%20language>
- Sins Invalid. (2019). *Skin, Tooth and Bone: The Basis of Movement is our People* (2nd ed). Retrieved from: <https://www.sinsinvalid.org/disability-justice-primer>
- Valle, J. and Connor, D. (2019). *Rethinking Disability: A Disability Studies Approach to Inclusive Education*. New York: Routledge.
- Wendell, S. (1996). *The Rejected Body*. New York: Routledge.
- 
- Seema Bahl, M.A., M.I.A.** is a faculty lecturer in the Sociology Department at Bellevue College and at the University of Washington's School of Social Work. Seema has developed and taught courses in disability studies, gender studies, and medical sociology. In addition, Seema has published academic articles on both mothering and flamenco performance within a disability justice context. Seema also serves as an Associate Education Ombuds at the Governor's Office of the Education Ombuds. In this role, she works with families, educators, schools, and community groups across Washington State to solve problems that impact student learning, facilitate communication among stakeholders, and advance educational equity and inclusion.
-