

Is Diversity Education Diverse Enough?

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We've heard it from the mouths of our own children, "You're such a retard! That's so lame! Are you deaf, or what?" All these expressions formed in a past when people with disabilities were viewed as objects of pity, void of any value. However, even in a transforming society, we still hear these phrases spoken without any understanding of the origin or the devastating impact of perpetuating these images in our modern culture.

We've come a long way with diversity education. Ask any third grader about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. or Cesar Chavez and you will probably get the complete story behind each man's sacrifice and impact on our society. Beginning in elementary school, our students learn about the many nationalities, religions, and cultures that make up our country's patchwork quilt. They learn the history of how each one has contributed to this country's experience, this country's development as a uniquely unified entity. They understand the immorality of slavery and racism as well as many forms of discrimination. Yet we have neglected to educate our children about the largest minority group in the United States: People who experience disability.

Who was Ed Roberts? He was a man who, due to discrimination based on his physical disabilities, had to fight to receive a public education. He ultimately became California's Director of the Department of Rehabilitation, and he is now hailed as the "Father of Disability Rights." Who is I. King Jordan? He was the first Deaf president of Gallaudet University, a university for Deaf people. Until a widely publicized student protest brought Jordan to the presidency, Gallaudet had been led exclusively by hearing presidents for over one hundred years. These individuals compare to the countless heroes who created an appreciation for diversity among Americans. They represent a civil rights movement long ignored by mainstream historians. Students not only need to know about these men and many other disabled American heroes, but they also need to get to know the people they see each day who experience disability. Why?

Disability isn't what happens when someone is born with legs that don't walk, or a brain that functions differently than most, or ears that don't hear. Disability happens when a person's community does not allow for equal opportunities. For instance, a person who uses a wheelchair is not disabled by the need to use a wheelchair. However, they become *disabled* by obstacles in the community such as curbs, steps, heavy doors, narrow aisles in department stores, and inaccessible parking and restrooms, to name a few. A person with an intellectual or psychiatric disability may



not necessarily be disabled by their minds' abilities as much as they are *disabled* by inadequate and non-dignifying educational and vocational opportunities, educational and social segregation, and other attitudinal barriers to life quality. A person who is Deaf isn't necessarily disabled by his or her deafness. However, a person who is Deaf becomes *disabled* when there is no closed captioning provided on television, no assistive technology to allow access for telephone use, or when others in their community haven't learned to value and speak their language. And of course, *disabling* occurs when insensitive language and dehumanizing stereotypes are perpetuated in the media and in general. *Disability* is a result of societal ignorance, attitudes and discrimination.

Children need to understand that their attitudes, their words, and their actions can either make a positive difference or a negative difference in the lives of their neighbors who experience disability. We need to learn that it is okay to be different and that there are many different ways to be different. All of those differences are worthy of respect and appreciation.

By educating children about disability from a perspective of diversity appreciation, we powerfully replace the inherited attitudes of fear and pity which have been reinforced by the media. By regularly exposing children to dignifying encounters with classmates and community members who experience disability, they become more connected members of society and actively promote ability appreciation themselves. Not only does this consciousness bring about empowerment for today, but also for a future when many of us will join the most inclusive of all minority groups: people who experience disability.

Given our current culture, it is wise to proactively include ability awareness as a component of diversity education, both for children and for adults. If we want our children to grow up and be enlightened citizens who appreciate their connections to their diverse communities, then we must teach them to appreciate the experiences of others. If we, as adults, want to make a difference for today, then we must expand our definition of diversity to include not only the physical, intellectual, psychiatric, and sensory differences of our fellow humans, but also to include the historical and current cultural experiences of people who have disabilities. We then, can pass this awareness on to our children and our communities. It is when we begin to understand our role in *disabling* others that we can truly begin to empower us all.

To learn more about Ability Awareness in Action©, visit www.AbilityAwareness.com.

