

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION:

How has education evolved from exclusion to inclusion, from judgment to acceptance, and from disability to difference?

Barbara Boroson

One of the central principles of our melting pot in the United States has been to greet diversity with inclusivity: *Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.* In practice, however, the meaningful inclusion of individuals who are different from the majority has been fraught in many ways. Learning about the evolution of the education system and its treatment of students who are different in terms of race, gender, or ability can guide us as educators to lead the way forward.

In America's earliest days, children born with disabilities were the source of shame and guilt among families, often stashed away in institutions. As described by The Anti-Defamation League (2005):

The stigmatization of disability resulted in the social and economic marginalization of generations of Americans with disabilities, and like many other oppressed minorities, left people with disabilities in a severe state of impoverishment for centuries. In the 1800s, people with disabilities were considered meager, tragic, pitiful individuals unfit and unable to contribute to society, except to serve as ridiculed objects of entertainment in circuses and exhibitions.

Even into the late 20th century, 1.8 million students with disabilities in the United States were excluded entirely from the public education system (Duncan, 2015).

In 1975, the federal Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) required public schools to guarantee a free, appropriate public education to students with disabilities. But the question of what constituted appropriate education was left to



LESSONS FROM HISTORY



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the courts (Esteves & Rao, 2008). And despite the legislation, the inclusion of individuals with special needs was considered by many educators to be of questionable worth, a drag on teachers' time and an intrusion—a threat to the status quo (West, 2000).

In the 1980s, activists began to lobby for a broader civil rights statute. As a result, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed in 1990, ensuring equal access and equal treatment for people with disabilities. Since then, the EHA has been reauthorized and renamed numerous times. The current version, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, together with the ADA, the Every Student Succeeds Act, and other legislation, aim to ensure that the concepts of access and appropriateness are interpreted and applied consistently. All students are now guaranteed an education that is not only accessible, but also free, appropriate, timely, nondiscriminatory, meaningful, measureable, and provided in the least-restrictive setting. Today more than 90 percent of all students with disabilities receive education in mainstream schools, and more than half are included in the general classroom for at least 80 percent of the day (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2016).

Although the signing of these federal laws imposed immediate legislative mandates to ensure equal access for and treatment of people with disabilities, long-standing assumptions, stereotypes, and pedagogical practices have persisted. Practically, educators still struggle to balance the acute needs of a few with the ongoing needs of the whole. Philosophically, educators and advocates today explore the implications of a semantic or paradigmatic shift from *disabled* to *different*. In more practical terms, the education community continues to worry that students with special needs will detract from the integrity of the competitive classroom environment.

Exclusion by Race: Separate but Unequal

We've been here before. Up until the mid-19th century, virtually all slave codes in the United States prohibited

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the education of black Americans (Marable & Mullings, 2003). At the time, it was widely thought that educating those who were believed to be inferior would be not only a waste of resources, but also a threat to the dominant majority.

The late 19th century brought the Jim Crow laws, which legally mandated racially segregated education in many states under the veil of “separate but equal.” The separateness was strictly enforced—the equality, not so much. It wasn’t until 1954 that segregation was declared unconstitutional in *Brown v. Board of Education*. But it was another 10 years before the Jim Crow laws were finally eradicated by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which forbade discrimination on the basis of race.

Even so, entrenched biases persisted in many communities, and black students faced harassment and often abuse as they matriculated into previously all-white schools. Jason Sokol (2008) describes how some white Southerners felt as desegregation began to take hold:

The civil rights struggle threatened to hoist African Americans up and out of [the] social “place” that whites had created for them. White Southerners would find blacks in their schools and neighborhoods, their restaurants, and polling places.... Many whites denounced the “Civil Wrongs Bill,” holding that such federal laws imperiled their own rights. They clung to the notion that rights were finite, and that as blacks gained freedom, whites must

suffer a loss of their own liberties. On the precarious seesaw of Southern race relations, whites thought they would plummet if blacks ascended. (p. 62)

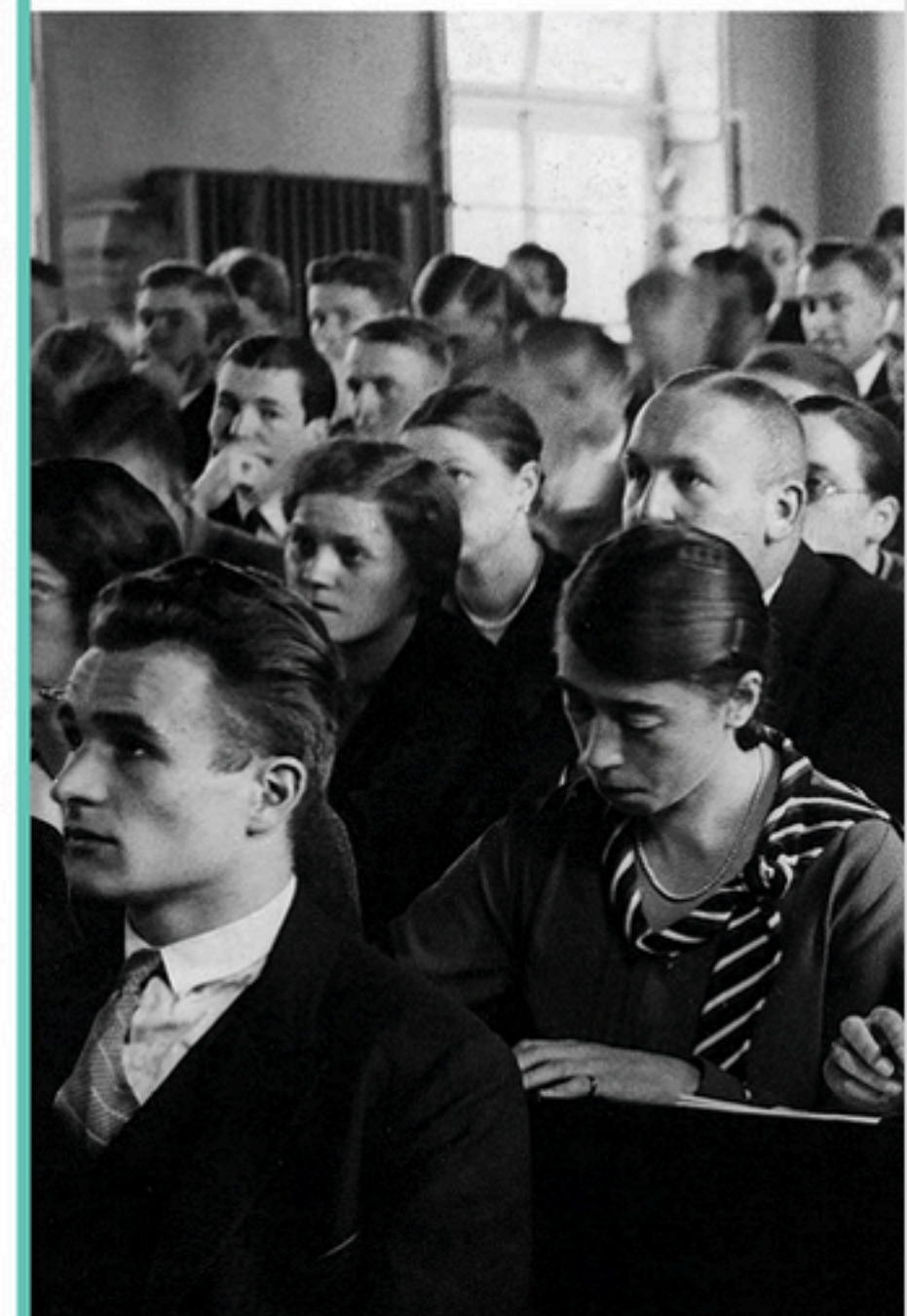
Just as many educators and families today fear the intrusion of students who are differently abled into general education classrooms, many white Americans believed that black students would be a drag on teachers’ time and energy, and would dilute the dignity and integrity of a homogenous learning environment.

Exclusion by Gender: The Fight for Coeducation

Dipping back in time again, it is important to remember that early American education was an exclusive privilege not of white *people*, but more specifically of white *males*. In the early 19th century, girls and young women who were lucky enough to have access to education were generally taught only homemaking skills, such as needlework, cooking, and etiquette (Forman-Brunell, 2001).

It was 200 years after the first American colleges were founded before white women were allowed to partake in postsecondary education, and even then, only sort of. By means of a familiar “separate but equal” version of segregated education, women were granted admission to *coordinate colleges* that were loosely affiliated with men’s colleges, providing only limited access to university resources and opportunities.

By the beginning of the 20th



century, white women were allowed to enroll in historically male-only colleges. As was the case when black students first entered historically white-only schools, women encountered prejudice and discrimination from their peers and instructors. Many professors disapproved of the admission of women, asserting that women were constitutionally incapable of higher-level academic work and often refusing to acknowledge women’s presence in their classes. The situation for black women was even more repressive. Just as some educators today doubt the academic potential of students with learning or functional differences, many considered women to be constitutionally inferior and unworthy of the investment of robust academic resources or opportunity. A dramatic shift would later occur in 1972 with the passage of Title IX of the



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Education Amendments Act, which protects students from discrimination on the basis of gender.

Where does this fear and resistance of others come from? Again it seems the dominant majority of white men felt somehow unsteady on their lofty perch—they believed that the act of lifting up others would topple the towering world of privilege they had created. So the status of black Americans and women was perpetuated as less-than, a disadvantage, a flaw, a predictor of incapacity, or incompetence—a disability.

Next Steps for Inclusive Educators

At this point in our development as inclusive educators, we have moved past legally exclusionary practices. But perhaps we, too, feel uncertain at the helm of classes that already struggle to stay afloat, even before students with significant learning differences come onboard. A paradigm shift could help us change course.

First, let's look closely at the language we use. As inclusive educators, many of us are still in a self-conscious phase of adjustment, bumping up against remnants of old stumbling blocks. Consider this historical parallel: As women took their place in previously male-only classrooms, the term *coeducation* became an uncomfortable

catchphrase. Although coeducation means “the education of both sexes together at the same time,” women were considered to be the physical manifestations of the coeducation movement. While men were called *students*, women were called *coeds*. The message was that women were on campus only because of the coeducation movement; they were not really students. Although coeducational status is no longer something that colleges and universities need to shout from the rooftops of their hallowed halls, the term *coed* still lingers.

Similarly, as inclusive educators, it's time to move past the self-congratulatory phase of celebrating our “integrated” schools and classrooms. Our public schools are expected to be inclusive of students of all fluid varieties of gender, race, and ability. So let's acknowledge that students who come from other classrooms or programs are not “inclusion kids,” and the teachers who come with them are not “inclusion teachers.” Every student in every classroom is an inclusion kid. Every teacher in every classroom is an inclusion teacher. These students and teachers are not here because of the inclusion movement; we are all here because we embrace difference and diversity.

At the same time, we must be careful never to slip into an oversimplified illusion that we're all the same, as has happened before. When Martin Luther King, Jr. shared his dream that black Americans would be judged not “by the color of their skin but by the content of their character,” much of white America tried obligingly to be colorblind. The well-intentioned effort to treat race as irrelevant was meant to draw attention to commonalities. Instead, as Monnica Williams (2011), psychologist and director of the Laboratory for Culture and Mental Health Disparities, explains, “[colorblindness] helped make race into a taboo topic that polite people cannot openly discuss. And if you can't talk about it, you can't understand it.”

Valuing the Difference

In this context, let's look at the vigorous movement toward inclusion for students on the autism spectrum. In the 1990s, the term *neurotypical* was coined by some in the autism community to describe people who are *not* on the autism spectrum. From the notion of neurotypicality sprang a broader movement toward neurodiversity, which seeks to portray natural variations in neurological functioning as benign and inclusive, implying that all neurological functioning lies on a spectrum. In this sense, every one of us, different as we are, has a place on the same universal, neurodiverse spectrum.

In this inclusive light, we can view differing abilities



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from a more open, accepting perspective. Peter Smagorinsky (2011) asks:

Whose rules provide the center of gravity for considering what counts as appropriate behavior? Why are those who don't understand or follow those rules viewed as being in deficit, or having a *disorder*? Do folks on the spectrum have a *disorder*? Or do they simply follow their own order? (p. 1716)

Many proponents of the neurodiversity movement believe that Autism Spectrum Disorder and other neurological and neurodevelopmental differences should no longer be considered deficits that need to be cured or treated. Instead, neurodiversity advocates maintain that all kinds of neurofunctioning are valid. They encourage the neurotypical community to meet folks on the autism spectrum where they are and to stop trying to change them.

These concepts present us with challenges that go beyond semantics. As our lexicon shifts from *disability*

to *difference*, how do we address the reality of varied abilities? How do we honor different kinds of academic achievement even as we are expected to bring all students to standardized or "normalized" academic expectations? How do we balance the neutrality of *difference* with the practical reality of *disability*? Simon Baron-Cohen (2013), director of the Autism Research Centre in Cambridge, England, suggests,

Autism is both a disability *and* a difference. We need to find ways of alleviating the disability while respecting and valuing the difference. (p. 367)

Meeting Students Where They Are

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) takes us a long way toward finding that balance. UDL is based on the notion that rather than forcing students into a one-size-fits-all learning style, educators must provide varied and flexible options for learning, along with appropriate supports and accommodations. Our inclusive goal

is to meet students where they are and as they are and to lead them to be resourceful, knowledgeable, goal-oriented, and motivated learners. UDL strategies can help us acknowledge differences, differentiate instruction, and guide students to maximize their potential, while still leaving room for students' individuality to shine.

According to UDL's principles, we must incorporate diverse strategies for engagement, representation, and action and expression. To provide students with an engaging learning environment, for instance, keep classroom decorations to a minimum. Classrooms can be colorful and attractive without being overwhelmingly distracting to students with special needs. Consider posting large swaths of plain, brightly colored paper on the wall to keep things cheerful while giving students' eyes a place to rest.

In terms of representation, present new information in clear context so all students can assimilate it in ways that are personally meaningful to

them. By positioning new concepts on a timeline or in a Venn diagram, for example, we help students make their own associations between new concepts and prior knowledge. Like using hashtags on social media, this makes it easier for them to retrieve information when they need it.

Offer and accept a variety of ways for students to express their knowledge. Many students assimilate far more knowledge than they are able to demonstrate through conventional means. Whenever possible, let students choose to speak, write, act, sing, dance, pantomime, illustrate, videotape, collage, montage, podcast—or whatever vehicle drives them.

The Inclusive School

And spread awareness. Creating a school culture of meaningful inclusivity starts by drawing in classroom paraprofessionals, teachers in special areas, coaches, and bus and building staff. Provide adults in the school community with information about specific disabilities and actionable tips to support students so that all learners and teachers will be comfortable together.¹

Champion difference. Fill your school and classroom libraries with biographies of people who exemplify all kinds of difference: Helen Keller, Harvey Milk, and Malala Yousafzai, to name a few. Choose read-aloud books that highlight protagonists who stand out for their differences: *Chrysanthemum* by Kevin Henkes, in which the main character is a feisty individualist; the *Joey Pigza* series by Jack Gantos, in which the spunky protagonist has ADHD; *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio, in which the beauty of the narrator shines through his facial deformity; and *Out of My Mind* by Sharon Draper, in which the brilliant, nonverbal narrator gives voice to cerebral palsy.

Considering disabilities to be differ-

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ences that are as neutral as race and gender may be a false equivalence. But by viewing the classroom through the lens of neurodiversity, we can see that diverse learners do not dilute the dignity and integrity of a homogenous learning environment. Rather, diverse learners breathe energy, openness, and vitality into our classrooms and curriculum, so that for future generations, diversity will be mainstream, and appreciation of differences will be the one thing we all have in common. **EL**

¹Reproducible fact and tip sheets can be found in my book, *Autism Spectrum Disorder in the Inclusive Classroom: How to Reach and Teach Students with ASD* (Scholastic, 2nd edition, 2016).

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Barbara Boroson (barbaraboroson@gmail.com, www.barbaraboroson.com) has worked in the field of autism spectrum education for 25 years in clinical, administrative, and advisory capacities. She is the author of *Autism Spectrum Disorder in the Inclusive Classroom: How to Reach and Teach Students with ASD* (Scholastic, 2nd edition, 2016).