

Editorial

What About Disability and Social Justice?

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The Southern Poverty Law Center sent out a survey to educators after the election, asking them to describe the impact of the election on the school climate for people of color, religious minorities, women, and people who are LGBT. They recently issued a [report](#) that indicates that 90% of respondents believe that the election has had a negative impact on the school climate for marginalized students. Missing from this valuable piece of research is people with disabilities. Why? Are people with disabilities negatively targeted or discriminated against based on their disability? Given that students with disabilities are [twice as likely to be bullied](#) than their non disabled peers, I would say the answer is “yes”. Hate crimes and hate speech against people with disabilities, although prevalent, are [largely unreported](#). Although the incident earlier this year in Chicago where a young white man with an intellectual disability was tortured by four blacks was widely publicized, the focus was primarily on racial motivations for the crime, [not on disability](#). I would suggest that the reason why people with disabilities are not thought of as part of the spectrum of people with identities adversely affected by the election is because it is generally accepted that belittling, bullying, excluding and disregarding people with disabilities is a normative and acceptable practice.

I am deafblind and I grew up in the 1970’s in San Francisco. I reached Kindergarten age the same year as the passage of federal special education legislation required that children with disabilities receive a “free and appropriate public education” in the “least restrictive environment.” My local public school’s answer to that predicament was to recommend educating me in a basement room, by myself, where I could receive “special attention.” Throughout elementary school, though I went to several different small, private Montessori schools (the basement was a deal breaker for Mom), I was constantly ostracized and teased by other children. No one would play with me at recess. If they did play with me I was always the “cootie” and they would run screaming from me, yelling “cootie catcher, cootie catcher.” I was rarely invited to birthday parties. I was always the last one picked for team sports. Even “Benji Booger” got picked before me. During middle school the teasing and exclusion escalated. Boys pushed their noses up against the blackboard, imitating my need to stand close in order to see. Everyone left the table in the cafeteria when I sat down with my tray. Girls “spread the word” to anyone not in the know that I was “weird” and “unpopular.” One girl screamed at me in shop class that she “hated me” even though I barely knew her. An enlightened boy whispered, “You are a sexy fox,” directly into my hearing aid from the seat behind me on the school bus, every day, for two years.

Forty years after activists with disabilities [occupied the Federal Building](#) in San Francisco for 28 days to protest lack of implementation of civil rights legislation imbedded in the Rehabilitation Act, and twenty-five years after the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, we are still not widely recognized as a distinct minority group who experience discrimination and wrongful treatment similar to that experienced by other minority groups. We are also not recognized as a people who have built a positive and evocative group identity on the ruins of past discrimination and the foundations of present stigma.

Society still views people with disabilities as defective folk whose only hope is to be normalized. This is the same argument as the one that says the only hope for equality is for women to be more like men, for Blacks to “act white”, for gays to go straight, and for Jews to accept Jesus as their savior. Today, in order to be recognized as a valid minority, we have to claim our identity in a way that is apologetic, medicalized, and exceptionalized. We have to claim to be different because we are substandard. First we must prove that we are “really disabled.” We must show that we are “unable to perform normal life activities.” We must be “unable to work.” Yet at the same time, society demands that people with disabilities be deserving, and not expect too much. People with disabilities should be “otherwise qualified” to apply for a job. We should not expect that “equal treatment” will result in “equal access.” And we most certainly should not expect anything beyond a “reasonable” accommodation.

Although thankfully my middle school years are behind me, even as a well-educated, well-employed adult I continue to experience the negative impact of how society views me as a disabled person. Sometimes it is seemingly unimportant things, like the fact that I cannot go to the movies with my daughter because although the theater professes to have an assistive listening device, the battery is always dead or the static makes the device unusable. Sometimes it is things that are hard to name or pin down, what other minority communities would call “microaggressions,” like being called “arrogant” behind my back at my workplace because I am always “being negative” about access issues. And sometimes I experience plain old fashioned blatant discrimination, like when the cab driver who was about to stop instead accelerates and zooms past me or the bus driver shouts to me and my (clearly vested) Service Dog, “Hey, you with the dog, where your papers? I ain’t movin this bus until I see some papers.”

Is it no wonder then that people with disabilities are lost and marginalized even within other minority rights and identity conversations? How can disabled people find themselves to be deserving, equal and powerful under the shroud of a society and a political system that shuns them as equal citizens?

People with disabilities need to claim their identity, and claim it with [pride](#). If we view ourselves as abnormal, sub human, and undeserving of dignity and respect, we will be lost. Many similarly stigmatized groups have achieved more success than we have in convincing others that we can be both different, a minority group with a distinct identity, and the same,

human beings who are just like everyone else. This shift in perspective goes hand in hand with changes to the political system, not before it nor behind it. The law, through the very act of protecting the civil rights of a group of people, shapes the identity of that group of people. The trick is to shape that identity in a way that will actually result in civil liberties. Disability rights laws and policies need to be modified, and in many cases they need to be interpreted differently. But disability also needs to be integrated more fully into the general civil rights discussion, and that includes research, policy making, and the public consciousness.