

A Note from the Mouse Who Wanted to Be the Farmer's Wife

Megan A. Conway, Ph.D.
RDS Managing Editor

“Three blind mice...see how they run...they all ran after the farmer's wife, who cut off their tails with a carving knife...”

See what happens when a blind mouse challenges the farmer's wife? Obviously this little nursery rhyme has been through more literary and sociopolitical analysis than anyone has time to contemplate, but I think it is a rather fitting analogy for where people with disabilities are at in the barnyard of education. It's just fine if we are skulking in the corner nibbling on bits of leftover grain, but the minute we come out to play with the humans, BAM.

As a deaf-blind person who received her doctorate in Special Education from an esteemed university, I have to admit that I do have some biases when it comes to the topic of Special Education and educators in general. When I went into education, I wanted to make a difference for others like me and blah, blah, blah. I thought it was weird that I was the only one with a disability in my doctoral cohort—no, make that my entire doctoral program. People with disabilities must just not be interested in education? Or perhaps they did not “qualify”? Anyway, it soon became apparent that most of the special education professors and doctoral students I was working with did not know what they were talking about. Okay, so I am not being fair. I did learn a lot about how to count (and the deep meaning of) the number of times someone does “repetitive head banging behavior.” However, when I tried to turn the topic to something that I saw as meaningful, such as, “Why the heck won't you guys facilitate my participation in this class by using my assistive listening device,” I was met with eye rolling and that look of non-gimp solidarity: “Oh here she goes again.”

Over a decade later, here I go again. There are about 50 faculty at our research center, a unit of the college of education focused on disability. Of those faculty, three (including me) are known to me to have a disability. I know that others may have a hidden disability I am unaware of, so please put your hands down. However, the fact remains that, in a program dedicated to “promoting diverse abilities across the lifespan,” only 6% of us openly exhibit such “diverse abilities” (saving a full description of my diverse abilities for another time, wink, wink).

Being a noble and worthy academic, I decided that I needed to pull apart these unscholarly little biases by doing some online research. It is easy to find statistics on children with disabilities in special education, since from day one they are identified, branded with the scarlet “S” and put to work. Here's what I found.

Some fast facts from the National Center for Education Statistics:

- 13% of all children enrolled in public schools receive special education services.
- 38% of these have “learning disabilities”

(http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10_045.asp?referrer=list)

- 15% of all special education students, and 48% of those with an intellectual disability, spend more than 60% of their time outside a “regular” classroom.
- 21% spend “from 21-60%” of their time outside the regular classroom.
- 48% spend “less than 21%” of their time outside the regular classroom.

(<http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=59>)

I thought this was a strange way to present statistics on inclusion, “The percent of students with disabilities who spend between a low percent and a high percent not in a regular classroom.” And are lunch and recess considered “time in the regular classroom” (I’ll bet they are). These numbers don’t really tell us very much, so I have interpreted these statistics for the layperson in a less optimistic fashion:

- Almost half of all students with intellectual disabilities spend over half their time in a segregated setting.
- Nearly one quarter of all special education students spend half their time in a segregated setting.
- Only half of all special education students spend less than a quarter of their time in the regular classroom.
- Five percent of all public school students have been diagnosed with a “specific learning disability.”

I was pleased to find out that the Department of Education still views Special Education as a privilege (privileges are cool)!

“Special education services through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) are available only for eligible children and youth. Eligible children and youth are those identified by a team of professionals as having a disability that adversely affects academic performance and as being in need of special education and related services.”

(http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cwd.asp)

Oh dear. I found that I was having a hard time putting my biases to bed. Let’s just say I was only seeing what I wanted to see. I decided to investigate how many teachers and postsecondary faculty there are with a disability. So I did a Google search and came up with...not much. Apparently there is some difficulty in identifying anyone past the age of 18 who has a disability because of “confidentiality” concerns. Funny how when you are in primary and secondary school you are supposed to wear your disability like a badge of shame (or courage) but when you turn 18 you are best advised to hide it. JAN does address the question of educators who have disabilities, without actually giving us a real answer (the statistics are a bit of a leap of faith, sorry JAN):

“Question: How many educators with disabilities are working today?”

Answer: According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, nearly four million educators, specifically teachers, working in preschool to secondary settings were employed in the United States in 2006.

In addition, there were close to 1.7 million professionals who taught in post-secondary settings, ranging from four year colleges and universities to technology and culinary schools in that same year (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). If disabilities affect one-fifth of all Americans (Census Bureau, 2008), then close to 1.1 million educators, from preschool teachers to post-secondary professors and instructors, could be in need of job accommodations.”
(<https://askjan.org/media/educators.html>)

Twenty percent of teachers and higher education faculty are disabled? Where are these people? Not on my block, baby. The fact is, we have no idea how many teachers or professors have a disability, but we can speculate that they are highly underrepresented. No, I don't have any data to back this up. But I have about as much real data as the government, apparently. So we'll go with my personal experience – 6%. If 20% of the population has a disability, and 6% of educators have a disability, where does that leave us? In the corner of the barnyard, nursing our wounded tails.