

# *Eliminating Ableism in Education*

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*In this article, Thomas Hehir defines ableism as “the devaluation of disability” that “results in societal attitudes that uncritically assert that it is better for a child to walk than roll, speak than sign, read print than read Braille, spell independently than use a spell-check, and hang out with nondisabled kids as opposed to other disabled kids.” Hehir highlights ableist practices through a discussion of the history of and research pertaining to the education of deaf students, students who are blind or visually impaired, and students with learning disabilities, particularly dyslexia. He asserts that “the pervasiveness of . . . ableist assumptions in the education of children with disabilities not only reinforces prevailing prejudices against disability but may very well contribute to low levels of educational attainment and employment.” In conclusion, Hehir offers six detailed proposals for beginning to address and overturn ableist practices. Throughout this article, Hehir draws on his personal experiences as former director of the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs, Associate Superintendent for the Chicago Public Schools, and Director of Special Education in the Boston Public Schools.*

## **Ableist Assumptions**

When Joe Ford was born in 1983, it was clear to the doctors and to Joe’s mom Penny that he would likely have disabilities. What wasn’t clear to Penny at the time was that she was entering a new world, that of a parent of a child with disabilities, a world in which she would have to fight constantly for her child to have the most basic of rights, a world in which deeply held negative cultural assumptions concerning disability would influence every aspect of her son’s life. She and Joe had entered the world of ableist assumptions.

Penny remembers an event that made it clear that she had entered a new world of lowered expectations. She recalls her first visit with a social worker

from a preschool program for kids with disabilities. This person, though empathetic and supportive, made it clear to Penny that she could not have the same dreams and aspirations for Joe that she had for her seven nondisabled children. As Penny explains, “She was aghast that I expected that Joe would one day be employed” (Ford, 1993, p. 2). Another event added further clarification. At a workshop for parents of disabled kids, Penny was told that she had to go through a period of mourning the arrival of her disabled child. Deeply insulted, Penny’s response was, “I have lost a child at birth and I have had a disabled child. I know the difference. My son is a gift not a tragedy” (p. 1). Penny was quickly developing the view, held by most disability advocates, that while disability is not a tragedy, society’s response to disability can have tragic consequences for those who have disabilities.

Penny had yet to benefit from the narratives of disability activists such as former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education Judy Heumann. Throughout her eight-year tenure during the Clinton administration, Heumann emphasized that “disability only becomes a tragedy for me when society fails to provide the things we need to lead our lives — job opportunities or barrier free buildings” (Shapiro, 1994, p. 20). But Penny was beginning to write her own narrative, joining legions of other like-minded activists seeking to fundamentally change the world of ableist assumptions (Ford, 1993).

Penny’s early instinctual reaction to the negative assumptions held by many of the service providers she encountered led her to seek the advice of adults with disabilities. She recalls becoming friendly with an employee of the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights (OCR), a woman who had been disabled since childhood due to a form of muscular dystrophy. As a child, when it became apparent she was disabled, she was removed from the school she was attending and moved to a separate and, in her view, inferior school. She warned Penny against going along with prevailing practices based on low expectations. Penny recalls her counsel: “Don’t assume he has the same educational rights as every other child. You’re going to have to fight for that” (Ford, 1993, p. 3). This woman helped Penny understand that federal law, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1971, prohibited discrimination against her son, and that this law, along with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), supported Penny’s desire for a quality education for Joe.<sup>1</sup> However, even though these laws were strong, existing practices were often difficult to change, due to deeply held negative cultural assumptions about disability. By the time Joe was four, Penny had filed a com-

<sup>1</sup> Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was the first federal law that guaranteed education to all disabled children by prohibiting discrimination against the disabled by any institution that received federal funds. Therefore, given the fact that public schools accepted federal money, they were covered under the act. IDEA, originally PL 94-142, the Education for all Handicapped Children Act (EHA), passed shortly after Section 504 in 1975. PL 94-142 provided funds to states to assist in the education of the disabled, along with significant regulatory requirements. All states eventually chose to accept this money and therefore are subject to IDEA’s regulatory requirements.

plaint against the Chicago Public Schools with OCR seeking Joe's placement in a regular school and not in the special school into which the school system wanted to place him. She had begun the journey to secure an appropriate education for her son.

In this article, I examine how ableist assumptions influence the education of children with disabilities and how these assumptions undermine the educational attainment of these children. I ground this discussion within the context of standards-based reform and the contemporary disability rights movement. This piece is based on the relevant research, the narratives of individuals with disabilities and their parents, and my thirty years of experience in the field of education.

### Ableism and Schooling

The various definitions of ableism in the literature share common origins that are rooted in the discrimination and oppression that many disabled people experience in society (Overboe, 1999; Weeber, 1999). Laura Rauscher and Mary McClintock (1996) define ableism as "a pervasive system of discrimination and exclusion that oppresses people who have mental, emotional and physical disabilities. . . . Deeply rooted beliefs about health, productivity, beauty, and the value of human life, perpetuated by the public and private media, combine to create an environment that is often hostile to those whose physical, mental, cognitive, and sensory abilities . . . fall out of the scope of what is currently defined as socially acceptable" (p. 198). Black disability activist and talk-show host Greg Smith captures the essence of definitions of ableism in his article "The Brother in the Wheelchair." "I've faced unintentional discrimination, and it's just as damaging as racism. . . . It's called ableism, the devaluation and disregard of people with disabilities" (Smith, 2001, p. 162).

Applied to schooling and child development, ableist preferences become particularly apparent. From an ableist perspective, the devaluation of disability results in societal attitudes that uncritically assert that it is better for a child to walk than roll, speak than sign, read print than read Braille, spell independently than use a spell-check, and hang out with nondisabled kids as opposed to other disabled kids, etc. In short, in the eyes of many educators and society, it is preferable for disabled students to do things in the same manner as nondisabled kids.

Certainly, given a world that has not been designed with the disabled in mind, being able to perform in a manner that is similar to that of nondisabled children gives disabled children distinct advantages. If efficient ambulation is possible, a child who has received the help he needs to walk is at an advantage in a barrier-filled world. Similarly, a child with a mild hearing loss who has been given the amplification and speech therapy she needs may have little difficulty functioning in a regular classroom.

However, ableist assumptions become dysfunctional when the educational and developmental services provided to disabled children focus inordinately on the characteristics of their disability to the exclusion of all else, when changing disability becomes the overriding focus of service providers and, at times, parents. Narratives of disabled people and their parents are replete with examples of how changing disability became the focus of their young lives and how such a focus denied them the opportunities taken for granted by nondisabled people. These narratives speak to the deep cultural prejudices against disability that they had to endure from an early age — that disability was negative and tragic and that “overcoming” disability was the only valued result (Ferguson & Asch, 1989; Rousso, 1984).

In *No Pity*, his history of the disability civil rights movement, Joseph Shapiro (1994) chronicles the dominant cultural responses to disability. One model is exemplified by the poster children of the muscular dystrophy telethon, which he refers to as “Tiny Tims” — “the idea that disabled people are childlike, dependent, and in need of charity and pity” (p. 14). Cyndi Jones, a disability activist and former poster child, argues that “the poster child says it’s not okay to be disabled . . . but it says if you just donate money the disabled child will go away” (p. 14). Marilyn Phillips, a professor at Morgan State University who has studied images of poster children, recalls that the image of the valiant “crippled” child on crutches learning to walk emerged in the mid-1950s. She argues that children like herself who had polio before a vaccine was developed were an affront to the postwar faith in medical technology. Disabled children were now “damaged goods” who had to try harder to deserve charity and respect (p. 15).

According to Shapiro (1994), the belief that disability could be overcome led to the rise of the other dominant image of disability: the inspirational disabled person, or the “supercrip.” Shapiro argues that this image is deeply moving to many nondisabled people and the press, but is widely regarded as oppressive to most disabled people. The extensive press coverage of a blind man who recently climbed Mt. Everest is a good example of the supercrip image. Cyndi Jones argues that, like the image of the poster child, this image implies that a disabled person is presumed deserving of pity — instead of respect — until the person proves capable of overcoming disability through extraordinary feats (Shapiro, 1994). Both of these dominant stereotypes of disability, “Tiny Tims” and “supercrips,” have at their core ableist perspectives, the failure to accept and value disabled people as they are.

I contend that negative cultural assumptions about disability continue to have a negative influence on the education of children with disabilities. The pervasiveness of ableist assumptions in the education of these children not only reinforces prevailing prejudices against disability but may very well contribute to low levels of educational attainment and employment. School time spent devoted to activities associated with changing disability may take away

from the time needed to learn academic material. In addition, the ingrained prejudice against performing activities in ways that might be more efficient for disabled people but that are different from how nondisabled perform them, such as reading Braille or using sign language, may add to educational deficits. There is considerable emerging evidence that unquestioned ableist assumptions are handicapping disabled children and are a cause of educational inequities.

I will illustrate how ableist assumptions are having a profound and negative impact on the education of children with disabilities using issues around the education of three groups, the deaf, the blind, and students with the learning disability dyslexia. I will weave in Joe and Penny's experiences, as well as my own.

### The Education of the Deaf

The education of deaf children provides a compelling example of ableism in action. Unlike some disability populations, such as students with significant levels of cognitive disability, educational programs for deaf children have existed in the United States for over 150 years. Therefore, there is significant history and research to draw on that should guide our efforts to improve education for the deaf.<sup>2</sup>

Educators who were deaf themselves heavily influenced some of the earliest educational programs for deaf children. Thomas Gallaudet, an early advocate for educating the deaf, visited Europe in 1816 seeking educational models to bring back to the United States. While in Europe, he met a talented young deaf teacher, Laurent Clerc. Together they opened the American Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1817. The teachers were fluent signers and most were deaf themselves. By using American Sign Language (ASL), the school demonstrated that literacy could be raised impressively among the deaf (Baynton, 1996). In her landmark study of the impact of a high percentage of deaf people living in a Martha's Vineyard community in the 1800s, Nora Groce (1985) found that graduates of the Hartford School had achieved higher levels of literacy than many of their hearing neighbors. Unlike the deaf, many hearing people had left school early to fish or farm. Some of the less educated hearing people would bring documents to their deaf neighbors to explain. Deafness was so common on the island that most hearing people learned to sign. As a result of their rela-

<sup>2</sup> I have chosen not to address the issue of cochlear implants in this article due to the complexity of the issue and the relative newness and rapidly changing nature of these devices. Though there is much controversy surrounding these devices, there is evidence that they can increase language development in deaf children. However, more research is needed to determine whether these devices can, by themselves, substitute for the development of language that can occur when deaf children are given access to American Sign Language (ASL) from birth. For this reason, some cochlear implant advocates recommend that ASL be taught to these children as well (Zwiebel, 1987).

tively high education levels, deaf people held many positions of leadership in the community.

Despite these promising early results, the education of deaf children was severely set back by oralism in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Spurred on by the establishment of the Clarke School for the Deaf and by the advocacy of Samuel Gridley Howe, the founder of the Perkins Institute for the Blind, and of Horace Mann, the oralist methodology claimed success in educating deaf children by teaching them to lip-read and speak. This methodology prohibited the use of manual language, as proponents felt that signing decreased the motivation to learn to speak. Another prominent advocate of the methodology was Alexander Graham Bell, who was, ironically, married to a deaf woman. Bell was a staunch supporter of oralism and sought to have sign language banned from programs for the deaf. In a speech delivered to the National Academy of Sciences in 1883, he further advocated for the enactment of eugenics laws to forbid the “intermarriage of deaf mutes” (Baynton, 1996). As Shapiro (1994) points out:

Oralism fit well with the conformist spirit of the times. The Victorian culture was unsparing toward minority culture. . . . If one did not have speech then one did not have language and, went the thinking that dated back to Aristotle, was presumably unable to reason. To remain silent then was to be prey to the devil. All this suggested that deafness was a sickness, something that needed to be cured. Oralism held out the hope of correction. (p. 90)

The influence of Bell and other oralist advocates would prove to be surprisingly enduring, even to this day. This remains true in the education of deaf children as an enduring legacy of ableism. For many, the deaf “supercrip” is the deaf person who can read lips and speak, despite the fact that few deaf people master oralism (Jacobs, 1989; Lane, 1995). Those who have done so tend to be postlingually deaf, people who became deaf after they had developed language (Jacobs, 1989). Leo Jacobs, a deaf educator, compares lip-reading with breaking eighty in golf or painting a masterpiece, since under the best of circumstances only 30 percent of speech can be read from lip movements (Jacobs, 1989).

The grip of oralism on the education of deaf children started to break in the 1960s, when research began to reveal the benefits of manual communication (Stuckless & Birch, 1966). Many educators of the deaf began experimenting with new communication methodologies, such as total communication, which involved a combination of speech and signed English. Another methodology, cued speech, employed handshapes formed near the mouth to aid lip-reading. Though many viewed these innovations as progress, neither of these methodologies involved ASL in the way that the Hartford School did a century before. Thus, oralism continues to have a negative impact on the education of deaf children as an enduring legacy of ableism.



In the 1970s, important research in linguistics confirmed what many deaf people already knew: that ASL was a language with its own syntax and grammar, and that manual language developed naturally in deaf children similarly to the way oral language developed in hearing children. Timothy Reagan (1985), in his landmark piece in the *Harvard Educational Review*, stated, “ASL’s linguistic features are now understood, at least in fairly broad outline. It is a language in every sense of the word, relying on visual, rather than auditory, encoding and decoding. ASL has a complex, rule-governed phonology, syntax, and morphology” (p. 270).

Other important research has followed that further supports ASL as the foundation for language development and educational attainment for deaf children. A particularly important line of research involves deaf children whose parents are also deaf. These children, about one in nine deaf children, provide an ideal “natural experiment” to test assumptions about language development and to investigate the potential negative impact of ableist assumptions. Most deaf parents communicate with their infants and toddlers in their natural language, ASL. A number of studies have revealed that these children display superior language development and thus obtain higher scores on intelligence measures than deaf children of hearing parents (Courtin, 2000; Sisco & Anderson, 1980; Zwiebel, 1987). Similar findings have been reported in studies conducted on deaf children of deaf families in Denmark, Israel, and Greece (Lane, 1995).

Further, it is unlikely that deaf parents carry with them the negative cultural views of people who are deaf. The birth of a deaf baby to deaf parents is not a tragedy to be grieved, but rather a celebrated event. I have deaf friends who, upon learning they are about to become parents, have told me that they would prefer that their child be deaf.

Studies of deaf children whose parents are deaf are revealing. These children start school with vocabularies comparable to their hearing peers and have higher levels of educational and occupational success than most deaf children of hearing parents (Lane, 1995). Comparing students entering school with high levels of ASL ability with those who have lower levels, Michael Prinz and Philip Strong (1998) found that those with high ASL ability achieved higher levels of literacy, even when IQ is held constant. The evidence supporting the need to develop manual language in deaf children is so compelling that a National Academy of Sciences study concluded, “Parents and preschool teachers can enhance deaf children’s communicative and reading ability growth by beginning early to communicate with these children through finger spelling and manual signing” (Snow, 1998, p. 164).

This research underscores the point that language is the fundamental cornerstone upon which educational achievement is built for all children. Unless children have well-developed language before learning to read, they are unlikely to achieve high levels of literacy (Snow, 1998). Deaf children are no

different from their hearing counterparts in this regard. However, the optimal way for these children to learn language is different because they cannot hear. It seems clear that deaf children should be encouraged to learn ASL from infancy, and that educational programs should recognize that a well-developed ability in ASL is a strength in deaf children upon which their future progress rests. The continued adherence to the ableist assumption that it is better for deaf children to lip-read and speak than to learn sign language will surely guarantee poor educational results for this population.

Though history and recent research converge to provide clear evidence that recognizing the importance of developing manual language in deaf children is the foundation for literacy and for later educational and occupational success, educational practices often do not reflect these findings. Though deaf infants and toddlers and their families are entitled to early intervention and special education services from birth, many deaf children of hearing parents start school with vocabularies of fewer than fifty words (Shapiro, 1994). This is likely due to the lack of emphasis on the development of ASL skills in their preschool programs or at home. Further, many of the school programs these children attend do not recognize the importance of developing and using manual language. In short, many programs still reflect ableist assumptions about the deaf.

The ultimate institutionalization of ableist assumptions can be seen in a U.S. Supreme Court interpretation of IDEA in the case of *Rowley v. Board of Education of the Gloversville Enlarged City School* (1993). The Court decided that a deaf girl who was integrated into a regular class was not entitled to a sign language interpreter because she was “receiving benefit” — that is, she was passing. This decision in effect says that it was acceptable for this deaf child to understand only some of what the teacher was saying. Clearly, this child was not given the same access to educational opportunity afforded hearing children. Would parents of hearing children tolerate such a standard being applied to their children’s education? School board meetings would be full of parents demanding change. However, deaf children are few in number and therefore unlikely to sway a school board. In my view, the Court failed to serve its role of protecting a minority, a deaf student, from the rule of the majority, the school board.

Though the deaf community may have lost in court under *Rowley*, it has been using its political power to advocate for significant changes in educational programs for deaf children. Deaf children’s low level of educational attainment has been the rallying point, and federal intervention has been sought. It is noteworthy that, though there has been a significant deaf intellectual community in the United States since the founding of Gallaudet University in 1864, deaf people have not had a sufficiently powerful influence on policymaking involving their own education. This was brought into sharp relief during the naming of a new president for Gallaudet in 1988. When two



deaf applicants were passed over for a hearing candidate, the campus erupted in protest and the university was closed down (Shapiro, 1994). The deaf student body could not accept the continuation of 124 years of hearing presidents at the premier institution for the deaf. After a well-organized protest with appeals to both the U.S. Congress and the president of the United States, a deaf individual, I. King Jordan, was named president.

Another example of the increased role of deaf adults in policymaking occurred in 1990 with the issuance of the Deaf Education Policy Guidance by the deaf Assistant Secretary of Education Robert Davilla. This document emphasizes the importance of language development and communication in the education of deaf children. When Judy Heumann became assistant secretary in 1993, she and I reissued the guidance at the urging of the deaf community. When IDEA was reauthorized in 1997, the deaf community sought and achieved some significant changes to IDEA that further supported the centrality of language development and communication in the education of deaf children. IDEA now requires that when an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) is developed for a deaf child, the child's communication needs must be addressed. Some have interpreted these changes in the law (and I would agree) as challenging the *Rowley* interpretation of IDEA and opening the way for a greater use of bilingual approaches to the education of deaf children (Pittman & Huefner, 2001).

The foundation for the improvement of educational results for deaf children therefore lies in the rejection of the ableist assumptions that surround their education. Deaf children can achieve at comparable levels to their hearing peers, not by ill-conceived attempts to minimize deafness but by recognizing that deaf children optimally develop language manually and that a high level of ASL ability can serve as a basis for future educational progress. This is not to say that lip-reading is not an important adaptive skill for deaf people in a hearing world; it is. However, as a method of language acquisition it is inefficient and ineffective for large numbers of deaf children. By allowing deaf children to be deaf and by building on their inherent strengths through the development of manual language, they will ultimately (and, some might think, paradoxically) be better able to compete in a hearing world.

### The Education of Blind and Visually Impaired Children

The bias of schools against Braille and their failure to teach it to blind and visually impaired students is another example of how ableist assumptions influence educational programs. In 1829, Louis Braille invented Braille, a system of raised dots that enabled blind people to read. Yet, many blind and significantly visually impaired students are not benefiting from this old technology (Johnson, 1996). Though some attribute this to the rise of newer

technologies such as taped books and voice synthesizers that may be making Braille obsolete (Shapiro, 1994), I believe the failure to teach blind children Braille is another example of ableism. Reading Braille is a disability-specific method of reading that many nondisabled people view as unacceptable, preferring that children with very low vision read print even if they are inefficient readers due to their vision disabilities, and that totally blind children listen to tapes. As one young person who has a significant vision disability said to me recently, "I was taught to read print, not Braille, because everyone felt it would make me more like sighted people." This, despite the fact that reading print is difficult and exhausting for her.

The National Federation of the Blind (NFB), an advocacy organization of blind people, has taken a strong position favoring the teaching of Braille to blind children and those with other vision impairments:

There's no substitute for Braille in taking notes, reading a speech, looking up words in a dictionary, studying a complicated text, or just having the fun of reading for yourself. Talk of forcing blind children to learn Braille shows the prejudice. Nobody talks of forcing sighted children to learn print. It is taken for granted as a right, a necessary part of education; so it should be with Braille and blind children. (National Federation of the Blind, n.d.)

The NFB took action on this issue in the late 1980s by advocating for the passage of "Braille bills" by state legislatures throughout the country. These bills have sought to promote the teaching of Braille.

Though some totally blind students are not learning Braille, the controversy around Braille often revolves around students with limited vision. Some students with vision impairments can learn to read print or can read print with accommodations such as large print. If these students have stable, nonprogressive vision conditions and can learn to read print efficiently, they should. However, when educators and parents insist that vision-impaired children read print to the exclusion of reading Braille, many visually impaired children remain functionally illiterate.

Another controversy regarding the education of blind children centers on whether schools are required to provide orientation and mobility services (O&M) to blind students under related services provisions of IDEA. O&M teachers teach blind students how to get around using canes and other means. The goal of these services is to increase independence. It seems logical that, if the goal of public education is to prepare students to function in the world, O&M would be a required component of the educational program of blind children. Though this seems logical, advocates for the blind complained to me when I worked as the director of the Office of Special Education Programs for the U.S. Department of Education that they were having difficulty securing these services because the law at this time did not specifically name the service. Some have argued that school districts objected to providing these services due to cost, and this argument may have some

merit. However, advocates pointed out that some of the same districts had hired full-time aides to assist blind students, an expensive and, in the eyes of many disability activists, potentially harmful practice (Ferguson & Ashe, 1989). Many advocates believe the schools would have been better off teaching these kids to navigate on their own using O&M techniques.

In my view, the controversy around the provision of O&M raises broader questions about ableism in education. I am becoming increasingly concerned with the way I see school districts, and at times parents, respond to the needs of students with significant disability by assigning them a full-time aide. Adrian Ashe, a blind woman who teaches at Wellesley College, cautions, “An aide is not (or at least should not be) a chaperone, an administrative spy, a surrogate parent, or a personal servant. Any such role turns the aide into a shield or a barrier between the disabled student and his or her nondisabled peers” (Ferguson & Ashe, 1989, p. 129).

These concerns are compounded when aides take the place of teachers and compromise the quality of instruction. One of my graduate students at the Harvard Graduate School of Education spent a semester observing a child with significant disabilities who was included in general education classes with the support of a full-time aide. As a highly experienced and skilled special educator, she was deeply concerned that the middle school student had not learned to read. After careful observation, she concluded that he had not been *taught* to read; instead, the aide viewed it as his job to read the material to the boy. Therefore, despite the fact that, according to her assessment, he had normal receptive language and could fully understand language, and was in a regular classroom where significant resources were being spent on his education, this boy was being deprived of the opportunity to learn to read.

Assigning full-time aides to children with disabilities rather than, as has been the case with blind children, teaching them to get around independently through O&M reflects, in my view, deep cultural prejudices about significant disabilities. That is, it suggests that people with significant disabilities are weak and incapable of doing things on their own. The reaction of many educators to the integration of significantly disabled students into typical schools and classrooms is to demand full-time aides. For example, when Penny Ford prevailed in her complaint with the OCR to have Joe attend a regular kindergarten, the “negotiated agreement” between the school and the Chicago Board of Education was to provide Joe with a full-time aide. Penny recalls her discomfort with the agreement: “I found it repugnant that my son’s rights were a matter of negotiation. He didn’t need an aide. All he needed was for someone to flip pages for him. Another kid could do that! He already knew how to read. He also needed some help in the bathroom. That’s not a full-time job” (P. Ford, personal communication, October 2001). Penny’s initial discomfort was prescient. When Joe showed up for

school on the first day, he was denied entrance to the classroom because the aide had not cleared all the personnel hurdles. Already the object of two years of struggle over his entrance into the school attended by his sisters and friends, Joe Ford spent the first day of first grade in the school office, not in the classroom. It seemed the school could not conceive of approaching his education directly without the intermediary of a paraprofessional.

Like the deaf community, the blind community has sought action by the federal government to address the shortcomings of the educational system. When the Clinton administration took office in 1993, representatives of the blind community successfully sought the issuance of a guidance similar to that issued concerning the education of deaf children. This guidance emphasized the importance of specialized services such as O&M and supported Braille instruction. When IDEA was reauthorized in 1997, a requirement was added to mandate that when teams meet to develop IEPs for blind and visually impaired students, Braille must be considered. Further, the reauthorized law added O&M as related services.<sup>3</sup> Hopefully, these specific legal requirements will begin to change the ableist practices that have compromised the education of blind and visually impaired children.

### The Education of Students with Learning Disabilities

Blindness, deafness, and significant physical disability are relatively rare; their combined incidence is less than 1 percent of the total population of school-aged children (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). On the other hand, students with learning disabilities (LD) are common, comprising about 5 percent of children. Although definitional arguments concerning the identification of these children abound (Lyon et al., 2001), educators have long recognized the phenomenon of children who seem intellectually able but experience marked difficulty learning to read. This condition, commonly known as dyslexia, is by far the most frequent form of learning disability, affecting about 80 percent of the learning disability population (Lyon et al., 2001). Given its prevalence, one might think that these children would be less likely to be subjected to inappropriate ableist practices. However, the available evidence shows that these children are subjected to inappropriate educational approaches at an alarming level.<sup>4</sup>

The National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) investigated the educational results of a large sample of students with disabilities who attended

<sup>3</sup> The IDEA mandates that educational decisions regarding disabled children be made by an appropriate team of educators and the parent. This meeting results in an IEP that delineates the child's program and services.

<sup>4</sup> For the purpose of this article, I use the terms *learning disability* (LD) and *dyslexia* interchangeably for the following reasons. First, though the population of students with learning disabilities is diverse, a high percentage of children with learning disabilities have marked reading problems. Second, much of the research on LD is not categorized by type of LD. Finally, the way schools respond to dyslexia, in my view, is similar to the way they respond to other types of LD.

high schools in the mid-1980s. This study, the largest and most thorough of its kind, paints a less than satisfactory picture (Wagner, Blackorby, Cameto, & Newman, 1993). The NLTS, along with other data such as the performance of students with disabilities on statewide assessments and more recent research, confirms that the educational attainment levels of students with learning disabilities is less than adequate. Students with learning disabilities drop out of school at relatively high rates — about twice that of nondisabled students (Wagner et al., 1993). These students also participate in higher education in relatively small numbers. NLTS also documents that relatively large numbers of these students are not taking challenging academic subjects. Given these findings, it might not be surprising that more recent data indicates that students with learning disabilities fail statewide assessments at alarming rates (Katzman, 2001).

I believe the reasons for the lack of acceptable educational outcomes for students with learning disabilities are complex. The fact that dyslexia has as its main symptomatology the failure of children to learn to read, a primary goal of education for all students, and that dyslexic children are not the only children who struggle with reading means that explanations for this failure go to the very structure of schooling. Therefore, using an ableist lens alone is inadequate. Some students' failure to learn to read may be due to poor instruction, thus compounding the impact of disability. However, there is evidence that ableist assumptions may have a particularly negative influence on the education of those children who struggle the most with learning to read — dyslexic children.

The failure of students to learn to read has been of concern to educators and the general public for some time, therefore, significant resources have been directed to the study of reading failure. In fact, early reading may be the most researched area of education. As schools implement standards-based reforms, educators are increasingly looking to research to help guide schools in improving their performance. To meet this need, the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) contracted with the National Research Council (NRC) of the National Academy of Science to conduct a research synthesis in the area of early reading. The resulting book, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow, 1998), has become the biggest seller at the NRC. As one party involved in the initial study design, the DOE insisted that the synthesis employ an inclusive design. The DOE considered this important because any inquiry into disabled children's failure to learn to read must be viewed in the overall context of how children learn to read. Conversely, given the relatively large number of students who have disabilities, the failure to address the needs of disabled students in a study of this magnitude would render the study noncomprehensive.<sup>5</sup> This study, therefore, contains

<sup>5</sup> More than 11 percent of students age six to seventeen received special education services during the 1998–1999 school year (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

a wealth of information about those students who have the most difficulty learning to read, including those likely to be dyslexic. Along with this study, more recent work published by researchers funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) provides a converging picture of how schools handle young students with dyslexia. Adding the data from NLTS and other sources, the view through the ableist lens is most revealing.

One example of how ableist assumptions may be impeding the effective education of children with disabilities has to do with the reluctance to intervene on behalf of children experiencing marked difficulty with learning to read. Some of this reluctance may be due to a lack of appropriate options or inadequate teacher preparation (Lyon et al., 2001). However, some of the inaction may be due to the desire of schools not to label children, which undoubtedly reflects the deep stigma associated with disability in our culture. The mere label of disability carries such negative connotations that many educators and some parents seek to avoid it. Another reason that some may seek to avoid labeling is the fact that labeling may result in inferior special education placements. These placements often reflect the ableist notion that disabled children should not be challenged. Thus, some educators and parents justifiably avoid such placements. Finally, the federal definition of learning disability, which requires that a child exhibit a discrepancy between intelligence (IQ) and performance, may also inhibit early intervention. That is, the child must first fail to learn the material that his intelligence would indicate he should be able to learn before he can establish eligibility for special education services. From my perspective, the ethics of allowing young children to fail at learning to read without providing intensive help is questionable for all children — disabled and nondisabled.

The dilemma parents and educators face around the issue of labeling need not exist if schools employ research-based practices and improve their special education programs. The NIH has conducted an extensive set of studies using large data sets that examine the nature of early reading failure. These studies have documented that relatively large numbers of students experience significant difficulty with initial reading. There is evidence that of the 12 to 18 percent of the K–1 student population that has the most difficulty learning to read, research-based interventions are effective with 70 percent (Lyon et al., 2001). Though not all students fully benefited from these interventions, they can serve to identify those students who are highly likely to need more extensive help — that is, those who may have a disability that will require accommodations and support throughout their schooling. Once it is clear that a child has not responded to powerful interventions and is still struggling with reading, that child should get the protections of the IDEA.

Though early intervention for students experiencing reading difficulty will help identify students who may have LD, educators need to ensure that once children are identified they receive the types of services and supports



that will maximize their educational attainment. We must seek to remove the stigma associated with disability labels. Further, as with their peers who have other disabilities, ableist practices are evident in current practices with students with learning disabilities. The education of these children tends to be inordinately oriented toward the presenting characteristics of the disability and suffers from low expectations.

Most of these children are placed for part of the day in special education resource rooms and part of the day in regular classes. Some are placed in regular classes all day. For large numbers of these students, neither regular nor special class placements seems to be meeting their needs. Research looking at the type of instruction LD students experience in special classes raises serious issues. Sharon Vaughn and her colleagues (2000) studied elementary schoolchildren with LD assigned to special classes and found that their instruction was characterized by large multi-aged groups and was largely non-differentiated. Other studies have found that special education placement results in students reading less (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1989).

Some have responded to the failure of certain special education placements with a call for full inclusion in general education classes. However, research has raised questions concerning mainstream placements as well. NLTS documented that a large number of students with LD who were placed in general education classrooms did not receive accommodations or support. Such students were more likely to fail and drop out of school. Another more recent study documented that 80 percent of the poorest readers placed in regular classrooms made no progress over an entire academic year (Klinger et al., cited in Lyon et al., 2001).

Students with dyslexia *can* learn to read. However, they need more intensive help to do so, and even with the best approaches they are likely to experience significant difficulty with reading, writing, and spelling throughout their schooling. Torgesen (2000) and his colleagues have demonstrated impressive results with intensive intervention for severely disabled readers in grades three through five over an eight-week period. However, even though these students experienced gains in certain reading skills, they remained very slow readers. The picture that emerges from the research on remediation after grade two shows that reading improvement can continue but that those who have the most difficulty reading are likely to continue to have these problems and that their problems compound. Children with poor reading skills avoid reading and thus build up enormous educational deficits (Lyon et al., 2001). Given the centrality of reading to most instruction, severe reading problems can affect all areas of students' curricular attainment.

The research discussed thus far indicates several clear implications for educational practice. First, there is a population of children who are likely to experience significant difficulty with reading even with the best interven-

tions. *Dyslexia is clearly a disabling condition.* Second, reading improvement for these students can continue to occur throughout their schooling *if that intervention is sufficiently intensive and appropriate.* Third, those with the most severe problems in reading print are likely to experience increasing difficulty in school as the cumulative effects of reading deficiency become apparent. Fourth, significant numbers of these students are receiving inappropriate educational assistance in terms of both the interventions they receive and their access to the curriculum.

Though research strongly indicates that students with LD need more intensive services in reading than their nondisabled peers and that they should receive this assistance throughout their schooling, focusing their special education program solely on learning to read is not appropriate. For students with LD, this reflects the ableist assumption that special education's role should be to change disabilities even if that is not fully possible. These children must also have access to the rest of the curriculum with appropriate accommodations and supports. Therefore, educators planning programs for students with LD must strategize around how these students will most efficiently access the curriculum, given that they are typically laborious readers. Though this seems like common sense, there is significant evidence that large numbers of students with LD are not getting sufficient accommodations, services, and supports to give them equal opportunity to benefit from the curriculum.

As previously cited, NLTS documented that many students with LD receive relatively low levels of service and do not receive accommodations and supports in general education classes. Other research on IEPs has shown that these documents typically focus on discrete skills and are not connected to the overall curriculum (U.S. Department of Education, 1995). Should it be a surprise to anyone that so many of these children are achieving at such low levels?

Again, I believe that ableism at least partially explains our failure to better educate those with LD. First, as is the case with other disabilities, the programs for these students often focus on the characteristics of their disability, their reading deficiencies, to the exclusion of their total educational needs. Like the deaf who must learn to lip-read and speak before they can access the curriculum, it appears that many believe that those with LD must learn to read at grade level before they can access other subjects. This approach clearly magnifies the negative educational impact of the disability. This situation was brought home to me when I was associate superintendent of schools in Chicago in 1992. A general education teacher asked to meet with me concerning students with LD in her class. She told me that she was also a parent of a child with LD and that she knew a good deal about the disability. She went on to say that she had a number of students in her classes with LD who were failing and that she had not been seen by anyone from the special education department in her school. Later a staff member met with special edu-

cation staff in the school who informed her that it was not their job to meet with the general education teachers. They viewed their responsibility as only working on the goals and objectives in the IEPs, which were largely discreet skills centered on reading and writing. Therefore, these students were being expected to handle text four and five grade levels above their reading level without accommodation. No wonder they were failing.

Can students with LD access curriculum above their reading level? Of course they can. However, for many of these students, that access cannot be dependent on their ability to read print or write at grade level. Fortunately, there are accommodations available that can help students with LD to access text written above their reading level. Taped books have been available to blind students for many years and are increasingly used by people with dyslexia. Recordings for the blind recently changed its name to Recordings for the Blind and Dyslexic to reflect the changing demand for their services. Also, as more text is digitized, computers will be able to read text using screen readers. Other techniques such as increasing the ability of students to handle text through pre-teaching multisyllabic and technical words can greatly increase students' ability to handle difficult texts. Word processing and spell-checks can greatly increase the ability of students with LD to produce writing assignments.

Though there are effective ways by which students with LD can access the general education curriculum, schools may have to modify some deeply held beliefs about what constitutes acceptable student performance in order for students with LD to benefit from these technologies. In many places, students are required to handle grade-level or higher text in order to be mainstreamed into regular classes. Taped books are not available or are not allowed. Still other schools do not allow students to use computers when taking exams, thus greatly diminishing some students' ability to produce acceptable written work. Though some may defend this rigidity as a means to maintain standards, for students with LD this posture will likely lead to lower educational attainment.

The late disabilities advocate Ed Roberts had polio as a child, which left him with significant physical disabilities, including the need for an iron lung. He attended school from home in the 1960s with the assistance of a telephone link. When it was time for graduation, the school board was going to deny him a diploma because he had failed to meet the physical education requirement. His parents protested and Ed eventually graduated (Shapiro, 1994). It would be difficult to imagine that happening today, given disability law and improved societal attitudes toward disability. Yet, reflecting widespread ableist assumptions, students with LD are routinely required to read print at grade level to access educational opportunities. As the disability movement has demonstrated over and over, there is more than one way to walk, talk, paint, read, and write. Assuming otherwise is the root of fundamental inequities.

## Students with Disabilities and Standards-Based Reform

A disability advocate recently sought my advice on the placement of an eight-year-old student with disabilities. The boy has various communication and motor disabilities due to brain damage at birth. He has received excellent early intervention and preschool services. His speech, though labored, is easily understood and his vocabulary approximates that of peers his age. He has some difficulties in coordination, fine motor skills, and behavior, but is not significantly cognitively impaired. Unfortunately, his current school placement is woefully inadequate. At his most recent IEP meeting, his mother asked what he was learning in science. She wanted to make sure he was being prepared to take the statewide assessment in grade four. The special education teacher responded, "We're not doing science. We're concentrating on fine motor development." Again, like too many children with disabilities, his educational program concentrates inordinately on the characteristics of his disability at the expense of access to the curriculum.

This example illustrates why many disability advocates view standards-based educational reforms as holding great promise to help eradicate the most insidious ableist assumption: that people with disabilities are not intellectually capable. The education of students with disabilities has been plagued by low expectations, which is why many in the disability community have sought to have students included in state and national accountability systems (Thurlow, 2000). The hope is that by including students in statewide assessments, more attention will be paid to assuring that these students receive quality programs (McDonnell, McLaughlin, & Morrison, 1997). In 1997, advocates were successful in getting IDEA amended to require students with disabilities to be included in statewide assessments.

It is noteworthy that, before this federal requirement, most states excluded most students with disabilities from these important accountability systems (Thurlow, 2000) — this at a time when most states were implementing various forms of standards-based reform. A number of explanations may address this exclusion. It is possible that disabled students were viewed as not capable of achieving standards. Another explanation might be that the performance of disabled students was not important to track. Both of these explanations clearly reflect ableist attitudes, that disabled students are either incapable or unimportant. Another explanation is that in high-stakes environments school districts may actually be placing more students in special education to avoid accountability (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1989). A more positive view might be that states simply did not know how to accommodate students with disabilities in assessments. There are many technical issues involved in the inclusion of students with disabilities, especially those who receive accommodations (Koretz & Hamilton, 2000). Though the truth probably lies somewhere among these views, the exclusion of students with disabilities from state and local assessment systems may result in their exclu-

sion from the curriculum and thus reinforce the status quo of low expectations, leaving students with disabilities seriously undereducated. Fortunately, this exclusion is now illegal.

Though there was widespread exclusion of students with disabilities from statewide accountability systems before the passage of the 1997 amendments to IDEA, some states had begun to implement inclusive policies prior to the federal requirement. These states provide an interesting window on the impact of these policies. There is some emerging evidence that indicates that inclusion in statewide assessment may be improving the educational opportunities of students with disabilities.

In New York State, where an emphasis on including students with disabilities in the Regents Exam began in 1998, the number of students passing this high-level test has greatly increased. Comparing data from 1997 and 2000 shows dramatic change. In 1997, only 4,419 students with disabilities took the Regents English Exam, with 3,414 passing. Three years later, over twice as many disabled students *passed* the test as had taken it in 1997. In 2000, 13,528 took the test and 9,514 passed (New York State Department of Education, 2001). Prior to this inclusionary push, some school districts in the state did not have *one* student with disabilities taking the test. It appears that in these school districts, the view was indeed ableist; no child with disabilities was viewed as capable of passing this test. The impact of the exclusion of students with disabilities from the Regents over the years was undoubtedly significant. Important benefits can result from passing the Regents, from scholarships to college admissions. Further, the widespread exclusion from the Regents prior to 1997 probably meant that thousands of students with disabilities did not take higher level high school courses.

In Maryland, where students with disabilities have been included in the state's basic-skills test, many districts have shown steady progress to the point where the vast majority of students with disabilities are passing the test. Maryland has years of disaggregated performance data. These data were used to help negotiate an agreement to end a longstanding class action suit concerning students with disabilities in Baltimore City. This agreement broke new ground in that it focused on educational outcomes (*Vaughn, G. et al., 2000*). The previous agreement, like many special education class action suits, had focused largely on processes (*Hehir & Gamm, 1999*). The previous agreement made no mention of academic performance in any area. Though the agreement went into effect in the 2000–2001 school year and thus it is too soon to evaluate its impact, the city's special education director speaks positively of how the agreement is focusing staff on teaching and learning (*G. Amos, personal communication, 2001*).

Though the inclusion of students with disabilities in statewide assessments shows great promise, the imposition of high-stakes consequences for students who do not perform well on these tests gives rise to serious concerns. This is particularly the case when state policy requires the passage of high-

level tests in order to receive a diploma or to move from grade to grade. Concerns range from technical issues involving construct validity to the impact of failure on students' persistence in school.

Given the nature of disability and the type of assessments most states employ, the inclusion of disabled students in statewide assessments is complicated. Many disabled students require accommodations specific to their disability, and issues of construct validity may arise out of the accommodations students receive (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1999; Koretz & Hamilton, 2000). For instance, a test that seeks to determine if a child can read print is invalidated if a test is read to the child. On the other hand, a math test may be invalid if it is not read to a child who is print-disabled because the child has no way to demonstrate the math she knows if she has to read print to do so. The issues of construct validity are complex and, given the relative lack of experience in including disabled students in large-scale assessments, significant research will be required before we can be confident that these assessments are accurately measuring what students know and are able to do (Koretz & Hamilton, 2000).

Though there are numerous unresolved technical issues involved in including students with disabilities in assessments, high-stakes decisions are being made that have the potential to deny students important opportunities such as promotion or graduation. Further, beyond the technical issues is the nature of the constructs themselves. A major concern is whether the constructs are sufficiently broad to enable disabled students to demonstrate what they know and are able to do. A case that came to my attention when I was working at the DOE illustrates this point. The case involved a student who had become blind during high school. Although he was beginning to learn Braille, he was using taped books as his main means of learning from print. The state policies required all students to pass a test to graduate. The issue was whether he could participate in the language arts test through a taped administration. One of the constructs to be evaluated by this test was the ability to read print. He could not read print because he could not see print. Of course he was not the only blind child in the state, and state policy allowed the state test to be administered in Braille. This boy, however, was not a proficient Braille reader because he was newly blind. The state decided to waive its policy that prohibited reading the language arts aloud as an allowable accommodation for this student.

This example goes to the heart of the issues of construct validity, accommodations, and ableist assumptions regarding acceptable performance modes. The fundamental question here is this: What is reading? The state had previously answered the question that reading was reading print or reading Braille. Extracting meaning from recorded text was not considered reading. Therefore, the statewide test was designed to measure these two modes of reading. Answering comprehension questions based on listening to re-



corded text would thus violate the construct validity of the test. However, significant numbers of disabled people use recorded text as their reading mode. These include people with a range of disabilities beyond blindness, including people who have dyslexia and people with certain types of cerebral palsy that make focusing and reading print exhausting and inefficient. Joe Ford, for example, uses taped books for this reason. Even though the use of recorded text is widespread, some states refuse to allow taped administration of language arts tests, thereby refusing to recognize the mode that many disabled people use to read. Applying this narrow definition of reading to high-stakes decisions may mean that large numbers of disabled students will be denied diplomas and thus future educational opportunity. Further, such a decision is likely to discourage the use of taped texts in schools, even though they may represent the most efficient means by which some students with disabilities gain access to the curriculum.

Even if states broadly define modes of performance and successfully deal with measurement issues around construct validity, another issue is arising in states that have high-level content/high-stakes assessment programs — that is, the problem of students who are incapable of passing the high-stakes tests due to the nature of their disability. This is particularly true of students with cognitive disabilities or mental retardation. Though it is important to have high expectations for all students, if states or local districts have diploma or promotion policies that assume the mastery of high levels of skill and knowledge, students with mental retardation, due to the pervasive nature of their significantly subaverage intellectual functioning, may be subject to inappropriate retention and will unlikely receive diplomas. Most in the field of special education would agree that keeping kids with mental retardation back because they have not achieved grade-level work is absurd and serves no useful purpose. Indeed, such a practice is likely to be detrimental if these children lose contact with their age-appropriate peers. The larger issue is whether these children will “graduate” and receive some form of diploma that recognizes their accomplishment in school, or drop out of school because they do not see the possibility of graduation. This is not an insignificant societal issue in that as many as 2 percent of children have some form of cognitive disability (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). Further, if these children receive high-quality services in school, they have a higher likelihood of being employed upon leaving school. Dropping out is associated with significantly poorer outcomes for all disabled kids (Wagner et al., 1993). Therefore, setting standards policies without these children in mind may have a devastating impact on a relatively large number of students.

A final point about high-stakes policy is that some aspects of the impact of these policies on students with disabilities are relevant for nondisabled students as well. There is relatively little support in the research for the use of high-stakes promotion policies as a vehicle for promoting higher achieve-

ment. In *High Stakes: Testing for Tracking, Promotion and Graduation*, Jay Heubert and Robert Hauser (1999) conclude, "The negative consequences, as grade retention is currently practiced, are that retained students persist in low achievement levels and are more likely to drop out of school" (p. 285). This finding also is consistent with the finding in NLTS that failing high school subjects is associated with kids with disabilities dropping out.

### Toward Ending Ableism in Education

There is much that educators, parents, and advocates can do toward ending ableism in education. As is the case with racism and sexism, progress toward equity is dependent first and foremost on the acknowledgment that ableism exists in schools. The examples given here have centered around three disability groups: the deaf, the blind and visually impaired, and the learning disabled. However, I believe that deconstructing dominant educational practices applied to other disability groups can yield similar results. Ableist assumptions and practices are deeply embedded in schooling. Further, the absence of discussion and dearth of scholarly inquiry within mainstream educational circles concerning the effects of ableism is stunning.

Though the lack of attention to ableism in schooling is unfortunate, activists within the disability community have long recognized its impact (Rauscher & McClintock, 1997). Therefore, as more adults with disabilities take on more powerful roles in society and seek to influence schooling, the attention to these issues will hopefully increase (Shapiro, 1994). In addition to this political force, the lack of acceptable educational outcomes for large numbers of children with disabilities in an era of standards-based reform should force a reexamination of current practices. Fortunately, there is a foundation in both research and practice upon which to build a better future. Schools can take action now. I offer the following suggestions:

*Include disability as part of schools' overall diversity efforts.* Schools are increasingly recognizing the need to explicitly address diversity issues as the country becomes more racially and ethnically diverse. Some schools are expanding diversity efforts to include disability. Recently, a local high school student with Down's syndrome, whom I had met at a school assembly devoted to issues of disability rights, addressed one of my classes. She stated, "There are all kinds of kids at my school: Black kids, Puerto Rican kids, gay and lesbian kids. Meagan uses a wheel chair. Matt's deaf, and I have Down's syndrome. It's all diversity." Her high school has done a great job of including disabled kids and has incorporated discussions about disability in its efforts to address diversity issues. Adults with disabilities address student groups and disability is presented in a natural way. Students learn about people with disabilities who have achieved great things as well as those who live ordinary lives. People with disabilities are not presented in a patronizing or stereotypical manner. Deaf

people are not “hearing challenged” nor are people with mental retardation “very special.” Ableism is not the norm; disability is dealt with in a straightforward manner. In schools like this, students with disabilities learn about their disabilities and learn how to be self-advocates (Jorgensen, 1997).

*Encourage disabled students to develop and use skills and modes of expression that are most effective and efficient for them.* This article has sought to demonstrate that the strong preference within society, reflected in school practice, to have disabled students perform in the same way that nondisabled children perform can ultimately be handicapping for some students. This is not to say that it is not desirable for disabled kids to be able to perform in the way nondisabled kids perform. For instance, deaf students who can read lips have a competitive advantage in a hearing world. However, assuming that most deaf children can develop elaborate language through oral methods has been proven false, and employing these methods without allowing for the natural development of language almost assures poor language development. What may appear to be a paradox to some is that a deaf child who has well-developed language through learning ASL from birth may actually have a higher likelihood of reading lips because he simply has a larger vocabulary. The problem is not, therefore, in the natural desire of parents and educators to have children be able to perform in a typical manner, but rather the missed educational opportunities many disabled kids experience because of a lack of regard for what are often disability-specific modes of learning and expression.

*Special education should be specialized.* There has been a persistent debate in the special education literature over the degree of specialization needed by special educators (Biklen, 1992; Jorgensen, 1997; Milofsky, 1974; Skrtic, 1991; Will, 1986). In 1970, Burton Blatt quoted Alice Metzner’s feelings about special education that continue to be echoed by others: “The problem with special education is that it is neither special nor education” (Metzner, quoted in Blatt, 1970, p. 21). This critique reflects the well-documented history of inferior education experienced by many in special classes at the time (Kirp, 1974). This critique of special education persists to this day with considerable support from research (Gartner & Lipsky, 1996; Wagner et al., 1993).

The notion that once children are placed in special education they receive a different education should be rejected. This is yet another example of ableism. Though students with disabilities may have individual needs, by and large their education should be based on the same curriculum as that of nondisabled students. This is why advocates worked so hard to amend IDEA in 1997 to specifically require IEP teams to address issues of curricular access. Deafness does not mean students should not be taking physics and dyslexia should not preclude access to great literature. Viewed in this light, special education should not mean a different curriculum, but rather the vehicle by which students with disabilities access the curriculum and

the means by which the unique needs that arise out of the child's disability are addressed. This role requires a good deal of specialized knowledge and skill.

Unfortunately, one by-product of the well-justified critique of special education practice has been the minimization of the need for specialization (Biklen, 1992; Jorgensen, 1997; Will, 1986). Motivated by the desire for greater inclusion, particularly for those with cognitive disabilities, personnel preparation programs have minimized the need for specialization. In many states, specialized preparation of special education personnel is minimal and requires preparation as a general educator first. Though this is desirable in the ideal, this emphasis on general education may take away from the need to learn specialized skills and also may inadvertently be contributing to the increasing shortage of special education and related services personnel (U.S. Department of Education, 1996).

If one accepts that the role of special educators and related services personnel is to help disabled children access the curriculum and meet the unique needs that arise out of their disability, the need for specialization should be obvious. Teaching Braille, knowing how to help students with significant communication disorders to use communication devices, developing positive behavioral interventions for a student with autism, and providing a comprehensive approach to accommodating the curriculum while continuing to assist a dyslexic student in learning to read are but a few of the specialized competencies required to assure full access to education for students with disabilities. Though it is important to increase the skills of regular educators in accommodating and modifying instruction for students with disabilities, it is unrealistic to assume that all regular educators can possess these skills. The lack of availability of specialized support has been cited in recent research as a reason some students were placed in segregated settings though they otherwise may have been served in inclusive settings (Hanson et al., 2001). Well-trained special educators are needed to assist general educators and the students they teach in inclusive settings and, at times, to provide intensive instruction outside those settings.

The need to assure that special educators learn specialized skills is not an argument for traditional categorical (by disability) special education teacher-training programs. Such programs often reinforce existing approaches that focus on the characteristics of disability to the exclusion of access to the general curriculum. Further, some traditional programs are not teaching the specialized skills required by students' IEPs. For instance, when I worked at the Office of Special Education Services, advocates for the blind complained that many "vision teachers" could not teach Braille. A review of existing teacher-training programs for the vision impaired by the U.S. Department of Education revealed that many programs did not teach this skill. This lack of disability-specific skill focus is not confined to the field of blind-

ness. Examples of such deficiencies exist in virtually all areas of special education teacher preparation. A number of deaf advocates have complained that many teachers of the deaf are not proficient signers, a complaint that reflects the controversies about oralism in the field. LD advocates have been so concerned about the lack of appropriate skills on the part of both regular and special educational personnel that the National Center on Learning Disabilities sponsored a summit on teacher preparation in 1996. A major concern emerged over the lack of appropriate training in the area of teaching reading to dyslexic students.

We need to develop clear standards for special education teacher-preparation programs that recognize the specific needs of disabled students and ensure that teachers have the skills necessary to develop the individualized programs that these children need. These programs must explicitly challenge the ableist assumption that the manner in which nondisabled children perform school-related tasks is always the preferred goal for disabled students. Teachers must be able to give these kids the skills that will enable them to perform at their maximum level and provide their regular education teachers with the help they need to assure maximum access to the curriculum. Without special education teachers with disability-specific skills, children with disabilities will continue to lack the skills they need to most efficiently and effectively deal with the demands of school and life.

*Move away from the current obsession with placement toward an obsession with results.* The movement to include greater numbers of students with disabilities, particularly those with significant cognitive disabilities, in regular education classes has had a profound effect on the education of students with disabilities. Over the past decade, more and more students with disabilities are educated for more of the day in regular education classrooms (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

The inclusion movement in education has supported the overall disability movement's goal of promoting societal integration, using integration in schooling as a means to achieve this result. In 1977, disability activists took over federal offices in San Francisco for twenty-five days, demanding that regulations for implementing Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, the first federal act to broadly ban discrimination based on disability, be released. Of particular concern to the protesters were leaked draft regulations that provided for separate segregated education for disabled students. Judy Heumann, one of these protesters, stated, "We will accept no more segregation" (Shapiro, 1994). The final rules were revised to encourage integration in schooling, and the newly passed PL 94-142 (later renamed IDEA) incorporated the current requirement that children be educated in the least restrictive environment (i.e., in regular classes as much as is appropriate for the child).

The strong legal preference for placement in regular classes, coupled with the political movement of disability activists and parents, has resulted in significant positive change for students with disabilities, who are moving on to jobs and accessing higher education at unprecedented levels (Hehir & Gamm, 1999). Virtually every school has had to confront the issue of inclusion as parents seek integration for their children with disabilities. However, like all change movements, inclusion has encountered opposition. Some opposition has reflected deeply held negative attitudes toward people with disabilities similar to that experienced by Joe and Penny Ford when he sought enrollment in first grade. I can recall a principal challenging me in a large public meeting concerning our efforts to promote inclusion in Chicago: “You don’t really mean kids who drool in regular classes?” The reaction against the integration of students with significant disabilities into regular schools and classrooms has been so strong that TASH, an advocacy group promoting integration, adopted the slogan, “All means all,” which reflects the group’s efforts to clarify its goal to promote integration for students with significant disabilities.

Another source of criticism has come from within the disability community (Kauffman & Hallahan, 1995).<sup>6</sup> Deaf advocates have expressed concerns over the lack of language development and communication access many deaf children experience in regular classes (Lane, cited in Kauffman & Hallahan, 1995). Supported by some of the research cited above, advocates for the learning disabled have questioned the ability of regular education classrooms to provide the intensive help these students need for skill development (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994, 1995). These criticisms receive support from research. The NLTS documented that many students integrated into regular education classrooms did not receive much in the way of accommodation or support, and that many who were integrated into regular classes failed, thus increasing their likelihood of dropping out. The issue is so controversial within the community that virtually every disability group has developed a position. A review of websites reveals, for example, TASH’s strong support for full inclusion and deep reservation on the part of the Learning Disabilities Association of America (see [www.tash.org](http://www.tash.org) and [www.ldanatl.org](http://www.ldanatl.org)).

The controversy over inclusion within the disability community is ultimately dysfunctional and allows those who would limit the rights of students with disabilities to use this as a wedge issue. Fortunately, the community united during the reauthorization of IDEA in 1997 to help prevent a weakening of the act. However, threats to IDEA’s fundamental protections remain. In 2001, Congress considered amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that would enable schools to fully exclude some students

<sup>6</sup> The term *community* is used loosely here to include those who have disabilities, parents of children with disabilities, and their advocates.



with disabilities. In order to fight these regressive provisions, the community must be united.

I believe the lens of ableism provides a useful perspective through which the inclusion issue can be resolved within the disability community. First, there needs to be a recognition that education plays a central role in the integration of disabled people in all aspects of society both by giving children the education they need to compete and by demonstrating to nondisabled children that disability is a natural aspect of life. Central to this role is the need for students with disabilities to have access to the same curriculum provided to nondisabled children. Further, education plays a vital role in building communities in which disabled children should be included. Therefore, for most children with disabilities, integration into regular classes with appropriate accommodations and support should be the norm.

However, the lens of ableism should lead to the recognition that for some students certain disability-related skills might need attention outside the regular classroom. Learning Braille or ASL or how to use a communication device are typically not in the curriculum and might be more efficiently taught outside the mainstream classroom. The dyslexic high school student who needs intensive help in reading may feel deeply self-conscious if such instruction is conducted in front of his nondisabled friends. The 19-year-old student with a significant cognitive disability may need to spend a good deal of time learning to take public transportation, a skill that will ultimately increase her ability to integrate into the community as an adult. Nondisabled students do not spend time in school learning this skill because they learn this easily on their own. The nature of mental retardation is such that this type of learning does not typically happen incidentally; it must be taught over time and within the context in which the skill will be used (Brown et al., 1991). Uniting around the goal of societal integration and recognizing that the difference inherent in disability is a positive one that at times gives rise to disability-specific educational needs may help advocates move away from the fight over placement to one that focuses on educational results.

*Promote high standards, not high stakes.* An important point to reiterate here is that the most damaging ableist assumption is the belief that disabled people are incapable. Therefore, the movement to include students with disabilities in standards-based reforms holds promise. However, high-stakes testing that prevents students from being promoted or from receiving a diploma based on performance on standardized tests is problematic, given the concerns previously cited about basic access to the curricula and those surrounding the construct validity of the tests. In a very real sense, some students with disabilities will have to become nondisabled in order to be promoted or graduate. This is ableism in the extreme. Thus, a promising movement, standards-based reform, may ultimately reinforce current inequities if performance on

high-stakes tests becomes the only means by which disabled students can demonstrate what they know and are able to do. As such, disability advocates should oppose high-stakes testing. It is important to note that disabled students are not the only group for whom high-stakes testing is being questioned (Heubert & Hauser, 1999). Other groups that have been poorly served by our educational systems, such as children from high-poverty backgrounds and children with limited English proficiency, may be equally harmed by these policies.

*Employ concepts of universal design to schooling.* A principle of disability policy that has evolved is the concept of universal design. First applied to architecture, this principle called for the design of buildings with the assumption that people with disabilities would be using them. With the legal backing of the Americans with Disabilities Act, these principles are applied increasingly to new construction and renovation of public buildings. Ramps, automatic door opening devices, accessible toilets, and fire alarm systems with lights activated for the deaf are examples of universal design features incorporated into contemporary buildings. Other examples extend to technologies. Captioning devices are required features on all televisions and digital text can be read from computers with screen readers. Universal design allows for access without extraordinary means and is based on the assumption that disabled people are numerous and should be able to lead regular lives.

However, the concept of universal design has yet to become widespread in schooling. For instance, even though learning disabilities are common in students, we have yet to design our reading programs with these children in mind (Lyon et al., 2001). We tend to have “one size fits all” reading programs in the primary grades. This is true of other areas as well, such as how schools handle students with disabilities that affect behavior. Using the analogy of architecture, we often attempt to retrofit the child with inappropriate interventions after they have failed in school, rather than design the instructional program from the beginning to allow for access and success. And, as is the case with architecture, the failure to design universally is inefficient and ineffective.

An interesting by-product of universal design is the benefit it brings to nondisabled people as well. People pushing baby carriages appreciate curbs-cuts. Hearing people trying to keep up with the Super Bowl in a noisy bar can do so via captioning. The same can be said for education. Reading programs that are successful with dyslexic students will be better able to reach those who may be struggling for other reasons. A school that includes a child with autism who has difficulty with school behavior requirements is likely to be a school that can serve others with behavior problems more effectively (Sugai, Sprague, Horner, & Walker, 2000). However, I do not believe that disability services should be justified on the basis of their impact on the

nondisabled. Universal design is a matter of simple justice. I mention these examples here simply to increase the force of the argument that universal design is truly universal in its impact.

## Epilogue

I would like to conclude this piece with an update on Joe Ford. He is currently a senior in high school and has applied to college. His Scholastic Aptitude Tests scores place him within the top 5 percent of his peers, so competitive schools have been vying for his attendance. I am pleased that Harvard College will be benefiting from Joe's presence in September 2002. This success, however, has required the constant advocacy of both Joe and his mother. Although universal design has not been a feature of his schooling, he has clearly benefited from inclusive education, and at times he has benefited from specialized services. At other times, however, the lack of specialized services has put a great burden on both Joe and Penny to find the most efficient means for him to access education. They have found that the most efficient way for him to read is through taped books, though other accommodations, particularly in certain areas of math instruction, have been lacking. He has no trouble moving about his city in his motorized chair, aided by an accessible public transportation system. One of his favorite pastimes is going downtown to challenge all comers to chess matches. He usually wins. Deeply interested in politics, he does not miss an opportunity to challenge the liberal views of this writer. Penny's intuitive challenge to ableism is paying off, and she looks forward to the day when Joe will not only support himself, but help support her.

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