

Extended Commentary: Moving Towards a More Inclusive Society: Full Inclusion for Those with Disabilities

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Extended Commentary: Moving Towards a More Inclusive Society: Full Inclusion for Those with Disabilities

Cover Page Footnote

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Moving Towards a More Inclusive Society: Full Inclusion for Those with Disabilities

The start of the twenty-first century saw the most inclusive, enlightened, and empathetic global society in recorded history. Gay people can openly marry and serve in the military, ethnic diversity, while still woefully lacking, is improving in the realms of business and politics, and while gender equality is still something society is striving towards, it is at least openly discussed. Important to this evolution, schools are transforming how they teach students, through transparency of and sharing information about our entire planet's history. That said, there remains a segment of society that has shouted for recognition, acceptance, and opportunity—since before the beginning of the twentieth century—that the rest of the population has purposefully ignored and education systems often leave out of the conversation. Regardless of the social, political, or moral position of our national and global citizens, the collective population has failed to recognize and uplift the capabilities of physically and cognitively disabled people, and continues to treat and view this group as helpless victims whose only purpose in life is to exist. This includes, but is not limited to, individuals who are visually impaired, hearing impaired, have a speech or communication disability, a mobility disability, or have a mental health or emotional disability. Little has changed in terms of how society views and treats them since the Victorian era and Charles Dickens. This extended commentary will serve not only to demonstrate the contributions people with disabilities have made—and continue to provide to this world—but also how supporting and educating employers will allow those with disabilities to become full members of society. A more accurate portrayal of people with disabilities is one step that needs to be taken. The other key to achieving this lies in primary and secondary education, ensuring that whenever possible, children are not divided according to

abilities and making those with disabilities seem like the “other.” These steps can improve this community’s status so they are not afraid of unwarranted rejection when they fill out a resume or run for office.

Organizations such as ThinkWork! highlight the contributions that those with disabilities make in the workforce.¹ Despite the contributions, for 2019 the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that approximately 20 percent of people with disabilities were employed as compared to roughly 66 percent of those with disabilities in the United States.² Outside of the obvious need of an income to survive, being gainfully employed can be fulfilling, providing purpose to those who work. A portion of the disabled population in this world, especially in America, are suffering from additional mental health issues, frequently stemming from the lack of opportunity to utilize their talents.³ In fact, individuals with disabilities who are not gainfully employed, or wrongfully terminated or passed over for a job, are five times more likely to suffer from depression, given that they are judged by their disability, on top of already having it, and not being able to do anything about it.⁴ This can lead to higher rates of suicide and family trauma within our society, which affects the welfare of all citizens. Even in the face of this public health and labor issue, disabled people are still over twice as likely to be unemployed compared to their counterparts, unless they create their own disability friendly business or non-profit.⁵ This gap needs to be addressed.

One argument made as to why the disabled are having trouble finding permanent, meaningful employment is that the burden placed upon employers to hire individuals with liabilities, and the costs associated with the necessary legal accommodations.⁶ While this point is a valid concern to a certain extent, it forgets to value people as a whole, ignoring contributions that are not immediately quantifiable.

Employers who are aware of various programs can receive accommodations for hiring disabled employees.⁷ Progress has been made in finding employment for disabled individuals, given that the unemployment rate for those who are disabled has dropped to 8 percent since 2018.⁸ Until people with disabilities are as comfortable in applying for work, like other people of every ethnicity, religion, culture, sexual orientation and identity, a focus on social education for all of society and legal representation for disabled workers must remain important.

Disabled individuals are frequently left out of conversations about prejudice and bigotry. This lack of representation and individual uplifting that every citizen deserves often starts with not receiving a proper education. One of the reasons for this—and not only in the United States, but in the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia—is that disabled children are frequently and purposefully excluded from full school activities, potentially because they are seen as burdens to regular students, with concerns that students with special needs will consume too much of teachers' time resources.⁹ Even in situations where positive trends can be seen in the integration of special needs students into general classrooms (often brought about in districts where lawsuits have been filed), the teachers may indeed not have the resources necessary, as they were not trained to do so.¹⁰ While services for disabled individuals improve in college, the initial education built around patronization and exclusion sticks in the social psychology of general education students who had been separated from their special needs peers during the formative years. This can lead to social exclusion in college based on misconceptions on how you treat people with disabilities, leaving those disabled to take part in the purely academic elements of higher education, but leaving them excluded from the equally important aspects, such as academic and social clubs.¹¹

As a result of these habits developed by most general education people in school, society becomes all but inaccessible to people with disabilities. This structural inequality, which begins in the classroom and continues in the board room, has become an indifferent reality to normal people of all political persuasions.¹² As stated before, disabled people are left out of the discrimination conversation, which is why our education system must change so all people, especially teachers, policy makers, and doctors, understand that total equality of opportunity applies to the disabled as well.

It has been over thirty years since the release of the Hollywood movie *Rain Man*, which illustrated society's lack of knowledge about autism, playing into the stereotype of the idiot savant. Regardless of the discoveries of different types and levels of mental or physical handicaps individuals may sustain today, many still socially classify every person with a disability the same way they diagnosed Raymond out of a lack of understanding: hopeless and helpless. Some of the greatest people in history have had a disability in some form but that is left out of the narrative.¹³ With that said, the general public is becoming more aware of different disabilities and their symptoms, and the generalization of people with disabilities as nothing but burdens to regular people is no longer accepted.¹⁴ Also, since *Rain Man*, the media has given people with physical and mental disabilities a bit more of a spotlight, such as in *Glee*, *Speechless*, *Stranger Things*, *Switched at Birth*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *House M.D.*, *The Good Doctor*, and *A Quiet Place* but even those shows are not enough to erase stigmas.¹⁵ Another small step in the right direction is *Sesame Street* including a puppet name Julia, who happens to be autistic. As the Ford Foundation's 2019 "Road Map for Inclusion" report notes, a goal should be for one in four characters in movies and on television to be disabled, mirroring the fact that one in four adults in U.S. live with a disability.¹⁶ Those roles should also go to actors that are

disabled, and equally importantly, jobs behind the camera should also be held by those with disabilities.¹⁷

Society has to do better when it comes to the rights and the physically, mentally, and cogitatively disabled. Legal mechanisms exist that advocates can cite to demand better: The Americans with Disabilities Act and The World Health Organizations Report on People's with Disabilities to name two important ones. As ARC, the largest national community-based organization advocating for and with people with intellectual and developmental disabilities notes, the U.S. Constitution, federal laws, and federal court decisions have established that people with disabilities have the same basic legal, civil, and human rights as other citizens.¹⁸ The struggle is to ensure that those rights are respected, giving people with disabilities the space to live fulfilling lives. Ultimately, this problem can only be solved through better education, so regular people at a young age understand the struggles, the situations and the day-to-day lives of disabled people, and those disabled in turn can enjoy the same opportunities to successfully show off their talents without the fear of preconceived dismissal.

ENDNOTES

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