Understanding and Addressing Ableism in Schools

Defining Ableism

Ableism is a form of systemic oppression, meaning it gives unearned advantages to people who do not experience the world as disabled. This system results in: (a) barriers that people with disabilities uniquely face when trying to navigate the world and (b) unfair treatment and discrimination against people with disabilities. Ableism suggests that some abilities are "normal" or "better," and ranks people's worth based on their abilities. As two forms of discrimination that can often overlap, ableism and racism are deeply connected, creating even more challenges for people who are both racial minorities and have disabilities. This concept, known as intersectional oppression[1], means that the discrimination is not just added together, but multiplies, resulting in unique problems.

Ableism's intersection with other systems of oppression — like racism, sexism, and classism — make the experience of people subjected to multiple systems of oppression at the same time more complex and severe, especially when it comes to discipline. For example, a teacher may misinterpret a symptom of a student's disability (e.g., difficulty focusing due to ADHD) as a behavioral issue. Combined with racial biases that stereotype Black students as being more "disruptive," this bias could lead to this student being unfairly disciplined more frequently and more harshly than their peers. Not only does this unjustly punish the student because of their race and disability, but it also disrupts their education. Frequent suspensions or expulsions mean the student misses out on valuable learning time, which can lead to them falling behind academically. This one example is meant to illustrate how the intersection of ableism and racism can significantly compound a student's negative educational experience, but racism and ableism show up in many ways in schools.

Ableism is systemic, and can manifest in overt or subtle ways. Subtle ableism, sometimes referred to as "casual" or "unconscious" ableism, involves

ABLEISM[2]
EXPLORING BELOW THE SURFACE

Overt Ableism

Hate crimes
Violence
R-word/Ableist slurs

Educational exclusion and segregation
Able savior complex   Lack of captions
Low expectations   Ableist curriculum
Inappropriate discipline practices
"Everyone is a little autistic"
Police brutality   Tokenism
"You're so inspirational!"
"Crazy" people jokes
Intrusive questions
Fear of Disability

Subtle Ableism

indirect, often unnoticed actions or behaviors that marginalize or discriminate against individuals with disabilities. Unlike overt ableism, which is blatant and intentional, subtle ableism is often unintentional and may even be perpetrated by individuals who believe they are allies to the disability community.

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[1] It is important to note that the term 'intersectionality' was coined by Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe the intersection of racism and misogyny faced by Black women. While its definition has been expanded over time, intersectonality's roots in Black feminist theory must be honored. Please see this link for more information.

[2] This graphic was adapted from Rausch, Joseph, & Steed, 2019 and Buzek, n.d., using the Hall's (1976) Iceberg Model.

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Systemic Impact of Ableism

Ableism leads to marginalization and isolation for students experiencing disability, and results in educational and life outcomes that lag considerably behind their peers that do not experience disability.

Unlearning Ableism

Interrogating Ableism in Yourself	Interrogating Ableism in Your School
- What assumptions do I make about people's abilities based on their appearance or disability? - In what ways do I see disability as a natural and valuable part of human diversity? - In what ways do I treat disability as a social/societal construct rather than an inherent deficit? - When do I use ableist language like "lame," "dumb," or "crazy"? - How do I act with pity or condescension towards people with disabilities? - When do I make judgments about the worth or value of people based on their abilities? - How do I recognize and challenge my own ableist thoughts and behaviors?	- How do our policies provide equal access and opportunities for students with disabilities? - In what ways are our facilities physically accessible and inclusive for people with a range of disabilities? - How does our curriculum, activities, and events celebrate and represent disability as human diversity? - How do we promote understanding about disability, inclusion, and anti-ableism? - What mechanisms do we have in place to identify and address ableism when it arises? - When are students and staff with disabilities represented in leadership and decision-making roles? When are they not and how can we fix that? - How do we foster an inclusive learning environment where every student belongs?

Recognizing Overt and Subtle Ableism in Schools

Ableism shows up in our schools in many ways. The below table is intended to be illustrative of potential ways schools encounter ableism, not an exhaustive list of ableist acts:

Overt Ableism	Subtle Ableism
Refusing to provide a student with a required educational accommodation.	Teachers assuming that all students can complete homework within the same timeframe.
Excluding students with disabilities from field trips or extracurricular activities due to perceived inconvenience.	Using ableist language, such as referring to something confusing as "blind" or saying a hectic day was "crazy".
Openly expressing or implying that students with disabilities are less capable or intelligent.	Attendance and grading policies that do not accommodate mental health or sensory needs.
Segregating students with disabilities from their peers unnecessarily.	Designing activities without considering accessibility for all.
Using derogatory or insulting language when referring to students with disabilities.	Not considering the needs of all students when planning school events.
Disciplining or punishing students for behavior related to their disability.	Ignoring or downplaying instances of bullying against students with disabilities.

Concrete Steps You Can Take to Combat Ableism

- **Inclusive Policy Development**: Inclusive school policies explicitly address ableism. These policies should provide clear guidelines on acceptable behavior and language, accessibility, accommodation provision, and disciplinary actions against ableist behavior.

- **Professional Development**: Providing regular professional development opportunities on disability and inclusion can be an effective way to combat ableism. This could include training on recognizing and addressing ableism, understanding various disabilities, differentiating instruction to meet diverse learning needs, and implementing IEPs effectively.

- **Encourage Representation**: Make efforts to include people with disabilities in visible roles within the school. Hire staff with disabilities, invite guest speakers with disabilities, and ensure that people with disabilities are accurately and appropriately represented in the school's curriculum and learning materials.

- **Include Voice and Choice:** Explicitly require the inclusion of the voice and choice of disabled individuals when developing policy, professional development, etc. Dismantling ableism requires listening to disabled youth and adults.

- **Accessible Environment**: Ensure that the school environment is physically accessible to everyone. Buildings should be wheelchair accessible, classrooms arranged to allow easy movement, and educational materials available in formats accessible to all students (e.g., Braille or large print for visually impaired students, digital text for students with print disabilities).

Dimensions of Belonging (*Taken from the TIES Center*)

Everyone wants to be valued and have a sense of belonging in their community. The need for valued belonging is true for students in a school community as well. Although belonging is equally important for all students, students with significant cognitive disabilities are less likely to experience a deep sense of belonging.

Developed to directly address the creation of school communities in which each and every student is included in all aspects of everyday school life, Creating Communities of Belonging for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities describes ten dimensions of belonging. This is a "ready to use" resource that includes a mini guide for each dimension of belonging that defines the dimension, provides snapshots of what it would look like, presents steps schools could take to promote change, and suggests areas of reflection for members of the school community.