

Keona May

Dr. Foss

Disability and Literature

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Confronting Ableism and Destroying the Stigma

Myself and the majority of the population were deprived of learning at early ages and in schools how to properly interact with those with disabilities due to the promotion of ableism and the separation stigma. While we must take partial blame for our own ignorance, we also have to take in consideration the systems put in place that further perpetuated this way of thinking. For instance, in schools the separation of children with learning disabilities in addition to the explanations of why this occurs plays a large role in teaching children the “us vs. them” mindset.

It is often argued that making these conversational changes takes a great amount of effort and that “that’s the way it’s always been”, but in actuality, we have as a society have been starting to move forward in terms of being more socially conscious for the inclusion of people with mental disorders for instance- a bunch of campaigns and ads are now talked broadcasted all over social media platforms including specific, detailed advice on how to better communicate with these individuals. However, for some reason there still seems to be a disconnect with applying this principle to those with disabilities. Therefore in this paper, I will utilize the journal article titled “Cultural Commentary: Communicate With Me” by DJ Savarese to provide specific examples of how people can better support someone with disabilities, in this case someone with

a form of autism, and surely also convey that taking the time to make these changes is not only not a difficult task, but one that we already participate in most social situations amongst neurotypicals. In doing so, I aspire to advocate for the elimination of any sense of superiority status, and work to end the stigma surrounding the division between those with disabilities and those considered neurotypical by showing that with extra reflection, we are not as greatly different as we may think.

Overall, the most common disconnect amongst neurotypicals and those with disabilities is the question of how to respectfully communicate with each other. In middle school, I was a witness to people extending false kindness to the known and identified group of children with special needs by either posing for pictures with them or giving them high fives or I've even seen people try to make them repeat raunchy statements to get a quick laugh. While of course the latter is inexcusable behaviour, I believe the majority of the act stems from a place of ignorance and simply not knowing how to conversate with someone whose communication methods differ or take more patience and planning than someone who is neurotypical. Consequently, the first piece of advice Savarese offers as a communication option to aid with this situation is to not question a person's use of a facilitator because for him, simply having them there to "hold the pencil while [he] write[s] or type[s]...fearlessly makes [him] feel safe by helping [him] regulate [his] nervous system" (Savarese). From the outside looking in, this might seem like a daunting or difficult task to accept something that appears to be different and unrelatable, but neurotypicals participate in this all the time. For instance, as a child, my brother loved cars and would not fall asleep without holding two of them in his hands because it brought his mind at ease. If you ask most adults to recall their childhood, it would probably reveal that most people had something

similar that brought them the same sense of peace. Thus, it is not a foreign concept to have an item or person that provides comfort and a sense of security. Through some slight extra reflection, neurotypical people can realize that they aren't as vastly different from people with disabilities as they might originally think and use this way of thinking to greatly lessen the sense of complete separation from one another.

Another example of a way to offer him support that Savarese discusses is to not doubt his intelligence just because he uses a facilitator. In fact, in reference to the controversy surrounding utilizing a facilitator, he says, "no one had ever doubted my words [,] because I learned to read along with my classmates in regular education and pointed independently to words spread out in answer banks, my teachers were able to see me learn to read and write" and also that "I've proven my competence through specific tests" (Savarese). A way that neurotypicals can relate to this idea is thinking back to if they have ever played the game telephone-in which a phrase is repeated down the line with the goal of the last person repeating the original phrase at the end of the line. In games where the end line is accurately repeated, no one in the beginning or middle of the line questions the intelligence of each other because the end result was correct, and they achieved that by supporting each other. The same principle can be applied to those with disabilities- just because someone is in a situation where they require extra assistance does not mean they do not think for themselves or are not as intelligent as anyone else without assistance.

Finally, a strong piece of advice that I took from the journal article was when Savarese advises to "Look at and talk to *me*, not to the facilitator" and then details that "[he] get[s] resentful if people ignore [him] or talk about [him] in the third-person" (Savarese). Another place most neurotypicals can relate to this is when interacting with someone who speaks a

different language. For instance, in documentaries, even if the person speaking does not speak English, the interviewer still speaks directly to and films the reply of the person who is then supplementary supported by the translator or by subtitles, and not the other way around. Consequently, this to me is just applying basic human decency that I hope people would not take much time to realize the importance of, but I am glad he spent time on this because I also believe this can easily be glossed over by people who do not take the time to consider the disrespectfulness of not doing so.

Prior to entering this disability and studies course, as unfortunate as I now realize, I possessed the idea there was this immense and clear divide between those with disabilities and those without. I used to assume the definition of disability was mainly limited to what the human eye could see and thought I was able to subconsciously differentiate between those who identified as neurotypical and those who required "special needs". Of course my intent was never to utilize this way of thinking as a means to discriminate against or to disrespect anyone, however upon gaining further knowledge through our course I realized the biases I have been succumbing to for quite some time and have come to accept the role I have played in adding to the stigma of this divide. As a result, moving forward I now better understand that it is my responsibility to always question my actions and be hyper-aware of my surroundings especially in relation to the people I am interacting with. This effort cannot just stop with individuals like myself who have had the opportunity to attend higher education and in fact as Sevarase says, "The answer is communicate with me. Boldly reach out to me, and together we will goldenly share our views of the world we long to greet" (Savarese). The key is therefore that it takes a

little extra consideration and is group effort but in doing so, beauty and learning is what comes out of it which is really what the human experience is all about.

“I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work.”

Keona May

Word Count:1,340

Works Cited

Savarese, DJ. "Communicate with Me." *Disability Studies Quarterly*,
dsq-sds.org/article/view/1051/1237.