



EQUITY & IMPROVEMENT

Val Brown

DOES YOUR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING SUPPORT EDUCATORS WITH DISABILITIES?

Recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates one in four adults has a visible or invisible disability, yet we rarely talk about supporting educators with disabilities in professional learning.

Val Brown (vbrown@carnegiefoundation.org) is director, future of learning at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and a former member of the Learning Forward board of trustees.

Most educators have worked with 504 plans or Individualized Education Programs (IEP) to support students with disabilities and specific learning needs. But do we have similar supports and structures for adult learners? Recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2023) estimates one in four adults has a visible or invisible disability, yet we rarely talk about supporting educators with disabilities in professional learning.

Fifty years ago, the U.S. government passed the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, a precursor to the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

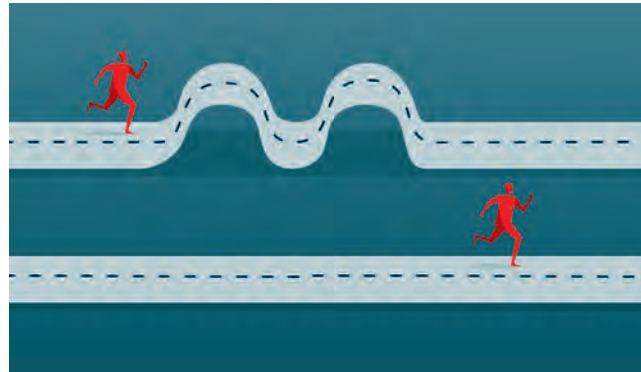
Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act prohibits discrimination based on disability. Before this legislation, it was legal to exclude disabled students from formal schooling or equitable instruction. With the passing of IDEA, disabled students attending elementary and secondary institutions were guaranteed access to the learning environment and accommodations to ensure academic success. The importance of these changes cannot be overstated.

While a classroom teacher, I collaborated with special educators to write and implement IEPs and 504 plans and took necessary steps to keep any student from feeling excluded in my classroom, but it was years before I recognized how accommodations I made for one or two students helped all my students. I didn't come to this understanding on my own, but through the expertise of special educators. One shared an illustrative example that helped me understand how inclusivity benefits everyone: Entrance ramps designed to make buildings accessible to wheelchairs also make it easier for strollers, young children learning to walk, and people making deliveries. Everyone wins.

That principle also applies to educators' professional learning, yet we often fail to see it. One reason is that many of us have an unconscious ableist bias. When I was a classroom teacher, I operated from the ableist assumption that all my students were able-bodied and neurotypical. Later, I unintentionally took those same biases into my practice with adult learners.

My awareness grew and my approach shifted thanks to a conversation in 2020 with Judy Heumann, a disabled educator and activist who led the fight to ensure the passing, implementation, and enforcement of Section 504. In 1977, she and more than 100 disabled activists in San Francisco led the longest sit-in at a federal building in U.S. history. The sit-in lasted for 25 days, and when the phone lines were cut, the deaf activists in the building used sign language to communicate to their supporters outside. Their protest led to full support of Section 504.

The first question she asked me after we were introduced was, "So what is your disability?" I stammered, "Uhhh ... I don't have one." Heumann worked from the assumption that I had a disability. From her perspective, understanding my needs would allow her to make the



necessary adjustments to accommodate me. She valued my inclusion, perspective, and participation in the conversation.

Before I met Heumann, if you asked me if I valued the inclusion, perspectives, and participation of all adult learners, I would enthusiastically reply, “Absolutely!” However, her question demonstrated how one operates in their values and shifted my perspective. Over time, she became one of my heroes, and her legacy continues to help me improve my practice as I strive to continue growing in this area.

In that spirit, I ask myself and all of you: How would we design professional learning if we worked from the assumption that 25% of our attendees experienced a

disability? What are some things we, as facilitators, would do or say differently?

Maybe we could:

- Use a microphone instead of our teacher voice;
- Consider accessible fonts and slides for our presentations;
- Provide printouts or digital access so participants can follow along on their personal devices;
- Include captions on videos;
- Provide alt-text for all images; and
- Be thoughtful about community builders that involve movement.

What are other ways we can design professional learning that benefits all adult learners so they in turn can support all young people? Share them with me and each other on social media or by email.

In her book, *Being Heumann*, Heumann writes, “We can design our cities and our society in a way that fosters belonging and community rather than segregation and isolation” (p. 207). Let’s work together so we can also make our schools and professional learning places that reject isolation and foster belonging and community.

REFERENCES

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2023, May 15).** *Disability impacts all of us.* www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html
- Heumann J.E. & Joiner, K. (2020).** *Being Heumann: An unrepentant memoir of a disability rights activist.* Beacon Press. ■

THE LEARNING PROFESSIONAL

THE LEARNING FORWARD JOURNAL

Announcing Changemakers

A new 2024 column in *The Learning Professional*

Changemakers is a new feature designed to showcase success stories about people making positive impacts through professional learning. Debuting in February 2024, this column will shine a light on the people behind the inspiring work of improving student outcomes, fostering collaborative cultures of improvement, and showcasing professional learning that supports success for all.

Nominate a changemaker today:

