

Chapter 5

Defying Deficit Thinking: Clearing the Path to Inclusion for Students of All Abilities

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ABSTRACT

Bolstered by the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), inclusion became part of the education vernacular. This chapter provides a review of key highlights in the history of inclusive education. The impact of deficit thinking and role of social justice are emphasized as undercurrents driving legislative changes. The authors propose systems thinking as a method to identify actionable items for advancing inclusive education. An overview of promising inclusive frameworks, specifically Universal Design for Learning and social-emotional learning, are described and recommended for embedding inclusive practices into daily practice within the education system.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last century, the focus of special education has been to increase access, equity, and inclusion for students with disabilities. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) describes inclusive education as an education system where all children, including those with diverse needs, learn together within the same schools and classrooms with equitable access to a continuum of support and services which match their needs (UNESCO, 2006b). The movement for inclusive education has grown and expanded around the world over the past few decades. Spurred on by the signing of the Salamanca Statement by 92 nations in 1994 (UNESCO, 1994), the world appeared determined to move past deficit thinking, segregation, institutionalization, and the denial of education for children with disabilities that characterized generations before. Nationally and internationally, legislation acknowledges research supporting inclusive education as the most beneficial educational

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model for all students, improving students' academic and social-emotional skills across the spectrum of abilities and needs (IDEA, 2004; EHA, 1975; UNESCO, 1994). Interpretations and implementations of inclusive education as defined by UNESCO remain varied (Smith et al., 2011; Kurth et al., 2018). Deficit thinking (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014; Valencia, 2010) and adherence to a purely medical model of disability (Goodley, 2014; Shakespeare, 2006) contribute to this variation across schools and continues to stifle the comprehensive adoption of full inclusion and the development of systems and structures to support it. This holds true for the adoption and implementation of inclusive education in the United States. Regardless of varying viewpoints on what constitutes inclusion, adhering to the spirit of the Salamanca Statement and its call for all students to be effectively and equitably educated together can serve as a direction for future efforts.

In the United States, the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) established inclusion as a right for students with disabilities. The introduction of the IDEA explicitly states:

Disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to participate in or contribute to society. Improving educational results for children with disabilities is an essential element of our national policy of ensuring equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities. (IDEA, 2004, §1400)

However, what has been acknowledged as essential to national policy has faced considerable setbacks in terms of systematic implementation. The IDEA goes on to acknowledge such setbacks in implementation, stating the reality of inclusive education “has been impeded by low expectations, and an insufficient focus on applying replicable research on proven methods of teaching and learning for students with disabilities” (IDEA, 2004, §1400). The United States upholds the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) concept for student placement, requiring all students to be educated within the general education environment as much as appropriate. Despite innovations in education and the availability of resources, the US has not stepped into its full potential to lead the global movement for inclusive education. Though as many as 95 percent of students with disabilities are educated in regular schools across a continuum of educational settings (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021), the implementation of fully inclusive educational programming in the US is limited in scope and prevalence. The authors assert that deep-rooted deficit thinking sustains this stagnation and they support a social justice disposition and perspective which promotes the cause of inclusion.

Significant historical events and subsequent social movements promoting equity and social justice, like the civil rights movement, led to profound shifts in education in the United States and impacted inclusive education models, both nationally and internationally. While progress towards equity and inclusion is lauded, caveats and limitations to inclusive education persist. Historical and contemporary legislation have negatively impacted the goal of inclusive education. To properly contextualize the changing perceptions and constructs of disability and their impact on school systems, the history and driving forces of these changes must be understood (Osgood, 2005). The first half of this chapter provides a brief review of the history of inclusive education for students with disabilities and how the medical model of disability and deficit perspectives have contributed to this history. The latter portion of the chapter describes a systems thinking approach to dissolve deficit thinking and shift the paradigm on inclusive education.

BACKGROUND

Disability Constructs: The Medical and Social Models and Deficit Thinking

Disabilities studies literature acknowledges many models of disability. For the purpose of this chapter, these constructs are broadly described by the umbrella categories of the “medical” and “social” models of disability. Table 1 provides a comparison of the broader medical and social models of disability and underpinning assumptions associated with these constructs. A true dichotomy of these models does not exist; rather most disability models derive different elements of these constructs and are primarily informed by historical trends and cultural values (Goodley, 2014; Shakespeare, 2006). According to Oliver (1983) and Shakespeare (2006), the medical model may also be described as the “individual model”. This individual approach to the concept of disability highlights the inherent impairment and needs of the individual. Many disability advocates associate the medical model with a negative stigma, as the focus becomes “fixing” the individual in order for them to function in society. This approach has historically driven society’s view on disability and presumes a functional impairment within the individual with a disability.

Even within organizations that work to promote research and improve interventions for people with disabilities and their families, embedded ideologies from the medical model are still received controversially in the disability community. One example can be found in Autism Speaks, an organization that supports the autism community and their families through various initiatives including funding grants for autism research and intervention, increasing public understanding and acceptance of autism, and increasing early childhood screening for autism (Autism Speaks, 2021). However, members of the autism community and disability advocates have taken issue with some of Autism Speaks initiatives. For example, Autism Speaks has a history of conveying that the autism experience is harmful to individuals and something to be grieved by families (Diament, 2020; Luterman, 2009). Another example of the potentially harmful pathologizing of disability through the medical model can be found in Iceland. Iceland is one of many countries to sign and adopt the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons (2006a) and has a primarily inclusive education system. However, Iceland also has the highest rate of abortion of fetuses identified with Down’s Syndrome. Nearly 100% of all women in Iceland whose prenatal results indicate Down’s Syndrome choose to terminate their pregnancy (Kettering, 2019; Quinones & Lajka, 2017). This statistic is indicative of a view of Down’s Syndrome as a medical deficit and an undesirable trait in children. As Kettering (2019) points out, while many liberal societies value the freedom of parents’ choice to undergo genetic testing, “one can imagine a future where a drastic decline in the number of disabled individuals will result in fewer accommodations or accessibility for the few who remain” (p. 28). Furthermore, many have interpreted this high rate of abortion of a specific subpopulation of people as a form of modern-day eugenics.

Table 1. Comparison of medical and social models of disability

	Medical Model	Social Model
Disability Construct	Functional or cognitive impairment within individual	A consequence of social structures
Advantages	Medication and technology innovations for individuals with disabilities	Empowerment of individuals with disabilities Shifts in blame to social structures
Disadvantages	Perpetuates deficit thinking Posits disability needs to be cured or fixed	Neglects effect of the impairment on daily life experiences

Source: (Oliver, 1983; James, 2020)

The social model emphasizes disability as a construct resulting from sociocultural structures. Instead of positioning the deficit as part of the individual, the social model situates disability as a result of social structures which disable the individual. The disadvantage of a strict social model approach is that it is contradictory to the provision of disability-specific aids or services (Goodley, 2014; Shakespeare, 2006). A rigid social model approach neglects the unique, individual experience of disability and the arising needs of that experience (James, 2020). Neglecting to concurrently acknowledge the reality of living with a disability in contemporary society while maintaining pride and activism has the potential to dilute the disability experience and lessen the perceived struggle.

Despite its drawbacks, this approach to the concept of disability has empowered advocates to challenge attitudes, perceptions, or systems which perpetuate negative stigma. Furthermore, the social model of disability has propelled advocates to call for the removal of disabling barriers within society. The perspective in the social model calls for barrier removal, self-direction, independent living, and other responses to social oppression. From the standpoint of disability rights, approaches based on the social model are generally considered progressive and proactive, whereas the medical model relies on a more reactionary approach (Shakespeare, 2006). As a result, the social model empowers individuals with disabilities and underpins the development of a strong base of advocates with disabilities, such as the formation of the American Association of People with Disabilities in 1995 (AAPD, 2018). Another example of the fruition of a social model approach is the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990), a federal law that mandates accessibility and removal of physical barriers for people with disabilities in public and private institutions. The movement for inclusive education stems from this social model of disability by recognizing that traditional, segregated systems of education prolong disabling constructs. While individual needs of students with disabilities should be recognized and met through educational services, fully inclusive education must be actualized by the removal of disabling barriers within education.

Both the medical and social models of disability underpin society's approach to the education of students with disabilities. Historical subscription to the medical model and the inherent deficit perspective therein resulted in the initial segregation of students with disabilities in the United States and internationally. Society's perceptions of people with disabilities over time are reflected in the labels and identifications placed on these individuals (Wehmeyer, 2013). Deficit thinking is a theory that describes the phenomena of unconscious or implicit biases (Valencia, 2010). Labeling or categorizing others as disadvantaged or disabled is an example of deficit thinking. People who hold a deficit mindset attribute a student's academic or behavioral challenges to intrinsic weaknesses or deficits (Reed, 2020). As a result, educators may unconsciously relieve themselves of any responsibility for providing adequate academic or behavioral support to students with disabilities or students from other marginalized populations (Reed,

2020). Naming is a prerequisite for defining and eventually categorizing people, often leading to relegation to particular classes and the inherent consequences of membership in specific groups (Wehmeyer, 2013). The names, labels, and language used in describing people with disability has typically illustrated an inherent deficit perspective. Both special education and the broader concept of disability are based on continually changing or redefining assumptions, conditions, and understandings in science, culture, society, and, of course, education. As a result, the adjectives, nomenclature, and labels used to characterize disability theory, purpose, and practice have changed significantly, even when the concepts themselves have not (Osgood, 2005). Just as an individual's name is a powerful identifier (Moore, 2020), society's process of naming conveys a variety of messages about perceived human value and relationships.

Historical Trends and Foundations of Inclusion in the US: Independence to Mid-Century

The disability community is a historically marginalized and segregated population as a direct result of deficit thinking and stigma. Stereotypes and inequalities are perpetuated as a result of exclusion. Because “education is a microcosm of society” (Kirby, 2017, p. 175), it is no surprise that groups that are disadvantaged and oppressed in greater society have been treated similarly in the classroom. Whether based on race, ethnicity, language, or ability, members of such groups have been excluded from education or relegated to an inferior and separate education, which maintains oppressive social constructs and barriers (Kirby, 2017). A basic review of United States history illustrates the impact of deficit thinking and societal stigma on the education of students with disabilities. Identifying and understanding the connection between the broader sociocultural context and perspectives provides insight into the history of special education policy and practice, contemporary challenges, and necessities for moving forward and expanding inclusive education within the U.S.

1800 to the Turn of the 20th Century

During the 19th century, it was common practice in the United States for individuals with disabilities to be cared for either by family members, religious institutions, or state asylums (Mostert, 2002; Osgood, 2005). Influenced by Social Darwinism and the Eugenics movement, people with disabilities were perceived by society as a threat and an inconvenience (Thomas, 2013; Mostert, 2002; Osgood, 2005). The language used to describe individuals with disabilities in this period included phrases such as “incurable idiots”, “useless eaters”, and “life unworthy of life” (Mostert, 2002, p.157). Perceptions of individuals with disabilities in this era are reflected in an 1865 article entitled *Idiot Asylums*, in which the author states “Idiotcy is unquestionably one of the most fearful of the host of maladies, which pass like gloomy shadows over the brightest spots of human civilization” (p. 1). The ideologies of Darwin and Eugenics provided a seemingly rational framework and justification for segregated systems and the measurements and methods for enforcing such segregation (Thomas, 2013). As a result, most individuals with disabilities during this time lived segregated, oppressed lives or were euthanized. According to the 1828 Webster's Dictionary, the term “idiot” is defined as:

A natural fool or fool from his birth; a human being in form, but destitute of reason, or the ordinary intellectual powers of man. A person who has understanding enough to measure a yard of cloth, number twenty correctly, tell the days of the week, etc., is not an idiot in the eye of the law. (Webster, 1828)

The latter part of this definition substantiates the concept of disability as a construct within society. The advent of standards-based education and mandate for access to general education curriculum has resulted in students with intellectual disabilities comprehending far beyond mere days of the week and counting to 20, yet this population of people with disabilities continues to be educated in separate classrooms away from neurotypical peers. While the terms used today to describe disability have changed significantly, disabling constructs continue to evolve as society evolves. A shift in thinking and the perception of people with disabilities is required before the complete removal of disabling constructs.

The dawn of Intelligence Quotient (IQ) testing in the early 1900s led to another metric by which to segregate students with disabilities. In this instance, the intent was to provide leveled support within France's education system. In 1904, the minister of public education in Paris ordered a commission to develop assessments to identify students with intellectual and learning disabilities to ensure students with and without disabilities were receiving education in what was deemed appropriate and separate educational settings (Sternberg, 2020). This was an early attempt at providing individualized education and support. The result was the first IQ test developed in 1905 by Alfred Binet and Theodore Simon. This led to profound shifts in models of educational service and delivery, still felt today. Henry Herbert Goddard, a psychologist, eugenicist, and segregationist, is credited with translating the Binet IQ test into English and disseminating it across the United States (Benjamin, 2009). Goddard encouraged the use of IQ testing in many fields, including education, to determine individual ability and classification. He believed in segregating people deemed "feeble-minded" by the IQ measure and supported the eugenic concepts of superior races or groups and that members of the superior groups should rule and regulate society (Benjamin, 2009). Goddard greatly influenced the use of IQ testing in education, a practice that continues today, despite remaining controversial within the scholarly community (Siegel, 1989; Kanaya, 2019). Today, the IDEA requires the use of "a variety of assessment tools and strategies" (IDEA, 2004, §300.304) to identify students with disabilities and determine appropriate services. Many school districts utilize IQ tests as part of their assessment protocols for the identification of students with disabilities to fulfill this requirement, resulting in a modern-day metric justifying the placement of students in separate educational environments. Assessments inform societal perceptions of competence, which "leads to a historically common district-level placement policy in districts in which all students with a particular disability label are placed together in a classroom or school" (Agran et al., 2020, p. 6).

The Mid-Century and The Beginning of Federal Involvement in Special Education

The Impact of Racial Segregation

The disability community is not the only community to have faced discrimination and segregation for generations. From the 13 colonies on, Black people and members of other racially minoritized groups were either enslaved or relegated to an oppressed second-class standing in the United States. As such, they were not considered nor included in educational decision-making. Even after the 13th amendment declared slavery illegal in 1865, segregation and exclusion continued in everyday society, based on deep-seated racism and deficit perspectives towards non-White people. "Separate but equal" laws were established throughout the American South and the famous *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) ruling played a large part in substantiating and upholding segregation in society. In this case, Homer Plessy, a Black man, attempted to board a train labeled for "whites only" in Louisiana. Plessy was charged with violating the state's "separate but equal" train car laws. The case was eventually heard by the Supreme Court,

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which ruled in favor of Louisiana's "separate but equal" laws (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896). This ruling set a precedent for excluding and separating those seen as different or inferior based on race and other factors. Subsequently, in many states, Black people were relegated to separate stores, restaurants, neighborhoods, and Black students were not allowed to be educated with White students.

It was 58 years before the overturning of the segregation of schools upheld by the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling. Not until the landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) was the notion of segregated education as an appropriate educational service model finally challenged. The *Brown v. Board* case originated when a Black student was denied the opportunity to enroll in the public school closest to her home due to the state segregation laws in Kansas. After a battle in the lower courts, the case was brought before the Supreme Court, resulting in the ruling that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal" (*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 1954). For advocates of students with disabilities, the ruling implied that separate education in an institution is "inherently unequal" to being educated in the general education setting. Advocates used the Brown ruling to argue that students with disabilities were now the only population of students who were not provided public education. Advocates asserted that "if segregation by race was a denial of equal educational opportunity for Black children, then certainly the total exclusion of children and youth with disabilities was also a denial of equal educational opportunity," (Yell, 2019, p. 41). Fueled by this legal precedent, a strong movement for inclusion continued to build in the education and disability communities, especially among parents of individuals with disabilities (Yell, 2019; Wehmeyer, 2013). Throughout the mid-century in the United States, the fight for civil rights provided leverage for disability advocates to further access and decrease exclusion for people with disabilities, including within education. Parallels between the struggle for racial equality and disability equality continued, each and together a fight against discrimination stemming from deficit thinking. Since the passing of *Brown v. Board*, the intersection of race and disability has become clearer and the use of disability labels to perpetuate the segregation of Black and Brown students (Ferri & Connor, 2005) is illustrated in the persisting disproportionality in special education in the United States (USDOE, 2020).

Federal Involvement in Special Education

In the context of the history of inclusion for people with disabilities, the widespread support in favor of segregation is deeply woven into the cultural fabric within the United States. Values, dispositions, and belief systems in support of segregation are not easily eradicated considering these values are passed in part through familial generations. This kind of formalized segregation is not a relic of the past, but rather of recent history. For perspective, the parents of today's millennials were born in the middle of the civil rights movement and the great-grandparents of today's millennials made up the general population of the late 1800s. The slow progression in America to provide education to all children reflects the entrenched nature of deficit thinking within society and how it manifests in legal policies and societal norms. Like Black children and children from other minoritized groups, children with disabilities did not gain access and right to public education until State and subsequent Federal legislative involvement.

The evolution of modern inclusive education in America is directly linked to federal intervention. Sociopolitical movements centered on social justice, civil rights, and advocacy catalyze change, both historically and today. The disability rights movement closely followed and benefitted from the establishment of social justice causes and civil rights for other marginalized populations. Like advocates for other marginalized groups, disability advocates leveraged court rulings and related federal legislation to

further the cause of inclusive education. For instance, four years after *Brown v. Board*, President Dwight Eisenhower signed the National Defense Education Act (NDEA, 1958) into law to promote education in the areas of science, technology, and mathematics (NDEA, 1958). While not directly related to the education of people with disabilities, this bill is regarded as the beginning of the federal government's complicated role in the education of United States citizens (Hunt, 2020; Rodriguez & Murawski, 2022). This bill bolstered mathematics and science education and marks the first time the federal government provided funds for public education. Because education is not mentioned in the United States Constitution, education was referred to as "a silence in the Constitution" (Rodriguez & Murawski, 2022). Society and legislative bodies believed the federal government had no duty to fund or regulate education and left all responsibilities regarding education and its funding to the states (Rodriguez & Murawski, 2022). The passing of the NDEA in 1958 set a new precedent for federal involvement in the national education system and opened the door for future federal legislation and influence.

In addition to setting a new precedent, the federal government's first involvement with education through the NDEA also had significant social justice implications. According to Lexico, social justice is defined as "justice in terms of the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society" (2021). Governments, organizations, and individuals hold a range of ideals and interpretations of the true meaning of social justice, resulting in a continuum of social justice models (Bonnycastle, 2011). Within the United States, dilatory legislative action contributes to disparities in the implementation of social justice initiatives, as the federal government has primarily left state governments responsible for such programs. Within the realm of education, inclusion is "about diversity and social justice just as much as it is about mainstreaming and disability" (Thomas, 2013, p. 474). Because the federal government continues to be involved in legislation and subsequent funding related to education and specifically special education, fully realizing inclusive education across the United States is impossible without the federal government's full support. Understanding the nuances of federal influence over education policy, reform, and funding is essential to planning and taking action for inclusive education.

After its initial involvement through the NDEA (1958), the federal government's role in education expanded considerably with the passing of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 1965), signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965. This federal legislation explicitly provided federal funding towards primary and secondary education. Following the monumental Civil Rights Act of 1964, the ESEA was part of President Johnson's "War on Poverty" (Chaveriat, 2016), a social welfare initiative that expanded Social Security, established Medicare, Medicaid, Food Stamps, and several federal work-study programs. The ESEA contributed to social welfare by establishing Title 1, which allocates federal funding towards schools located within communities of low socioeconomic status. When signing this landmark legislation, President Johnson stated this law "represents a major new commitment of the federal government to quality and equality in the schooling that we offer our young people" (Johnson, 1965). Signed during the throes of the civil rights movement, the ESEA placed high emphasis on equal access to quality education (US Department of Education [USDOE], n.d.). This statement further fueled the disability rights movement to ensure that students with disabilities were included in this newly established equal access to education.

Despite the intention of the ESEA to provide equal education for all students, a continued deficit mindset in the greater society resulted in students with disabilities being routinely denied enrollment in public schools. This disconnect between law and practice led to the seminal court case between the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (1972). In this case, public education was denied to 14 children with intellectual and developmental disabilities

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due to being classified as “uneducable and untrainable.” The court ruled that Pennsylvania violated the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, which states “No state shall deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws” (US. Const. amend. XIV). Later that same year, the outcome of the *Mills v. Board of Education* (1972) case established the right of every student to an equal opportunity for education within the District of Columbia (*Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia*, 1972). The District of Columbia (DC) had denied education to seven children with various disabilities, citing a lack of funds to provide services, resources, and supports. In this case, deficit thinking led to the justification of allocating funds for the education of children deemed capable while denying funds for others. Notably, the seven students represented in *Mills v. Board* were also Black, though there is no written indication in the case that the discrimination was based on race (1972). The court sided with the students stating, “if sufficient funds are not available to finance all of the services and programs that are needed and desirable in the system, then the available funds must be expended equitably in such a manner that no child is entirely excluded from a publicly supported education” (1972). This case demonstrates how inclusive education promotes social justice. In adopting the definition of social justice as the distribution of privileges and wealth within society (Lexico, 2021), the government is responsible for equitable funding of education for all students regardless of ability level. The *PARC v. Pennsylvania* and the *Mills v. Board of Education* outcomes combined to set a new precedent that guaranteed students with disabilities the right to an equal opportunity for education.

It should be noted these cases precede the provision of a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for students with disabilities as outlined in Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (from now on referred to as the Rehabilitation Act). The Rehabilitation Act was signed into law by President Richard M. Nixon. Section 504 of this law mandated that any institution that receives financial assistance from the federal government must not discriminate against individuals with disabilities (Martin et al., 1996; Rehabilitation Act of 1973, 1973; Rodriguez & Murawski, 2022). This was the first major legislation to safeguard people with disabilities against discrimination. While the outcomes of *PARC v. Pennsylvania* and *Mills v. Board of Education* are regional, Section 504 ensures all public schools across the country may not deny students with disabilities from enrolling in their programs. A major tenant of Section 504 is the provision of reasonable accommodations, which enables students with disabilities to participate in educational programs or services at the same level as their peers. It is important to note a common misconception regarding special education law is that the IDEA grants the right to an education for students with disabilities. Although the concept and provision of special education services were not yet formally mandated or defined, the right to education for students with disabilities was established 15 years earlier and is bolstered by Section 504 and the IDEA.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act: A New Era

Signed into law in 1975, the first bill to comprehensively address the issue of special education at the federal level was the Education for the Handicapped Act (EHA), also known as Public Law 94-142. This early iteration of what was to become the IDEA introduced sweeping changes to the educational service models for students with disabilities while also mandating specially designed instruction (SDI) and Individualized Education Programs (IEP), amongst other new regulations (EHA, 1975). Rights identified under the IDEA have been challenged many times since 1975, resulting in several landmark cases. One early example is *Timothy W. v. Rochester School District, New Hampshire* (1989). Timothy

W. was a child with multiple disabilities, including intellectual disability, cerebral palsy, and blindness (Steketee, 2020). The school district deemed Timothy as unable to benefit from special education services and thus denied him access to education. The US. First Circuit Court ruled that school districts must provide special education services to students with disabilities, regardless of the level of severity of the disability (*Timothy v. Rochester, New Hampshire School District*, 1989).

In 1990 the EHA was reauthorized and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1990). This revised legislation added two new disability categories (traumatic brain injury and autism) and mandated the creation of Individual Transition Plans for postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities. At this time, the term “mental retardation” was still used in federal law to describe individuals with intellectual disabilities. The passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 expanded on Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. While Section 504 prevents discrimination against people with disabilities, the ADA went further to require that employers make reasonable accommodations for individuals with disabilities. Congress found that “physical or mental disabilities in no way diminish a person’s right to fully participate in all aspects of society” (ADA, 1990). This law resulted in sweeping changes to the physical accessibility in buildings across the country and guaranteed equal opportunity to employment, transportation, telecommunications, and accommodations for individuals with disabilities (Parrott-Sheffer, 2020). While this law does not directly deal with special education, a result of the ADA is the requirement of all public schools to be physically accessible to all, a concept underpinning the “universal design” approach in architecture and structural planning.

IDEA and Establishing Inclusive Education

In 1993, the *Oberti v. Board of Education of Clementon School District* (1992) seminal case ruled that school districts must provide students with disabilities with supplemental aids and services. Furthermore, the court ruled that students with disabilities should be included in the general education setting to the “maximum extent appropriate” (*Oberti v. Board of Education of Clementon School District*, 1992). This decision is widely considered to have established the principle of inclusion for students with disabilities in public schools in the United States. One year later, the ruling in *Sacramento City Unified School District v. Rachel H.* (1994) further solidified the right to inclusive education. In this case, the 9th Circuit Court examined four factors to determine appropriate placement:

(1) the educational benefits available to the child in the regular classroom, (2) the nonacademic benefits of interaction with children who are not disabled, (3) the effect of the disabled child’s presence on the teacher and other children in the classroom, and (4) the cost of mainstreaming. (Martin et al., 1996, pg. 35).

As a result of continued advocacy by professional organizations and families of individuals with disabilities, the 1997 reauthorization of the IDEA included several significant changes. Signed into law by President Bill Clinton, changes to the IDEA included the provision of a general education teacher to be present at IEP meetings. This provision enhances access to general education by ensuring someone knowledgeable about the general education curriculum is present and contributing to the IEP meeting for students with disabilities (USDOE, 1999). Other updates in the 1997 reauthorization of the IDEA included a new mandate for IEPs to address student behavior and clarification that parental consent for evaluation does not mean consent for special education services. The issue of parental consent for

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evaluation and placement circles back to the ideal of inclusion, ensuring any change in access to the general education environment does not occur without parent awareness. It is important to note that the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) was also being formulated and signed during this time, making it a contemporary influence on United States policy narrative and efforts towards inclusive practices (de Bruin, 2019).

Federal legislation and precedential court rulings illustrate how the movement for inclusion was born out of the special education field. This presents a paradox in the requirement that students must be labeled with a disability before receiving specialized services, yet the act of naming and labeling can have significant consequences. As discussed earlier in the chapter, names and labels can perpetuate segregation and discriminatory attitudes. The identification of a student with a disability can lead to “a label that is psychologically, emotionally, and socially damaging. From a critical disability theory perspective, one can see how the medical model of disability perpetuates stereotypes,” (Harris-Bosselmann, 2019, p. 27). It is imperative that labeling, naming, and categorizing is done with caution to avoid the potential influx of negative consequences from deficit thinking and resultant exclusion (Kirby, 2017).

Transition Services and Postsecondary Inclusion

Students with disabilities have been historically underrepresented on college campuses and within the workforce, spurring the need for legislative action (Benz et al., 1997; Grigal & Papay, 2018). The 1997 reauthorization of the IDEA mandated that IEPs should include a section for transition goals and services (IDEA, 1997). These changes reflect the movement for inclusive education, implying that inclusive education should extend beyond K-12 education and into adulthood. A decade later, the 2008 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, now referred to as the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA), emphasizes inclusive education and provides funding for Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (HEOA, 2018). With the advent of inclusive postsecondary education buttressed by the most recent HEOA reauthorization in 2018, students with disabilities must be adequately prepared for college and career postsecondary outcomes. Beginning in elementary school, educators and educational leaders must emphasize the skills needed for students with disabilities to successfully transition into college or career opportunities. This need is underscored in the latest reauthorization of the ESEA, now known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015). The ESSA preserved the provision in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) for rigorous academic standards and allows for students with significant cognitive disabilities to complete alternate academic standards that promote access to general education curriculum. While the ESSA does not directly deal with postsecondary education, it provides funding for states to ensure they implement standards that prepare students for college and career readiness (Slanda & Little, 2018). The opportunities for inclusive postsecondary education provided through the HEOA combined with the increase in rigorous standards and expectations for students with disabilities through the ESSA requires educators to continue providing high-quality education to students with intellectual disabilities with the goal of successful postsecondary outcomes. In this way, inclusion is legislatively extended past PK-12 education and through college and career settings for students with disabilities.

SHIFTING THE PARADIGM: SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Using Systems Thinking for Inclusion: A Call to Action

Today, inclusion within the educational systems is a multifaceted issue that requires a multifaceted approach to dismantle the systems and beliefs that perpetuate the segregation of students with disabilities and other markers of difference. Systems thinking is a comprehensive approach to analysis and problem solving that considers how each part of a system interacts, how the system functions through time, and how the system functions within a larger system (Kim, 2016). This approach offers a valuable way to address the issue of reformation for inclusion. A key concept within systems thinking is the realization that all parts are interdependent. “Without such interdependencies, we have just a collection of parts, not a system” (Kim, 2016, p. 2). The characteristics of problems that benefit from a systems thinking approach include importance to general society, having a known history, being a long-standing and chronic issue, and previous unsuccessful attempts to solve the problem (Goodman, 2016). Based on these characteristics, inclusion within the United States qualifies as a problem that stands to benefit from systems thinking.

Fields with strong connections to education, such as social work and public administration, all incorporate the idea of multiple levels within systems thinking and systemic changes (Adelman et al., 2007; Stroh, 2015). In social sciences, these levels are labeled macro, meso, and micro, corresponding to the sphere of influence or impact of the system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Giddens, 1984). Discussing and reflecting on actions for change in small and large systems is imperative when implementing systems thinking for educational change and inclusion. Numerous interdependent systemic factors contribute to the continued segregation of students with disabilities, many of which stem from a collective deficit mindset and medical model approach. Systemic change requires action within all related systems and throughout every level. Although some actions can be applied to all levels (e.g. modeling inclusivity by honoring individual choice regarding disability language (i.e. person-first or identity-first) in verbal and written communication and materials), targeted actions are needed to address particular elements within specific systems and system levels. Key elements which must be addressed to advance fully inclusive education are national and state legislative bodies, state and local education agencies, local schools administration and educators, professional organizations, higher education, educational corporations or businesses, and communities.

Table 2 presents examples of the systems within each educational system level (macro, meso, and micro) and indicates recommendations for actions towards inclusive and equitable change. The table is based on the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994), the Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action Towards Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education and Lifelong Learning for All (UNESCO, 2015), and research related to systemic change in education (Adelman et al. 1997; Adelman et al., 2007; Stroh, 2015). Table 2 organizes actions for change based on the macro, meso, and micro systems within education in the U.S. This table is not exhaustive but includes actionable items relevant to the system level(s). In this way, Table 2 is a guide for considering each individual’s part within the broader system of education and how they can take action within their level to begin shifting the educational paradigm for inclusive education.

Macro-Level Actions for Change

In social sciences, the macro level of analysis is often referred to as the “global” level, focusing on large-scale systems which impact entire populations and (Ritzer & Murphy, 2019). Macro-level systems include national governing bodies, administrations, and regulations, as well as broad sociocultural systems. Although typically placed in the meso-level, we are including state governing bodies and institutions at the macro-level for the purpose of this discussion. Some examples of macro-level actions to further inclusive education include updating IDEA and enacting legislation that mandates and supports inclusion and fully funding IDEA to support the infrastructure needed for fully inclusive education. At the state level, enacting policies and requirements to include disability rights education and inclusive practices within teacher preparation and professional learning are also macro-level action steps.

Table 2. Recommended actions for stakeholders within different levels of the educational system

Stakeholders	Recommendations to Increase Equity and Inclusion
<i>Macro-Level Systems</i>	<i>Recommendations for Macro-Level actions for change</i>
Federal & State Legislative Bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Enact laws that promote inclusive education, informed by professional organizations and experts ● Appropriately fund IDEA, ESSA, and HEOA ● Mandate equitable redistribution of education funds to better support infrastructure for inclusive education
State Education Agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Update professional standards for all educators to include inclusive and special education practices. ● Set an agenda for professional development focused on inclusive and equitable practices ● Add disability rights to K-12 curriculum (as is often done with the Civil Rights Movement) to foster respect and inclusivity amongst students
<i>Meso-Level Systems</i>	<i>Recommendations for Macro-Level actions for change</i>
Local Education Agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Establish a standard for general education teachers to have comprehensive training in inclusive practices ● Ensure administrator certification or training in special education, inclusion, disability rights, and equity ● Ensure equitable redistribution of funds at the local level
Professional Organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Solicit stakeholder feedback (esp. disability community) on policy initiatives, outreach, etc. ● Provide professional development on inclusive practices and disability studies and disability rights ● Develop professional standards with an emphasis on skills needed for inclusive education
Higher Education and Personnel Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Offer dual-certification teacher preparation degrees so all teachers are prepared to work with all students ● Include social justice and inclusive practices as part of curricula for preservice teachers ● Include disability studies as part of curriculum for undergraduate degrees to promote respect and inclusivity amongst college students
Educational Corporations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ensure products and curricula are based on rigorous research with diverse populations ● Ensure representation of marginalized groups in curricula materials and resources ● Incorporate perspectives of marginalized populations during development of lobbying agenda ● Develop curricula based on UDL principles
<i>Micro-Level Systems</i>	<i>Recommendations for Micro-Level actions for change</i>
Communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Engage in advocacy to promote high-quality, inclusive education for all students ● Engage in the legislative process and vote for legislators who promote values such as equity and inclusion ● Collaborate with school systems and provide input from a family or community perspective
Local Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Allocate resources to ensure teachers participate in inclusive education professional development ● Engage in advocacy to inform legislators of the impact of policies on the local level ● Support bold changes to educational programming by piloting fully inclusive classrooms or schools

Meso-Level Actions for Change

The meso-level of social structure and systemic analysis encompasses community or organizational structures (Ritzer & Murphy, 2019). It includes connecting bodies between the micro, or individual level, and the macro level. Within the education system, school districts, higher-education institutions, and educational corporations could be considered meso-level entities. For the purpose of this discussion, individual schools will be categorized as micro systems, but may be grouped as meso systems in other circumstances. To further inclusive education, meso-level actions would include teacher preparation programs increasing the special education competency requirements (courses and internship) for preservice teachers seeking general education certification, school districts increasing professional learning around special education and students with disabilities for all teachers and administrators, and professional organizations collaborating with the disability community to increase knowledge and inform inclusive policies and practices. It is also important to mention the role educational corporations play in the greater education system. Companies responsible for educational materials, resources, research, and testing must incorporate evidence-based practices and recommendations inclusive of *all* students. People with disabilities and other marginalized groups must be represented in their materials and products and included in organizational leadership and decision-making. Through lobbying and other influence, educational corporations can also advance inclusion and equity for students with disabilities at the macro-level.

Micro-Level Actions for Change

The micro-level of systems and change includes individuals and their immediate relationships with others (Ritzer & Murphy, 2019). In this discussion, individual schools and communities are listed as micro-systems. At this level, actions to advance inclusive education revolve around transforming individual mindsets and the culture of communities and schools. Schools can partner with community members with disabilities, parents, organizations to strengthen the representation and consideration of disability in policies and practices. Through this collaboration, they can also advocate for inclusive education and disability rights at the meso and macro-level systems. Educators and community members can work to be politically informed and active in voting for people and policies committed to inclusion. School administration can take action by leading the transformation of school culture and structures to support inclusive education (e.g. restructure classrooms and staffing to support fully inclusive classrooms, allocate funds for professional learning around disability and inclusive practices, encourage person-first language and the reduction of deficit thinking amongst students and staff).

Engaging with Professional Organizations

While professional organizations are identified as a meso-level system, it is important to recognize their influence on macro and micro levels. Professional organizations have had a significant impact on the movement for inclusive education through their legislative involvement and ability to coalesce individuals from the local level (Rodriguez & Murawski, 2022; Yell, 2019). As such, professional organizations have a responsibility to use their influence to further this movement through advocacy and professional development that confronts deficit thinking and promotes full inclusion. Both the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) have an advocacy history spanning over a century. Table 3 provides a list of several leading professional

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organizations active in either special education, disability rights, and/or social-emotional wellbeing for all students. The policy agendas of each organization are provided as a resource for readers to learn more about engaging in advocacy and promoting inclusive practices. Participation and engagement from educators and educational leaders ensure the organizations are meeting the needs of their stakeholders. Working through this arena within the education system leverages the power of research, experience, and advocacy to further efforts for inclusive education and other key issues in the disability community. Working with professional organizations in this way improves lobbying efforts in the legislative system and provides structure and resources for initiatives that can make a real impact (Fisher & Miller, 2021).

Table 3. Policy platforms of key professional organizations

Professional Organization	About	Policy Platform
Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)	Professional organization dedicated to the education of children with exceptionalities. CEC has several divisions focused on different disabilities.	https://exceptionalchildren.org/policy-and-advocacy/policy-agenda
American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD)	Founded in 1876, AAIDD is a professional organization with a long history of advocating for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.	https://www.aaidd.org/news-policy/policy
TASH (formerly an acronym for The Association for the Severely Handicapped)	TASH promotes inclusion of individuals with significant disabilities and advocates for human rights across the lifespan.	https://tash.org/about/national-agenda/
American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD)	AAPD is a non-profit disability rights organization that aims to increase the political and economic power of people with disabilities.	https://www.aapd.com/advocacy/

Frameworks for Supporting Systemic Inclusion

While many practices have been identified for enhancing inclusive education (McLeskey, 2017), two specific frameworks are recommended to promote access, equity, and inclusion. The first is Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which has its origins in the concept of universal design in architecture. The second framework is social-emotional learning (SEL), which targets specific skills students with disabilities need in an inclusive environment and has the potential to impact the perceptions of students without disabilities to be more inclusive (Cartagena & Pike, 2020). The principles and perspectives underpinning UDL and SEL can be leveraged throughout the development and implementation efforts to advance inclusive education in any educational system across macro, meso, or micro levels.

It is important to recognize that while both frameworks are formulated and supported by decades of research, limited extant research empirically validates these frameworks specifically for supporting the inclusion of students with disabilities. Relatively few schools offer fully inclusive services or programs for students with moderate to severe disabilities, resulting in few studies within the US with generalizable findings on the impact of fully inclusive environments on the academic or social well-being of students (Chung et al., 2019). Instead, many US studies related to inclusion contrive inclusive opportunities through academic, social, or behavioral interventions (Brodzeller et al., 2018; Carter et al., 2015; Kart & Kart, 2021; Kuntz & Carter, 2019). The benefit of this approach is that it works within the continuum of

services model present within the majority of public schools in the US. The drawback of this approach is that it does little to address the systemic factors which contribute to the continued segregation of students with disabilities (Ryndak et al., 2014). As our field moves forward with defying deficit thinking and enhancing inclusive education, rigorous research must be completed within fully inclusive settings to determine practices that are effective within those environments. Additionally, further research is needed which operationalizes UDL and SEL to identify specific elements and practices within these frameworks that best support inclusion for all students (AlRawi & AlKahtani, 2021).

Universal Design for Learning

A comprehensive adoption of UDL (CAST, 2018) transforms practice to be fully inclusive of all students, regardless of ability level. Implementation of UDL defies deficit thinking by creating an educational environment that removes learning barriers on which deficit thinking is predicated. The origin concept of UDL, universal design, was born when the ADA (1990) mandated accessibility to individuals with disabilities. Universal design refers to architectural structures, designs, and regulations that enable people with disabilities to physically access homes, buildings, and other structures (Rose, 2001; Rose et al., 2005). The principles guiding universal design for architecture were combined with research from the learning science and neuroscience field to form the principles of UDL within the context of education. Like universal design in architecture, UDL prioritizes equitable access to quality learning and education for all. The UDL framework is an approach to instructional design that increases accessibility and student autonomy through three overarching principles: multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation, and multiple means of action and expression. Developed by Rose and Meyer (Rose, 1999; Rose, 2001; Rose et al., 2005), UDL is designed to activate the affective, recognition, and strategic networks of the brain. Table 4 includes the UDL guidelines and checkpoints. This framework is intended to provide students access to content, build their knowledge, and internalize self-regulation and other learning processes so students can become independently motivated learners.

Table 4. Universal design for learning guidelines and checkpoints.

	Multiple Means of Representation	Multiple Means of Action and Expression	Multiple Means of Engagement
Access	1) Provide options for perception. 1.1) Offer ways of customizing the display of information. 1.2) Offer alternatives for auditory information. 1.3) Offer alternatives for visual information.	4) Provide options for physical action. 4.1) Vary the methods for response and navigation. 4.2) Optimize access to tools and assistive technologies.	7) Provide options for recruiting interest. 7.1) Optimize individual choice and autonomy. 7.2) Optimize relevance, value, and authenticity. 7.3) Minimize threats and distractions.
Build	2) Provide options for language & symbols. 2.1) Clarify vocabulary and symbols. 2.2) Clarify syntax and structure. 2.3) Support decoding of text, mathematical notation, and symbols. 2.4) Promote understanding across languages. 2.5) Illustrate through multiple media.	5) Provide options for expression & communication. 5.1) Use multiple media for communication. 5.2) Use multiple tools for construction and composition. 5.3) Build fluencies with graduated levels of support for practice and performance.	8) Provide options for sustaining effort & persistence. 8.1) Heighten salience of goals and objectives. 8.2) Vary demands and resources to optimize challenge. 8.3) Foster collaboration and community. 8.4) Increase mastery-oriented feedback.
Internalize	3) Provide options for comprehension. 3.1) Activate or supply background knowledge. 3.2) Highlight patterns, critical features, big ideas, and relationships. 3.3) Guide information processing and visualization. 3.4) Maximize transfer and generalization.	6) Provide options for executive functions. 6.1) Guide appropriate goal setting. 6.2) Support planning and strategy development. 6.3) Facilitate managing information and resources. 6.4) Enhance capacity for monitoring progress.	9) Provide options for self-regulation. 9.1) Promote expectations and beliefs that optimize motivation. 9.2) Facilitate personal coping skills and strategies. 9.3) Develop self-assessment and reflection.
Goal	Expert learners who are purposeful & motivated	Expert learners who are resourceful & knowledgeable	Expert learners who are strategic & goal-directed

Source: (CAST, 2018)

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The UDL framework advances inclusive education by removing barriers to learning and creating educational experiences which consider the unique needs and variability among all learners (Rose, 2001). As a proactive framework, implementation of UDL starts in the lesson planning phase. By proactively planning for multiple modalities and presentations of learning content, educators can minimize the need for further interventions or differentiated instruction after a lesson has concluded. The concept of a “normal” or “average” student is replaced with the reality of nuanced diversity amongst and between all students. The UDL framework for education acknowledges and meets the needs of all learners by providing multiple means of access, representation, and action or expression for every student (CAST, 2018). Regardless of physical, neuro-cognitive, social-emotional, or behavioral differences among students, truly inclusive classrooms should employ the principles and practices of UDL to reject deficit thinking and support the learning and social development of all students (Cartagena & Pike, 2020). In this sense, UDL is a tool for empowering students with disabilities through a social model approach to dismantling disabling barriers to learning.

Social-Emotional Learning

Social-emotional learning (SEL) refers to the process of learning and developing skills related to managing emotions, responsible decision making, and relationship skills (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2020). These skills directly defy deficit thinking by encouraging taking on the perspectives of others and learning to accept and appreciate unique individual differences. True SEL can only occur in an environment that is inclusive of all forms of diversity, as a homogenous group is less likely to provide opportunities for students to exercise these skills. There are five core competencies for SEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020). Students with disabilities struggle with many of these core competencies, and in some instances, the challenges related to these competencies define the very disability itself. For example, Autism Spectrum Disorder is characterized by challenges related to communication. Per the IDEA, “Autism means a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction” (2004, §300.8). Part of the IDEA criterion for Emotional Disturbance is “an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers” (2004, §300.8). Similarly, students with emotional or behavioral disorders struggle with social interaction, relationships, and prosocial behavior (Stormont & Reinke, 2021). Results from many studies indicate universal social and emotional learning programs provided to all students, not just through intervention services, improve positive attitudes towards the self, others, and learning, and enhance prosocial behavior and academic learning (Stormont & Reinke, 2021; Sokal & Katz, 2017; Taylor et al., 2015). Integrating SEL into schools and classrooms promotes inclusion by developing student social and emotional capacities through interaction with students different than themselves, including students with disabilities (Sokal & Katz, 2017). Inclusive classrooms allow students to learn to communicate with, work together with, and value diversity in others - a skill and disposition needed in the ‘real world’ and essential to eliminating deficit thinking (Sokal & Katz, 2017).

Table 5 includes each level of CASEL’s SEL framework along with a brief description. Implementing SEL within the classroom environment ensures that students receive instruction and the support to target these skills. These skills should be taught and practiced in an educational setting with special education and general education students. “Research has shown that students with significant disabilities benefit socially and acquire new skills in general education classes when taught alongside peers with typical

development” (Browder, 2007, p. 2). Implementing SEL schoolwide promotes values and skills such as respect for others, conflict resolution, and relationship building. The emphasis on families or caretakers as well as communities exemplifies true inclusivity within society. Only teaching students with disabilities rote communication skills is not true SEL. As demonstrated by this framework, a holistic approach should be taken to achieve true SEL.

Table 5. Levels of social-emotional learning framework

Levels	Category	Description
1	SEL Core Competencies	SEL comprised of 5 skills: Self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making
2	Classrooms	SEL instruction is carried out most effectively in nurturing, safe environments characterized by positive, caring relationships among students and teachers.
3	Schools	Strong school culture is rooted in students’ sense of belonging, with evidence that suggests that it plays a crucial role in students’ engagement.
4	Families and Caregivers	When schools and families form authentic partnerships, they can build strong connections that reinforce students’ social and emotional development.
5	Communities	Community partners often provide safe and developmentally rich settings for learning and development, have a deep understanding of community needs and assets, are seen as trusted partners by families and students, and have connections to additional supports and services that schools and families need.

Source: (CASEL, 2020)

CONCLUSION

A symbiotic relationship exists between current cultural values and legislative decisions. Cultural values and stigmas, such as deficit thinking, have profoundly impacted legislation. Resultant legislation has further impacted culture in the United States. For instance, businesses initially detested conforming to the ADA’s new inclusive building requirements (1990). Today, universal design in buildings is expected and seen as a modern-day convenience enjoyed by all people, not just individuals with disabilities. Education is another frontier for civil rights and social justice, and inclusion is a central piece in this effort.

A social justice disposition will steer teachers and educational leaders away from deficit thinking and instead lead them to examine their beliefs and values to align educational practices to promote an equitable and inclusive society. “In this sense, the social justice narrative of inclusion is about becoming better persons and raising the ethical standards of American society,” (Danforth, 2016, p. 583). The notion of social justice embraces ideals such as fairness, equality, and distribution of resources to provide equitable opportunities for all citizens. Inclusion within broader society is an inherent tenet of social justice, and the very act of inclusion promotes social justice ideals. In a study completed by Harris-Bosselmann on the perceptions of students without disabilities enrolled in a fully inclusive school, findings demonstrated that “social justice as a value was a prominent theme in all of the student interviews. All were committed to the ideas of equity and inclusion” (Harris-Bosselmann, 2019).

The *Brown v. Board of Education* (*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 1954) decision ruled that separate is not equal, which translates across race and ability. Continuing to separate children within

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and between schools perpetuates the message that disability is a stigmatized difference, not an aspect of valuable diversity. The approach to education as a whole system will change when communities and leaders understand the social justice implications of education and change deficit thinking. Fully inclusive education is not impossible. It is a moral and ethical imperative based on justice, democracy, and equity for all children. When deficit thinking is replaced by a strengths-based commitment to equitable education, all children are seen as capable and valuable. When this perspective is adopted, fully inclusive education becomes no longer an unattainable ideal, but a necessary reality.

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