



Embracing Diversity and Inclusion in Our Schools: Empowering All

By Evon J. Black

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”

- Nelson Mandela

Evon J. Black, MS, is the assistant director of recruitment in the Admissions Office and Outreach Programs at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. She graduated from the Arkansas School for the Deaf and went on to receive her bachelor’s degree in psychology and her master’s degree in educational technology from Gallaudet University. For more than 25 years, Black has worked closely with deaf and hard of hearing student development that ranges from primary, to secondary, to postsecondary education. Her passion for students and education led her to implement the National Black Deaf Advocates (NBDA) Youth Empowerment Summit (Y.E.S.) program in 1997. Twenty years later, she served as president of NBDA from 2017-2019.

This year’s *Odyssey* theme, “Diversity and Fostering Inclusive Learning,” brought back memories of the struggles my mother and I encountered in our efforts as an African American family to successfully navigate through a predominately white education system.

My mother was a single mother of six children. I was the youngest and the only deaf child. We resided in a small, rural African American community in Northeast Arkansas. The Arkansas School for the Deaf (ASD) was located several hours away. By the time I was ready to attend primary classes, I was among the first group of African American students to integrate into ASD. At that time, ASD was clearly not ready to embrace diversity or foster inclusive learning. I experienced a double standard in the dorms. What was especially memorable to me was the practice of requiring the African American girls to wait until the white girls finished taking their showers first before being allowed to take ours. Eventually that practice was discontinued, and attitudes have changed and evolved since then.

Several years later, in 1975, P.L. 94-142 (now called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act)—which guaranteed a free appropriate public education to each child with a disability—was enacted by the United States Congress. One of the main provisions of the law was for parents and students to attend and participate in Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. Attending and participating in IEP meetings was

intimidating for my mother. She was not accustomed to being in a room with several school administrators, teachers, and other professionals who did not look like us. Neither did they share an awareness or understanding of our culture and the community in which we resided. She also found it challenging to comfortably comprehend the meeting discussions

since unfamiliar concepts and terminology were used. My mother was not provided with training to advocate regarding my learning needs and goals, and tools such as the Clerc Center’s Parent Advocacy app didn’t exist back then.

One of my educational goals was to

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attend Gallaudet University. I was influenced by some of the older black ASD graduates who were attending Gallaudet during the time I was a high school student. During one of my IEP meetings, there was discussion about placing me on a vocational training track rather than an academic track. The IEP for me that year included taking vocational classes. My mother, however, was not aware of what students would learn from taking vocational classes. During the school year, I began complaining to my mother that I was being taught how to clean, cook, and sew. My mother was clearly unhappy about what I was learning. She expected me to be enrolled in academic classes so that I could be prepared for college. My mother was also a resourceful person. She used resources in our community, such as the summer camps and after-school programs available at our church,

to help supplement what I was learning at ASD. She was determined to ensure I had access to educational and learning opportunities that had not been available to her when she was growing up. After graduating from ASD, I did go on to attend Gallaudet. I earned both a bachelor's degree and a master's degree despite the challenges of that period in time when diversity and inclusion weren't a priority in schools or even a concern.

Many schools today do try to be more inclusive (e.g., celebrating Black History Month, Deaf History Month, and/or others; modeling inclusive language; utilizing more diverse learning materials in class), but we are still struggling in terms of hiring diverse teachers and staff, including at the top levels (e.g., principals, directors, superintendents). Students with disabilities are still struggling to have their needs met in

schools and programs. Access and acceptance of students and families from LGBTQIA and immigrant communities are still issues. Diversity and inclusion are still a work in progress across the nation in all schools, deaf and hearing. The questions remain: *What must we do to better meet the educational needs of the diverse population of deaf and hard of hearing students in our schools? How do we keep expectations high and best support students based on their goals and unique life experiences?*

Progress cannot be adequately attained unless schools and programs are truly committed to embracing diversity and fostering inclusive learning, to empowering students and their families. Commitment is more than words; it requires leadership and action, reaching out and valuing **all** the diverse groups that make up the fabric of our communities.



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