

Disability Awareness and Recognizing Ableism

If you watch the news or if you're active on social media, you've probably seen any number of "prom proposal" videos – viral clips of high school students asking, sometimes very elaborately and/or expensively, a classmate to prom. Amongst those, you've probably also seen at least one video of the football player or cheerleader asking a classmate with a visible disability to prom. These particular prom proposals might not be elaborate, but they almost always come accompanied by an audience of cheering, joyful observers – fellow students and maybe even a few teachers thrilled to see someone in a wheelchair or perhaps someone with Down syndrome being asked to attend such a milestone event by *the most popular boy or girl in school*.



These videos get a lot of likes and positive comments. Many viewers find them inspirational and uplifting, a moment of light and joy in a world that can seem so callous and cruel. However, there are many within the disabled community, including both those with disabilities and their advocates and allies, who object to these kinds of videos and stories.

But how can asking someone to prom be a bad thing? Especially if that someone might not otherwise be asked or included? Isn't inclusivity what we're striving for?

As with most things, context is everything. If this hypothetical football player or cheerleader had an established relationship with or a genuine interest in getting to know the person with the disability *outside of* appearing charitable to others and feeling good about themselves for including someone who might otherwise not be included, then that's great! Lovely even! But no greater or lovelier than any other person asking someone with whom they are genuinely interested in being with to prom.

And therein lies the objection to these kinds of videos and stories for many within the disabled community: the person with a disability in these videos is being singled out and recognized solely for their disability. If they were not disabled, there would likely be much less interest and fanfare around who asked or didn't ask them to prom.

When we think about discrimination and prejudice against those with disabilities (also known as “ableism”), we tend to think about lack of accessibility, a need for accommodations, or the myriad ways in which simply existing – getting to and from places, eating meals, using the restroom – is more difficult for those with disabilities. And no doubt, all of that is true. But ableism also refers to an attitude or belief that a non-disabled person’s life is worth more than or at least preferable to that of a disabled person’s life. And when we celebrate a disabled person for being asked to the prom – or for having a job, or for being given an opportunity to travel, or for being a pleasant person to be around – *only because they are disabled*, we erase the individual and only see the disability.

At the same time, it’s important to remember that there is a great deal of diversity within the disabled community, including a diversity of opinion on what may or may not be ableist. Many within the community champion person-first language (“a child with Down syndrome” rather than “a Down’s child”) as a demonstrable way of focusing on the whole person rather than the disability. Still others favor identity-first language (“my autistic child” rather than “my child who has autism”) as a means of dispelling the stigma around the disability and the notion that a disability is a hindrance rather than a unique, value-neutral characteristic. Some dislike the use of the word “disability” itself.

These are not easy topics to discuss. But we encourage you to consider these ideas, complex though they may be, and to consider those living and working around you who are different and what you might do to better care for and support them. And a good way to support them is by supporting them the way you would anyone else: with kindness, compassion, respect, and above all, *listening*.

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