

Like many students of my ethnicity and socio-economic class, the benefits of a K-12 education have always been a given. I grew up in a predominantly caucasian school district that lacked diversity. There was never a point in my young academic career where I was conscious of not having at my disposal whatever resources I needed to succeed. I was very fortunate in that sense, but I entirely understand that that's not the case for many others. In it's finest sense, an education should be the definition of a "social good." But I would be naive if I didn't realize that it can be, and often is, "structurally unjust." Unjust to students of color. Unjust to students born into poverty or to those who deal with the challenges inherent in an intellectual or physical disability.

In my time as a special education paraeducator at North Thurston High School, I have witnessed the effects of having privilege, or more often, the lack thereof, specific to students with disabilities. The disparities between special and general education are vast, and I believe therein lies the crux of structural injustice between these populations. Opportunities aren't as readily presented to students with intellectual disabilities or the students who are identified as "severe and profound." It takes a village of family members, peers, and educators to create possibilities for the students in special education classrooms. Even in 2022, according to OSPI statistics, Washington schools are woefully behind in resources and inclusion for the special needs population.

As a volunteer coach and peer tutor for the Special Olympics Washington Unified program, I have a plethora of testimonies that reinforce the social good that is present within that specific program. Through the Unified program, inclusion is promoted via athletic competitions and social activities. Prior to the existence of Unified at North Thurston High School, one of my students had never had a birthday party. He had never been to a movie theatre, had never been bowling, had never been to prom. With the presence and involvement of general education students in Unified, that all changed last year. Empathy and compassion are verbs, active choices that students and educators alike have to adopt to ensure progress toward equality. The special and general education students who give their time to Unified are leading the charge in this fight for equal opportunities. Because of the Special Olympics Unified program, the students that I currently teach are having their abilities empowered.

When I think of my future as an educator, I know that there will be discrepancies to navigate. I understand that as an educator I have to be cognizant of offering a level playing field for all. I look forward to the opportunity to learn how to better do that.