

## Education: One For All, All For One

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An unexplainable fear is linked to certain groups of people in the United States. People are afraid of Muslims because they associate them with terrorism, people are afraid of homosexual men because they associate them with rape, and people are afraid of those with mental disorders because they are deemed unreachable and uncontrollable. An unseen barrier remains between ignorant people and those who are the victims of stereotyping. One specific group of victims is people with autism. Since it is in human nature to distrust and avoid that which is foreign, people tend to avoid autistic people because their condition is rather uncommon and difficult to relate to. Unfortunately, ignorance and the inability to relate can become a problem in social settings and places like public schools. Temple Grandin, a woman with autism, has learned to cope with her disorder and use it to benefit society. Through her novel, *Thinking in Pictures*, which is based on personal experience, she claims that schools and other professional institutions are not supportive of people with autism, and she makes a valid claim. Stereotypes are difficult to break, and most schools are not designed for students with disorders like autism that give individuals the ability to think diversely.

Traditional schools are not an appropriate setting for autistic individuals because teachers and other professionals are not receptive to the needs of autistic students. In a research article by BMC Psychiatry, teachers were surveyed on their knowledge and opinions surrounding autistic students. The data collected showed that 57 percent of teachers were either ambiguous or disagreed that students with special needs should be integrated into mainstream schools (Liu, Zheng, Zaroff, 2016). In addition, according to *The Journal of School Nursing*, a questionnaire was conducted to collect information on a school nurse's knowledge of autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). In this study, it was found that only 23 percent of school nurses knew how to deal with the difficult behavior associated with autism and only 26 percent of nurses knew how to create an environment in the school that would help autistic children develop best (Strunk 2009). If faculty in schools are not educated on how to work with students that have an ASD, it is impossible for these students, who need additional attention, to thrive in such an environment. In *Thinking in Pictures*, Grandin reinforces the idea that autistic students need more support: they "require much more time than others to shift their attention between auditory and visual stimuli" (p. 159). Thus, the educational system does not support individuals with autism because the system does not give them the specialized care they need to help with communication and learning.

Traditional schooling is also not a good fit for people with autism because they are often misunderstood. Students often cannot understand the reasons that their peers with autism act the way they do. They have difficulty understanding that sensory problems brought on by autism are more important than understanding the behavioral problems they cause. For example, many autistics deal with sensory problems when it comes to eating. According to a study from the *Journal of Autism Research and Treatment*, 48.4 percent of autistic children surveyed had taste and smell sensitivity (Nadon, Feldman, Dunn, and Gisell, 2011). It is hard for non-autistic people to understand that something as simple and necessary for survival as eating can be difficult and cause behavioral problems. Grandin describes how they are often misunderstood and punished, relating the time she "was kicked out of a large girls' school for throwing a book at a girl who teased [her]" (p. 164). In turn, these feelings of rejection can be very detrimental as people who perceive themselves as socially-isolated are more likely to incur psychological problems (Myers, Ladner, and Koger, 2011). Furthermore, when autistic people are rejected and punished, they cannot always respond positively and learn from their actions. In an experiment to investigate the emotional reactivity of people with autism, it was shown that autistic children paid much more attention to the visual cue of a happy face than that of a fearful face (Nuske, Vivanti, and Dissanayake, 2016). This means that their response to a negative stimulus was less than that of a positive one. Overall, traditional schooling is not a supportive setting for individuals with autism

because very few people can understand them and communicate with them effectively.

In order to make educational and social settings more receptive to people with autism, awareness needs to be spread. In *Thinking in Pictures*, Grandin explains that, before she went to kindergarten, her mother "Explained to the other children that they needed to help [her]. This prevented teasing and created a better learning environment" (p. 102). These kinds of improvements could be made in social and work settings so that people know how to respond to and work with autistic people. The main issue with inclusion is that people are ignorant about autism and are afraid of the unknown. According to a questionnaire that was taken on university psychology students, when asked to rate whether an autistic person made them feel afraid, 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree, the average ranking was 4.41 (Gardiner and Iarocci, 2013). However, when given brief and inexpensive training about autism, college students showed that stigmas could be weakened and that knowledge about the disorder made them more comfortable in its company (Gillespie-Lynch, Brooks, Someki, 2015). It is also critical for people to recognize that visual thinking can be superior to traditional thinking and can lead to advances in a variety of different subjects, such as engineering and technology. In an experiment conducted to investigate the intelligence patterns in those with autism, PKU, and head injury, it was shown that people with autism excelled in block design despite struggling with the comprehension portion (Dennis, Lockyer, Lazenby, 1999). This study demonstrates that autistics can still be a valuable asset to society; their visual-spatial abilities can be used in different fields.

Autism is just another source of variation within the human pool. It is a difficult process for schools and professional institutions to make alterations for people with autism, but it is also difficult for people with autism to learn in institutions that have no regard for the disorder. However, it is possible to make every environment more supportive and inclusive of people with autism if awareness is spread, creating a setting in which autistic people have more freedom to learn, discover, and make an impact on society.

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