



SIP and Sam Inclusion Coffee Talk

Podcast Transcription

Guest Speaker: Emily Ladau

00:00:04 Janelle Mercado

Welcome inclusion allies. You are listening to the SIP and Sam Inclusion Coffee Talk, a collaborative conversation focused on creating inclusive opportunities for all students. This podcast is brought to you by the Supporting Inclusive Practices project, SIP, and Changing Perspectives. We are your hosts, Janelle Mercado and Sam Drazin.

00:00:26 Sam Drazin

A special thank you to the California Department of Education for funding this project, along with the El Dorado and Riverside County Offices of Education, for their ongoing support of inclusion for all students, including students with disabilities. If you are committed to being an inclusion ally, this podcast is for you.

00:00:51 Janelle Mercado

So today we have Emily Ladau is a passionate disability rights activist, writer, storyteller, and digital communications consultant whose career began at the age of 10, when she appeared on several episodes of Sesame Street to educate children about her life with a physical disability. Her writing has been published in outlets including The New York Times, SELF, Salon, Vice, and HuffPost and her first book, *Demystifying Disability* (which is a fabulous book, by the way), was published by Ten Speed Press, an imprint of Penguin Random House, in September 2021. Emily has spoken before numerous audiences, from the U.S. Department of Education to the United Nations. Central to Emily's work is harnessing the power of storytelling as a tool for people to become engaged in disability and social justice issues. So thank you so much for being with us today, Emily.

00:01:50 Emily Ladau

Thank you so much for having me. I am so excited to be in conversation with you both.



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00:01:56 Janelle Mercado

We're thrilled! So Emily, I have my first question that I just I was dying to ask you and especially after reading your book because, you go so, you go in depth about what is disability and what is ableism. So for our listeners, maybe we can start there: just telling us what exactly is ableism?

00:02:21 Emily Ladau

I think that's a really great and important place to start! Because when we are talking about different types of discrimination and experiences with stigma and prejudice, so often ableism is left off the list. Because we don't recognize that discrimination against the disability community is such a common occurrence, and so we don't talk about it. But ableism is incredibly pervasive and there are a multitude of definitions, but I try to describe it as simply and straightforwardly as possible, and I say that it is attitudes and actions and circumstances that devalue someone on the basis of disability. So that's whether that person actually has a disability or is perceived as having a disability or using disability in in derogatory and insulting way.

And ableism is something that anyone can experience regardless of whether they have a disability or not. I think that's something we don't really tend to think about when we're talking about ableism, but it's true. The attitudes about disability that we have, are so incredibly ingrained in our minds. As a society where we think of disability as this negative, shameful thing, that we immediately jump to it as a way to insult and put someone down. In addition to the fact that we also often judge people on the basis of the fact that they do have a disability, and so it's incredibly rampant.

And on top of that, I want to remind everyone that one in four adults in the United States has a disability. So this is not some niche issue that we're talking about ableism is something that impacts so many people day-to-day. That we need to acknowledge it, and in order to acknowledge it that means taking that step back and really thinking about the disability experience, and recognizing that it's not something that just exists in a bubble, but rather that disability cuts across EVERY identity. So we can't simply look at it as a silo-ed issue, because it's something that absolutely impacts either your life or the life of somebody that you know or love or care about or work with. And so when we're starting to think about disability as what it really is, which is a part of the fabric of our humanity, then we start to realize that we absolutely need to be thinking about ableism. And not only do we need to be thinking about it, but we need to be actively fighting against it.



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00:05:14 Janelle Mercado

Yeah Emily, I, I couldn't agree with you more! And looking at, at like you mentioned, traditional.. traditionally marginalized groups and knowing that disability is a large, marginalized.. traditionally marginalized group, yet that sits in the intersection of other traditionally marginalized groups. And we're not talking about it! Why do you think we're not talking about ableism and ableist structures, and disability.. discrimination against disability.

00:05:45 Emily Ladau

I think there are so many reasons for that, but largely it's because we have been sent the message that it's not something we should be talking about. We're supposed to keep it in the corner and keep it quiet, it's taboo, we shouldn't really address it. And I don't honestly fault people for that because we learn what we live, and so much of what we live is centered on this mindset that disability is a bad thing, that it's a tragedy! And so, when we're taught to look at disability that way, and we're not taught about it in any sort of real positive light. When it's not in our school curriculums, when we don't see enough positive representation in the media. We don't have the tools in the language to have honest and open communication about disability and so instead we're afraid to talk about it. But we forget that we are surrounded by ableist structures, and if only we would begin to have these conversations, we could begin to dismantle and eliminate these structures.

And I point to examples of the fact that yes, ableism can often be interpersonal in the sense that you can say something that might be a microaggression meaning, you make a comment, or you ask a rude question, or you make an assumption about someone. But we also exist in a world that shuts out people with disabilities in so many ways, and one of the biggest examples that I point to in terms of systemic ableism is public transportation. Which is so often not fully accessible to people with a variety of disability, and because of that, it then creates barriers to full participation in education, and employment, in access to healthcare, in socialization, in doing things like going to exercise your right to vote.

And so, suddenly you realize that when systems are designed to shut us out, it's not as common to see and engage with disabled people because we live in a world that keeps us from fully engaging. Which then creates a cycle of us feeling uncertain, not wanting to talk about it, not knowing how to interact and so we are stuck in these self perpetuating cycles. And really, the only way to break them is to talk about ableism. To talk about disability, to begin to embrace it as part of the human experience.



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00:08:33 Janelle Mercado

And I just, I so appreciate you pointing out, how important it is to lift up the voices of the disability community in order to hear that about that lived experience. Um, there's a quote that I pulled from your book that I just really want to honor because it says so

“It's important to remember that if you've met one disabled person, you've met one disabled person. And if you have a disability, then the only disability experience you're an expert on is your own.” And, in your book, you talk about becoming a disability ally. Recognizing that, we need to come together collectively to be to be disability allies, but also that the disability experience really does bring a unique perspective from every single person's lived life.

00:09:26 Emily Ladau

I am so glad that you brought that up because I always want to be sure that I am giving the caveat that I am only one disabled person, and I am a white, physically disabled woman who communicates verbally and I have the privilege of having a supportive family, and I have been able to receive a full education, and I am employed, and so I acknowledge that I exist in this overlapping space of privilege and of marginalization. And I am able to use the privilege that I have to forge a platform in order to be able to educate and to have these conversations, but I am not the expert on any disability experience other than my own experience.

00:10:22 Sam Drazin

How do we recognize that individual lived experience, but simultaneously, inspire and work collectively to create more inclusive societies?

00:10:38 Emily Ladau

I love this question and I think that it is exactly by honoring that individual experience that we create a more collectively inclusive society. Because if we are not willing to recognize and celebrate each person individuality, then we're automatically excluding them from the conversation. And so, I think it's by accepting that each person has a different reality and that we need to make room and hold space for those realities, even if they are sometimes in opposition to each other. That's how we'll begin to create a common pathway forward. I think that acknowledging differences and celebrating



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differences is actually the way forward when it comes to creating a more inclusive world.

And I know that that sounds sometimes cliché and a little bit cheesy, but I also think it's really important to acknowledge that. For so long, people who hold any kind of marginalized identity have really had those identities erased. And I know that when I was younger, the biggest compliment that you could pay me was that you forgot that I was disabled, or you didn't see me as disabled, or you didn't remember that I used a wheelchair, or think of me in that way. And, I have since completely shed that mindset because I've come to realize that if you are not seeing my disability, if you are overlooking that part of me, then you are not seeing all of me and you are not accepting all of me. And in order to truly include and uplift someone, you have to celebrate who they are as a whole person. And that means not having to ignore a part of them in order to see them as a whole person.

00:12:45 Sam Drazin

We started this conversation around ableism and you know, we kind of I feel like, the thread of our conversation thus far in today's episode has really focused on language and the power language has to recognize individuals create, inclusive and or perpetuate exclusive communities and societies.

Um, as you were talking, Emily, one of the things that came to mind and love to hear your thoughts on this, is, you know when I go into schools and I coach teachers on creating inclusive environments for students with disabilities, teachers always come back and they're like, are we allowed to use the word disability? Like, can we say that? Is that OK?

And, and I'm like you Emily, I'm like, 'Yes ,we have to use the the the verbiage, we have to say what it is. Um, but it's it's very interesting how some people that sparks a lot of anxiety for them. They become very cautious and ambivalent, saying the name of a specific disability or just saying disability opposed to, you know differently-abled or or something like that. Would love to hear your thoughts on that.

00:13:57 Emily Ladau

There are so many times where I will give a presentation, and I'll realize that I've lost people almost in the first slide because I said the word disability, and they're stuck on whether it was OK that I said it. And so, they're not necessarily processing anything else that I'm saying, because they don't know if it's even acceptable that I'm using that word.



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And so, I've started beginning all of my presentations by reminding people that it is 100% OK to say the word disability. That it is not some kind of a bad word, and I understand why they may think it is because we've been sent the message for so long that it is.

And I am someone who's very passionate about flipping that script and getting people to recognize that when you acknowledge disability as part of a person, when you say the word disability, you're simply talking about another person or another part of what makes that person who they are. And you're talking about an identity, and for so many people disability is an identity with a history, with a culture behind it, one that we don't necessarily learn about in mainstream public school curricula. But it is there, and it is important, and it is real, and it is what makes people who they are. And so, I don't want people to be afraid of saying the word disability.

I also note that language is a deeply personal choice, and if somebody does decide that disability is not the right word for them, then I will honor that so long as they will honor that disability is the right word for me. And I also notice that you mentioned some euphemisms, right, like differently-abled, or special needs, and again, if that's the terminology somebody chooses for themselves, then go for it.

But I will also urge people to think about the fact that when we're avoiding using the word disability, we are in some ways buying right into that stigma against it, and so rather than dancing around that word, why not just call it what it is? Especially because disability holds weight in many ways, it's the legal term, right? It's not 'The Americans with Special-Needs Act' or the 'Differently-Abled Americans Act'. It's the Americans with Disabilities Act.

And if you want access to supports and services, those supports and services aren't really special-needs related, it's disability related, and that's OK. And on top of that, you know when you're saying things like special-needs or differently-abled, my question is always, do you not see how that might actually cancel itself out a little because everybody has different abilities. And everybody has needs. And I don't necessarily think that because I'm disabled my needs are special compared to yours, and the joke that I make quite often (to the point that my family tells me I need new material already) but, I think it does the job: When you say I have special needs, I say, sure, I do. I need you to fan me and feed me grapes like a queen. Other than that, my needs aren't really that special.



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00:17:24 Janelle Mercado

Well, uh ha ha, I'm I'm still chuckling, chuckling by what you just said, Emily, because I would really love somebody to fan me and feed me grapes as well. So I'm thinking I'm, I'm listening to the two of you talk, and I'm thinking about language, and how important it is that we do acknowledge that language is, is so important because it becomes a carrier of stigmas, but it all it also is a personal preference, right? And I think I've heard Sam say this before, if you have a question and you're free to talk about it just ask, ask someone. Ask me, what it what is my preference? How do you want, you know, how do I want to be referred? It's the same as saying what are my pronouns.

Uhm, and so I think it is going to be very specific to the person, but acknowledging that language is very powerful and also acknowledging that, it's really necessary for us to begin to shift our mindsets about the stigma of disability. Um and stop thinking from a deficit-mindset and start thinking in terms of positive-mindset, and everyone is capable of learning and growing. And so I just wanted to hear what your thoughts were on this concept, of just really abandoning our deficit-model of thinking.

00:18:52 Emily Ladau

I am totally with you on that, and I think that we can absolutely take a realistic view of what disability means. And in my case, it means that I am unable to walk. But then people immediately jump to saying something like, Oh well, you're wheelchair bound, or you're confined to a wheelchair. And so you're jumping to that deficit mindset, when in fact, my wheelchair is my freedom and my wheelchair is what allows me to move around. So I am a wheelchair user, not someone who is bound to my wheelchair.

And so, yes, it's true that I have a physical limitation, but there are also tools out there to support me in that physical limitation. And if there is someone who has a communication disability, there are tools available. Augmented communication tools available that can support them to communicate. So they may not communicate verbally, but that doesn't mean that they don't have something to add to the conversation. And again, it's about shifting from that deficit-mindset to realizing that we have a world around us that provides us with, you know, the tools and supports and services that we need. Of course, if only we know where to find them and also I strongly acknowledge that financial accessibility is a real concern as well, but we cannot simply look at disability as deficit. We have to look at it as an opportunity to adapt.

00:20:23 Janelle Mercado



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Yeah, I love how Shelley Moore always talks about how important it is to presume competence, and we just we have to start there in our thinking, in the way that we view disability, the way that we talk about it. And like you said, looking at these accessibility options instead of, you know, it being a deficit, it's it's an opportunity to create and mitigate barriers that exist for individuals with disabilities.

00:20:54 Emily Ladau

Could not agree with you more.

00:20:55 Sam Drazin

So I know that. Oh!

00:20:56 Janelle Mercado

Hmmhm.

00:21:00 Sam Drazin

You can go ahead Emily, sorry.

00:21:02 Emily Ladau

Oh no, I was just agreeing, please go ahead.

00:21:06 Sam Drazin

So I know Emily, that one of the things that you're really passionate about is really helping folks think about what does it mean to be an ally to the disability community. And that you know, allyship, um, is not always just a title, but it's actually an action. It's a verb. It's something you could do. I'm, I'm sure, our listeners, we've been talking a lot about language and kind of thought processes, and I'm sure our listeners would love to kind of get some information here like how do I become an ally to the disability community? What does it mean? What does it look like? What does it sound like? What does it feel like to be an ally?

00:21:51 Emily Ladau

I'm so glad you brought this up, because I think that it is the culmination of all we've been talking about, right? We have so much information about what ableism means and using language that is affirming of disability, and when we are thinking and talking about



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disability, we have to be very mindful of the diversity of experiences that are held within the disability community.

And, that is, to me, really what it means to be an ally, is recognizing that it's not a title that you give yourself, but rather it's about taking consistent action to keep learning about the disability community, to keep engaging with the disability community, and to keep supporting the disability.

00:22:46 Janelle Mercado

Absolutely Emily! We have to not shy away from the conversation. It's going to be uncomfortable and that's OK. Lean into that discomfort and, um, like you said, I mean at the very beginning of this conversation, it's it's about starting the conversation so that we can learn and grow.

So for those of our listeners out there who are wondering where they can learn more about disability history, culture, identity, community, having these crucial conversations. Do you have any recommendations on where they might be able to turn for resources, references, or just ways to engage.

00:23:31 Emily Ladau

I am a big proponent of engaging with the disability community on social media because that's how you know that you are getting some of the most authentic perspectives and such a wide range of perspective. But also remember that there's so much media out there. There's still certainly major gaps in media representation, but there are a lot of places to go now as we're beginning to expand around disability culture in literature, in television, and movies, and so.

So, I am a fan of getting into that culture wherever you can, whether it's following people on social media, whether it's making yourself a list of books to read by disabled authors, whether it's checking out shows that have authentic disability representation or movies with authentic disability representation. And certainly I could go on and on, and name every single account I would want you to follow, or every single book I would suggest you read or show that you watch. And and I can give some recommendations that perhaps could be shared in notes along with the show, but suffice it to say that the media is out there and just start to dive into it, and I think it will open up an entire world of learning for you, for sure.

00:25:01 Sam Drazin



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Emily, every time I talk to you I learn more. I have a whole host of lightbulb moments what I call, you know, going off all the time. So, I wanna thank you so much for for being a part of today's episode for sharing your own personal journey, you are professional insight your lived experience and your passion for this work.

00:25:28 Emily Ladau

It was such an honor to join both of you, and I know that you, are similarly so passionate about this work, and so these are the kinds of conversations that you know really fill me up and remind me that there are so many people committed to doing this work. And while I joke. That I would love to put myself and all of us out of business, I think we'll be around for a few more years, as we continue to teach and learn and grow together, and so I'm glad to be able to do it in community spaces, with people like both of you.

00:26:04 Janelle Mercado

Right back at you, Emily! thank you so much for your time today! We appreciate you and love your book and can't wait to continue these conversations.

00:26:14 Emily Ladau

Thank you for having me!

00:26:18 Sam Drazin

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00:26:40 Janelle Mercado

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