Discriminatory Language in Schools

By Breanna Bastian-Johnson

Over centuries, bullying and verbal discrimination in schools have been nothing but acts to show power over other kids, widely seen as inappropriate and unethical. However, as of late, these actions and use of language have been heavily normalized once again in newer generations across the schools of America. Some may brush them off as cruel, “dark-humor” jokes, though others may say these discriminatory actions and verbal language may have a deeper meaning that is affecting children heavier than they may have thought.

As a junior in high school, a 17 year old girl, I, like every other girl my age, believe I am a bit more mature than my peers. However, by witnessing discriminatory language directed and nondirected towards my peers at school, and many other schools, I do not believe it is solely based on immaturity, but also overall upbringing and morals. Discriminatory language in schools, including racist and ableist slurs, homophobic remarks, and demeaning language toward accents or non-English speakers are heavily harmful to growing students in their learning environment, causing aspects such as lower self-esteem, increased anxiety, and diminished academic performance.

According to the UK Parliament House of Commons Library, a report from the YMCA estimates--based on focus group and survey research--that “95% of young Black people report that they have heard and witnessed the use of racist language at school.” Racial discrimination is not always seen clearly; however, I have witnessed members of my own school using and yelling racist slurs in the lunchroom and in the hallways, direct and nondirected to those affected. Off-putting and stereotypical comments, nasty looks, and overall distinguished attitude have all been presented by white students towards students of color at not only my school, but others schools across America. This causes immense discrimination in the learning environment, directly amplifying obstacles for students of color. The same report states that “49% of young Black people felt that racism was the biggest barrier to attaining success in school, while 50% said the biggest barrier was teacher perceptions of them…” Although the language may not be directed towards these students and the intent of them is nothing related to harm, these words still affect students heavily and warps the way of thinking of young, impersonable attendees in the school environment.

Furthermore, in learning environments, according to The Oregon Department of Education, “Ableism’s intersection with other systems of oppression — like racism, sexism, and classism — make the experience of people subjected to multiple systems of oppression at the same time more complex and severe, especially when it comes to

discipline." Discriminatory language comes in many different ways. Minority groups spread over multiple individuals in different categories, some fitting into multiple. Violent language affects a wide range of students each day in their school setting, causing an overall obstacle of learning simply due to the environment they are engulfed in. Ableism is one of the most common and normalized forms of discrimination presented in my school. Students that are affected by disorders such as ADHD and autism are subject to groups of people who simply wish to push an individual down to raise themselves, yet also groups who do it subconsciously. The Oregon Department of Education states, "Subtle ableism…involves indirect, often unnoticed actions or behaviors that marginalize or discriminate against individuals with disabilities." These actions, as performed by my peers, go unnoticed and unaddressed. These particular students frequently see others exemplifying these violent behaviors, unconsciously following them to "fit in."

Many other forms of linguistic discrimination are presented in school environments, and outside of them. This verbal violence has been widely normalized in students across the nation, forming in conscious and subconscious actions, yet nonetheless, harmful.