

MAY 2018 CONVOCATION SPEECH BY PROFESSOR SHIRIN ANTIA

First, let me say it's quite a responsibility to be asked to give the very last lecture that you, as the captive audience, can't escape! Second, I suspect that what I have to say will be self-evident to many of you, but I'm going to say it nevertheless. The title of my talk is "Public and Inclusive Education". And the point I am going to make is that you shouldn't take either public education or the inclusivity of public education for granted. These may be ideas that you've grown up with and accepted as normal. However neither public education nor inclusive education is universally accepted or practiced.

I'm an immigrant to the U.S. I grew up in India where I was a reasonably privileged person and the recipient of a good education. I attended private mission schools along with children from India's upper economic classes. The system of private schools (ironically, following the terminology adopted from the British colonial Empire, called public schools) was quite exclusive. I could attend because my parents could pay the tuition and because I spoke English.

The few government schools in existence were for poor children, staffed with under-educated underpaid teachers. Children of uneducated farm workers, street sweepers, or household help did not go to school, because they were not considered capable of learning.

My parents, my friends, my friends' parents, and I all accepted this system and believed that this was how education should work. I never really questioned the system until I arrived in the U.S. in 1972 to attend graduate school in special education. There was plenty for me to learn, but one idea was front and center and extremely "foreign". It took me a while to understand that the predominant school system in the U.S. was public not private – that schools in this country were supported by public tax dollars, therefore they were really public schools. And these public schools were (at least in theory) open to children of all races, religions or socio-economic status.

Over time I learned that the actual practice of universal public education in the U.S. fell short of the ideal. In 1972 there were U.S. children who were considered not capable of learning and were excluded from public schools. These were children with learning disabilities, emotional problems, mental retardation, physical handicaps or sensory disabilities. Schools had ingenious ways of excluding these children. Children with physical disabilities could not attend because they could not climb the stairs to their classrooms or be toilet trained; blind and deaf children could not attend because they could not take intelligence tests that required you to be able to see pictures and hear directions; mentally retarded children could not attend because these same tests showed they had not reached the required mental age of five years to enter first grade.

What happened to these children? Well some could go to special schools, such as schools for deaf and blind children. These schools were residential; parents only saw their children at Thanksgiving, Christmas, and in the summer. Other children, whose parents could afford it, could attend private schools, and the rest could stay home or be placed in mental institutions for their entire lives. My most vivid memory of my first field trip, when attending the University of Pittsburgh, was a visit to Canonsburg Mental Hospital. I entered a large room devoid of anything except 40 mats on the floor on which lay 40 adults with severe disabilities, wearing only diapers, staring at the tube lights on the ceiling. The only interaction they had with people was when they

were turned by an attendant every few hours, and when they were fed. They had spent their entire lives in this room. No one believed that these individuals could learn.

Times were changing however. In 1975 Congress passed legislation giving children with disabilities the right to a free, public, education and the right to attend schools along with their non-disabled peers. We've come a long way since 1975. Today more than 62% of children with disabilities spend most of the school day with their non-disabled peers. Only about 5% of children with disabilities attend special schools or institutions. Research shows that, with support, children with disabilities can indeed learn and thrive in our public schools.

Although it took me a while to appreciate public education, I realized then, and believe now, that the ideal that all children can learn, and can learn together, is the foundation of a civilized and inclusive democratic society. Attacks on public education, which we hear and see every day, are attacks on this foundation. Yes, our public schools may not be as good as we would like, but abandoning the idea of public schooling is not the answer. Public schools are one of the few places in our society where a diverse group of children can come together to form a community. I hope that my grandchildren will never have to live in the kind of society in which I grew up, one where they will seldom encounter, learn from, and work with individuals different from themselves.

It may sound trite to say so, but we will have to fight to keep education public and inclusive. The concept is relatively recent and not something we can take for granted. It does not exist and is not valued in many parts of the world. It can disappear. The disappearance might be slow and largely invisible like the Mullah's donkey.

Let me tell you about the Mullah's donkey, a story that every Indian and Pakistani children know. The Mullah decided that his donkey was too expensive because he was eating too much. So he decided to give him a little less food every day. Alas, one day he found the donkey was dead and he lamented "It's so unfair. My donkey died just before I taught him to live on nothing".

I'll end by a quote from John Dewey whom I never appreciated during my Indian college days.

What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy.