What Your Colleagues Are Saying . . .

As someone who struggled in school, and as a parent of kids with learning disabilities, I know firsthand that teachers are a key reason for whether a child meets their potential or falters. If thoughtfully addressed, neurodivergence can go hand in hand with creative genius. This book is the book all teachers need in order to make sure all students have an equal chance to thrive.

—**Shepard Fairey**, Artist and Activist, Los Angeles, CA

Here's why this book matters. Confusion and chaos continue to surround teaching students with learning disabilities. Too often policies driving educational practices cause major pivots away from the knowledge, resources, and expertise educators need to cultivate inclusive, liberatory literacy environments where all students thrive. Cruz cuts through this noise. With *Neurodiversity in the Literacy Classroom*, finally, every educator will have access to information and practical, research-based strategies to support neurodivergent students. Schools do not always have the resources to send educators to conferences or classes to acquire and develop the skills needed for inclusive classrooms to flourish. But now we have this incredible resource to keep at our fingertips, to use as our guide, and to light the way.

—**Sonja Cherry-Paul**, Educator, Author, and Consultant, Red Clay Educators, New York, NY

Neurodiversity in the Literacy Classroom is a book I wish every general educator had access to! This book explains IEPs, UDL, dyslexia, ADHD, and autism in a clear and compassionate way, and celebrates the brilliance and complexity of students. It makes it very clear that literacy learning for neurodivergent children is not about perfection, but more about starting with joy, intention, and the belief that every child deserves access to high-level literacy learning.

—**Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz**, Professor of English Education, Teachers College, Columbia University; Author, *The Archaeology of Self: The Introspective Educator's Guide to Racial Literacy*, New York, NY

Neurodiversity in the Literacy Classroom is intended to be an approachable and supportive "mentor on the shelf." The author writes in an accessible and engaging voice and shares practical strategies for creating a responsive literacy environment for neurodiverse learners along with relatable anecdotes and wisdom that come from her vast experience in the field. You will find yourself reaching for this book again and again!"

—**Jan Valle**, Professor, The City College of New York, New York, NY

Wow! I wish *Neurodiversity in the Literacy Classroom* had been available when I was teaching, since it serves as the primer many educators need to support neurodivergent students and help them thrive. The book offers educators a comprehensive, strengths-based guide to creating inclusive and effective literacy environments. Colleen's research-based insights, practical strategies, and thoughtful guidance make this an invaluable resource for building classroom communities where every student feels like they belong.

—Stacey Shubitz, Literary Consultant and Author of *Make the School System Work for Your Child with Disabilities: Empowering Kids for the Future*, Lititz, PA

What a gift of a book! With detailed but accessible support for teachers at every stage of their careers who wish to build truly inclusive learning communities, M. Colleen Cruz offers practical strategies backed by extensive research and real-life stories. Cruz's writing is authentic and compelling—her thoughtful, engaging, and dynamic prose is free of jargon and encouraging about the possibilities for building on what we know will strengthen our schools and classrooms. *Neurodiversity in the Literacy Classroom* is a timely and absolutely essential resource for the classroom and beyond.

—Olugbemisola Rhuday-Perkovich, Author and Teaching Artist, New York, NY

Early in this book, M. Colleen Cruz informs the reader that "this is a book about belonging." Being a literacy teacher who also deals with my own AuDHD, I am thrilled to have this powerful and practical road map for making my own classroom a place of joy and belonging for all students.

—Ray Smith, Reading Teacher, Bryan Station Middle School, Lexington, KY

Neurodiversity in the Literacy Classroom

For the person reading this book who has been told they can't, their students can't, or their own children can't, and have kept going anyway.
I see you. I am you. We are not alone.

Neurodiversity in the Literacy Classroom

The General Educator's Guide to IEPs, Dyslexia, ADHD, Autism, and More

M. Colleen Cruz

CORWIN

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Contents

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https://companion.corwin.com/courses/neurodiversity
for downloadable resources.

Acknowledgments

The last book I wrote was published in 2020. This is the longest stretch of time I have gone without publishing anything since my first book was published in 2003. I have never worked harder on a book or believed more in its content; nor have I ever received the level of support, care, and enthusiasm I have gotten during the writing of this one. There are so many people, in ways large and small, who made it possible for me to finish and to whom I owe a debt of gratitude.

First and foremost, I thank my professional community. As someone who works independently, I don't have colleagues I share an office or a school with, but I do have a loose network of colleagues I call, text, grab lunch with, sit with on the floor in a conference hallway, or trade information with at an airport. Sometimes we're in touch once a year, sometimes every week or day, but no matter the amount of time, their support, insights, and generosity have been invaluable. I'd like especially to thank Donalyn Miller, Nell Duke, Carla España, Stacey Shubitz, Natalie Louis, Brooke Gellar, Carl Anderson, Maria Walther, Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, Kate Roberts, Maggie Roberts, Cornelius Minor, and Sara Ahmed. Thank you to Arléne Casimir for your expertise and advice, Amanda Hartman for your optimism and cheerleading, Margaret LaRaia for the best non-official-editor advice in town, Beth Neville for being my favorite neurodiversity fact-sharing friend, and Kass Minor for being my team-teaching and IEP thought partner.

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hype man and a model for the power of learning about your brain no matter your age. Thank you to my sister Michelle Cruz for dealing with my flakiness, my missed calls, and my shortened visits because of the never-ending book deadlines. Thank you to Nico Cruz for reminding me of the importance of play, performance, and music every single day. Thank you to Sam Cruz for reminding me to take care of myself, being curious about the project, and reminding me of the value of spending time outside with my hands in the dirt making things grow. And of course, an inadequate thank you to Nadine Cruz, our family joy-maker and teamster, strong shoulder to lean on, and my most trusted gut-checker who was my most frequent "does this sound right?" page reader. You are an inspiration to me and everyone who knows you.

About the Author

M. Colleen Cruz is an educator, independent consultant, and author committed to making rich literacy education accessible. Her popular books include *The Unstoppable Writing Teacher,* the Writers Read Better series, and *Border Crossing,* a finalist for the Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award. Her student-centered, research-driven work is used by classroom teachers, administrators, and teacher education programs nationally and internationally. She lives in Brooklyn with her family, her persnickety dog Charlie, and way too many books.

Introduction

Read This First!

One day, early in my career, I was having lunch with other teachers in someone's classroom when a colleague put down her sandwich, looked around to make sure no kids or administrators were around, and said, "I am going to ask a question that may make me look bad, but it's really bothering me. If a kid doesn't know how to read in your class, what do you do? Like I am embarrassed to admit, I just tell them to pick easier books and read a lot and then wait for Sandy (our reading specialist) to pick them up. I don't really know what to do if they don't know how to read, do you?"

This launched into a rather awkward conversation where a group of teachers, ranging in experience from new to veteran, all admitted that most of what we knew had to do with students who already read and could do it pretty well.

None of us had a deep understanding of phonics or fluency instruction, let alone variations on how to teach comprehension, or what to do when the things we knew how to do didn't work. There was an after-school scripted program that some of us did with select students, but everyone admitted that if a kid needed something outside of the program—if, say, the way the program taught how to break up long words didn't work for a kid—we were stumped. We all realized that we were, in effect, useless as instructors to kids who were not typical learners.

I couldn't sleep that night, and I realized how deeply problematic it was that I really didn't know how to teach foundational reading skills to students who needed them. I taught at a highly regarded public school with lots of professional development opportunities, resources, and programs available, but none of them helped me to teach literacy to students with individualized education plans (IEPs), 504 plans, or anyone else who needed intervention.

That lunchtime conversation launched a quest. I decided I had a lot to learn. I requested a switch in position and became a teacher in a co-taught, inclusive classroom. I threw myself into reading everything I could get my hands on, signing up for professional development on my own, talking to the reading specialists at my school, the service providers, the special educators. By the time I left my classroom to become a teacher educator, teaching reading and writing to students who were identified as having disabilities or difficulties with literacy became an area of passion and expertise.

While it has been about two decades since that lunchtime discussion, that quest to learn as much as I possibly can about students who are too often underserved by general education in the United States, and fine-tune understandings of how best to serve them, continues. Much of what I have learned and continue to learn is in this book.

We Can Only Do What We Know

When I went to graduate school, I was only required to take two special education classes as part of that degree. A quick scan of more recent programs for teacher certification with a master's degree continues to show an average of one to two special education classes required for a graduate degree in education. While we are seeing more and more programs that offer concentrations or special certification coursework that require more instruction in special education, in general, most new teachers, if they go the traditional route, have only taken one to two classes of dedicated coursework in neurodiversity, learning disabilities, physical disabilities, or special education. It is not unusual for teachers who went an alternative route to step into the classroom without having taken a single class on learning disabilities or neurodiversity.

When I started teaching, I believed that while I might have a few students who had IEPs or 504s, the responsibility of effectively teaching those kids what they were mandated to know would belong to the special educators. This notion seemed to be supported by my school administration. We pored over data, recommended students for interventions or evaluations, and sat in on IEP meetings, but as for the actual teaching of those students? I felt woefully unprepared and no one seemed concerned about that. I was lucky enough to teach in a building with skilled interventionists and special educators. While it was never explicitly said that those students' growth in literacy was their responsibility, many felt it was implied.

For a long while I assumed my experience was the anomaly. While I was interested in learning more, I just assumed that everyone already knew what I was looking to learn. But over time, and in my later role as an educator who specialized in giving professional development to other educators, I soon discovered that I was far from alone. Almost every general education teacher I spoke with felt that not only were they lacking what they needed to know to teach students with a range of learning needs but also that on-the-job professional development tended to focus on learning new curricula (which was rarely inclusive of any neurodivergence or disability needs), data, assessment, and any new district/state/federal initiatives. One teacher shared, "We spend a lot of time looking at data and listening to what the students need to be taught. But no one tells us how to teach it."

When I sought out teachers to pilot aspects of this book, I asked several questions so I could match teachers to the chapters that would be most useful to them. While the questions were not designed as a poll, the data they revealed lined up with my personal experience and what others around me have shared. The majority had no or very little training in special education, neurodivergence, or disability before they became teachers. Now, as teachers, they get a little bit more, but not a single respondent felt they got a good amount or that they were well prepared. (See Figures I.1 and I.2.) In Figure I.1, teachers were asked, "Which word or phrase best describes the training or knowledge you received about special education, neurodivergence, and disability and how to best support students in a general education setting *before* you become a teacher?" In Figure I.2, they were asked, "Which word or phrase best describes the professional development you have received about special education, neurodivergence, and disability and how to best support students in general education *while being a teacher*?"

Figure I.1 • Teacher Survey Question

Which word or phrase best describes the training and knowledge you received about special education, neurodivergence, and disability and how to best support students in a general education setting *before* you became a teacher?

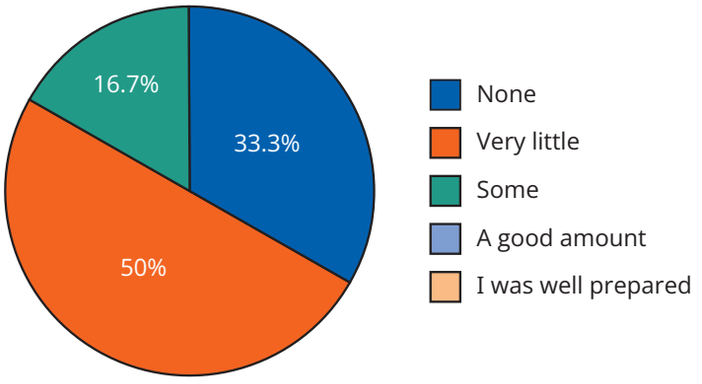
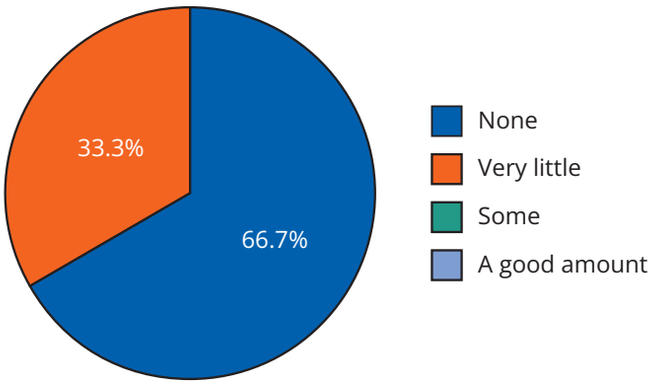


Figure I.2 • Additional Teacher Survey Question

Which word or phrase best describes the professional development you have received about special education, neurodivergence, and disability and how to best support students in a general education setting *while* being a teacher?



To be clear, these are excellent teachers and literacy coaches; they are people who run PLCs, follow educators on their social media, read professional books, and seek out professional learning opportunities. And they say that they have not gotten, and are not getting, much in the way of professional support, even though we are seeing more students who are identified as benefiting from specific supports and services with IEPs or 504s than ever before (Arundel, 2025).

Add to it that many of the teachers I spoke to with special education certifications report that most of their degree training was on law, a fast survey of a huge range of disabilities, the diagnosis process, and IDEA compliance. Very little, if any, of their training was focused on what to do in classrooms or as part of pull-out sessions with students.

I belong to a handful of groups focused on literacy, neurodivergence, and disability. Some of these groups are for educators; others are for researchers or caregivers. Some are in-person, some social media. There is a sharp contrast between the content shared in the caregiver groups versus the teacher groups. The teacher groups frequently seek advice for a range of scenarios or have direct questions about how to teach a particular topic or skill to a particular kid. Sometimes there are questions about good intervention or curricula programs or teacher training programs on a range of topics. But what strikes me is how often the caregiver groups ask for help with speaking to teachers or advocating for their children with IEPs or 504s. They assume that the teachers know how to help if the caregiver can just unlock the right phrasing or question.

Some schools, districts, and advocacy groups try to address the need for more teacher knowledge by pouring time and money into packaged programs, believing that if teachers use this high-quality program they will learn about the content and strategies over time and be able to transfer it eventually to "make it their own." And there are strong programs available. As a parent who had a first grader who was struggling to learn to read when COVID lockdowns hit, I clung to my *Recipe for Reading* manual like a life raft. Unfortunately, many of the professional development supports associated with these programs are meant to just help implement the program. Less common is professional development that teaches how to teach literacy *and* not just how to use a program. So, if a student requires anything that is not outlined in the program, a teacher might find themselves struggling to meet that kid's needs while staying on the pacing guide to teach with fidelity. These programs, even the most brilliant ones, tend to be either/or: either they are centered on the students who need additional support in literacy and are interventions only for them, or they are centered on the typical grade-level learner with a few sidebars and extension materials to support students who need something different.

I want to be clear here: I am not pointing the finger at educators or caregivers for the disconnection between what teachers need to know and what teachers do know in terms of meeting the needs of all students, especially and including students who are neurodivergent or have learning disabilities. I have been and am one.

However, after years of complaining and moaning about that disconnection, I came to the realization that while there are many books on teaching literacy to general education students, and some books on teaching literacy to students who have learning disabilities, I could not find one that addressed the very specific needs of a general education teacher or a special educator teaching literacy in an inclusive setting, which includes neurodivergent students, students with learning disabilities, and students with or without identified learning variabilities in the same classroom. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2024), most students with disabilities spend 80% or more of their time in the inclusive general education classroom; of course, this is where almost 100% of students not identified with disabilities spend their time.

I realized that wishing and waiting for a book I could recommend to the teachers I work with was not going to materialize. I needed to write it myself.

What This Book Is (*Betty Crocker's Cookbook*) and What It Isn't (*Mastering the Art of French Cooking*)

When I first graduated from college and moved into my first apartment, my mom gave me the "good old" *Betty Crocker's Cookbook*. She said, and I paraphrase here, "It's not fancy, but it will give you all the foundations." These were the pre-internet, pre-smartphone days, so having a book like that was a necessity for figuring out how to make a basic broth from scratch or a simple vanilla buttercream. It also had all the substitutions, measurement equivalents, and even how to set a table for different occasions. If you had *Betty Crocker's Cookbook* you could get dinner on the table with only what you had in your pantry and maybe even make a birthday cake for dessert.

But you weren't going to find out how to make the perfect pâte à choux, create a balanced sauce à la moutarde, or learn how to pair food with wine. If a deep dive into French cooking was what you wanted, then *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* by Julia Child is what you needed. However, my wise mother knew I needed to start somewhere that would cover a lot of ground and hold my hand on my post-college adult cooking journey, so Betty Crocker it was. Truth be told, while my cookbook collection has grown quite a bit, I still refer to "good old" Betty from time to time.

This book is meant to be your Betty Crocker version of a professional development book about teaching literacy to neurodivergent students and students with learning disabilities in general education settings. What that means is that this is a book that

- offers foundational understandings of must-know key ideas of working with students who are neurodiverse or have learning disabilities;
- assumes that readers might need some filling in or a refresher on vocabulary, practices, and background on these topics;
- realistically addresses the challenges of balancing a sometimes very wide range of needs in one classroom;
- *will not* give specific lessons to teach in literacy; and
- *will not* deeply explore most aspects that are touched upon, but rather will give working information to get you started.

In other words, I tried to include everything I wished I had at my fingertips when I was in the classroom and to answer the most common questions I get asked when I'm working in schools, communities, and districts. What I kept picturing was a teacher, or a team, who has a student or group of students that they want to think and plan for so they reach for this book. While it might not give everything that a teacher needs, it will hopefully give a starting point.

Who Is This Book For? The Air Fryer Versus the Egg Scrambler

The book you are holding is a labor of love and my best attempt to bridge some of the differences between what educators are expected to know and be able to do and what they can do right now. I have been working on this book informally for about a decade and formally for another four years. The deeper I delved into it, the more desperate I was to make sure that everyone who needs the information I will share in these pages can get their hands on it. I won't go so far as to say "steal this book," but I might be OK if you did. Why? Because as someone who has dedicated a majority of my career to high-quality, inclusive literacy practices and as the parent of two children with IEPs as I began writing, I am invested in everyone who needs it to get the information in this book. And, in the process of deepening my learning while writing this book, I learned so many more things that are shocking, exciting, and critically important for all teachers to know if they don't already.

My dream, as I have told those poor unfortunates to whom I have been talking incessantly about this book, is that this book becomes the air fryer equivalent of a professional book for teachers.

I don't know how old you are, but I was an adult when air fryers first hit the scene. I thought they were a useless extra appliance that I didn't need. Kind of like the egg scrambler my sister got my mom for Mother's Day when we were kids. An egg scrambler, if you don't know what it is, is a niche appliance. You insert one egg on a pin. The pin vibrates violently. Then when you crack your egg, it is all ready to cook. As you can imagine, it was used once and then shoved in a drawer by my mother because it only had that one use. Many books for educators are egg scramblers, and I did not want this book to be like that: only good for one narrow situation that could probably be better served by tools that have broader purposes. Instead, I want this book to be an air fryer. Something that so many of us did not have, did not see a use for, but now around two-thirds of American households have at least one of (Doering, 2024). For someone who lived most of my adult life without one, hardly a week goes by when I don't use it at least once, or usually more.

What Content Is Covered in This Book?

This book is organized into two parts with a total of seven chapters.

Part I is dedicated to the essentials that every educator should know regardless of who is in your class when it comes to neurodiversity and learning disabilities.

- **Chapter 1** looks at foundational knowledge on neurodiversity and learning disabilities that plays out in today's schools. There is information on language, must-know legislation, and explanations of our current system of education.

- **Chapter 2** is an overview of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a powerful and practical framework that allows teachers to meet the needs of a range of learners. Whether UDL is new or already familiar to you, this chapter is designed to be a good intro or refresher. It also discusses how UDL can apply to literacy instruction.
- **Chapter 3** is focused on individualized education plans (IEPs). It goes over their background, including essential information about what they include and how students get them. It also explores the role of strengths-based IEPs and what they can look like in literacy.

Part II shifts into more specific information about literacy practice and three common types of neurodivergence we might see in general education classrooms.

- **Chapter 4** explores key features of quality literacy practices for all students, including the role of diagnoses in our plans.
- **Chapter 5** discusses print-based learning variabilities, specifically dyslexia. The chapter will cover foundational definitions, common strengths of students with dyslexia, diagnostic criteria, as well as important instructional content and strategies.
- **Chapter 6** explores attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Although ADHD is not considered a learning disability, it is considered a type of neurodivergence that can thrive with literacy when the instruction leans into strengths and removes or reduces obstacles.
- **Chapter 7** is the last chapter and discusses autism spectrum disorder (ASD). In addition to exploring essential understandings of autism, this chapter addresses the unique strengths and needs autistic students have around literacy.

How to Navigate This Book

I thought a lot about how this book could be read or referred to. And ultimately in the structure those two seemingly opposite uses were the driving force of how it is organized. This book absolutely can be read cover to cover. It also can be a book that you only dip into on an as-needed basis. You have an IEP meeting coming up? Spend some time reading through the IEP chapter. A student's family informs you that she has ADHD? Take a look at that chapter.

My fondest hope for this book is that it is read in the company of others, whether in an informal book club, a professional learning community, or as part of a schoolwide professional reading cycle. I tried to include intriguing information, reflection activities, and collaboration opportunities throughout the book to make that sort of engagement a natural option.

The book includes several key features that I hope will help you plan your reading more easily, or at least make it possible for you to get what you came for.

— Each chapter has a similar layout and some shared features:
  - Overview of the chapter with estimated time it will take to read so you can plan what to read based on your time, interest, or both
  - Short summary of must-knows and truths for each topic
  - Context that will provide you with foundational and background knowledge of the chapter topic
  - The Beyond the Basics section, which takes some of the information explored in the context section and builds upon it as well as adding deeper information that is helpful to know
  - The Take It to the Classroom section, designed to leave you with practices you can apply
  - The Next Steps section, recommended resources for learning more about each of the chapter topics
  - Final Thoughts, which pulls everything together

— The chapters are written from most important to most interesting. So, if you have a set amount of time to read, starting at the beginning you will get bite-sized summaries, with more details coming as the chapter unfolds.

— In each chapter you will notice a Research Read section with a research article from a journal published by Sage (the parent company of Corwin Press, the publisher of this book) and guiding questions for you to explore on your own or with colleagues. One of my biggest frustrations as an educator has been, and continues to be, how many people tell teachers to "just read the research" when it can be difficult to determine worthy research material and it can be expensive to get your hands on. One of my favorite features of this book is that I was able to include links to relevant research articles written by experts in the field that you can read in their entirety. Whenever possible, I tried to include articles that were meta-analyses, which encompass analysis and summarize many different studies, so that your reading time is maximized.

— You will also notice three articles or excerpts written by guest contributors. I included these to bring in other voices and encourage you to think of this book not as a solo work but as a conversation within the field. The more voices we can hear from, the better our professional lives will be. Each contributor I invited is one that I have learned a tremendous amount from and thought you might enjoy learning from, too.

A Word About the Scholarship Included and Referenced in This Book and Why It Matters

"Nothing about us without us" has long been a slogan in disability rights activism (Koontz et al., 2022) because so often decisions are made, topics are researched, and policies are written with little to no input from the very people most impacted by these actions. Throughout the book you will notice contributions from, articles written by, and works cited from a range of different scholars. I strove to make sure the scholarship I included and referenced in this book was as representative of our current student population in the United States as possible and the identities and lived experiences of the students we are focused on across these pages. That means I tried to include a range of identities, including neurodivergence, disability, race, ethnicity, country of origin, socioeconomic class, geography, and religion, to name just a few. Because of the current makeup of scholars on these topics, while I was able to include a diversity of voices, I was not able to get the type of representation that fully reflects our rich and diverse student body in this country. When I reached out to my dear friend and constant thought-partner, Dr. Sonja Cherry-Paul, about this struggle, she said, "Representation in academia is a known and documented concern, and specifically in academic publishing. There are barriers that still exist. Be transparent with your readers that this is a problem that you hope in future editions you will be able to remedy."

If you know Dr. Cherry-Paul, you know to take her advice, so that is what I am doing here.

Writing This Book Now

Writing this book now was extraordinarily fraught for many reasons, both personally and because of larger national and world events dealing directly with education, equity, inclusion, neurodiversity, and disability. I did my absolute best to reflect the complications of this rapidly changing educational landscape and tried to make clear the places where I thought things might change once the book has been published. As of the writing of this introduction, everything I have included reflects the most up-to-date information and theory from reputable sources that I could find. Anything that is inaccurate or out of date by the time you read it is a reflection of the dynamic situation we are in and my limitations as an author, and not the skills of the editors and contributors to this work. I also want to make clear that, unless I refer to someone by their full name, all the people discussed in this book are referred to by a first name pseudonym to protect their privacy.

With that explained, I want to use the last bit of this introduction to explore some foundational content that I hope will set us up for what's to come.

Belonging Is the Bedrock for Inclusion

In 2023, *Science* published a big study on an intervention at the college level that had an impressive impact on students finishing their first year of college successfully (Walton et al., 2023). The impact was especially large for students with identities that historically had a slower or stopped progression through college. What was the intervention about?

Belonging.

One of the most powerful interventions to give to college students to keep them in college is that of belonging.

If you believe the adage "bigger kids, bigger problems," it should come as no surprise that while the stakes might be a bit lower in school-age children, research has shown, again and again, that belonging matters deeply for students in elementary and middle schools. One compelling meta-analysis that looked at 10 studies found that students' sense of belonging was a key factor in students' positive outcomes in school (Allen et al., 2018).

From the time public schools in the United States were developed by Horace Mann in the 1830s as a way to create a "common" space for education so that children of different backgrounds would have access to similar knowledge bases, skills, and civic morality, they have been grounded in a belief that school should be a place where everyone would belong so that later, after school and into adulthood, that sense of community and communal values would remain. While we know those original public schools did not fulfill that core value of true inclusion, integration, and access, it is helpful to remember that a central stated value to their creation was belonging.

This book, which is about teaching neurodivergent and neurotypical students in heterogeneous settings, stands on a clear belief and understanding that students must have a sense of belonging in order to succeed. No matter what ideas are shared, research is explored, or strategies are explained in this book, if students do not believe that they belong in our schools, it will be for naught.

Belonging is the deep human need to know you are a wanted, valued, and needed part of a community. Belonging is about more than fitting in. Belonging is about contributing and effecting change within one's community as well as being cared for by that same community.

Dr. Erik Carter, the executive director of Baylor University's Center on Developmental Disabilities, developed "Ten Dimensions of Belonging," which apply to many contexts but were designed especially for schools and faith

communities to consider the members of their communities with disabilities (see Figure I.3). In Dr. Carter's work, he posits that for a person to feel included and valued, all 10 of these dimensions need to be in place. As you look through or review the 10 dimensions of belonging, I encourage you to think of a student in your class and how you or your students have been actively involved, or not, in each of these dimensions when it comes to that student.

Figure I.3 • Ten Dimensions of Belonging

Source: Ten Dimensions of Belonging by Erik Carter, Baylor Center for Disability and Flourishing, Baylor University.

- ***Present.*** This dimension refers to the very real possibility that some children are not even in the room with us. In order to belong, someone needs to be present. That also means present for the good stuff like the class celebrations, field trips, and inside jokes. The more a child is present, the more likely they are to belong.
- ***Invited.*** This dimension refers to personal and individualized invitations, the type that make you feel like you matter, that someone is asking you because they want you in particular to be there. It is not a mass email sent to all the families suggesting that they come to the class writing celebration but rather a phone call, text, or face-to-face invitation.

- ***Welcomed.*** Being welcomed is an active move. It's not the same as opening a door. It's letting people know through our words and actions that they belong in this space and that we are delighted they came. My friend Shana Frazin, who is a middle school librarian, greets every child who comes to her library with, "Welcome! So glad you came to the library today." The first time I saw her do it, I'll admit I thought it was a bit corny. But when I looked at the warmth on the face of the adolescent she was speaking to and heard the sincerity in Shania's voice, I realized it was a powerful practice. It sends a message to anyone who enters our space that you are wanted here.
- ***Known.*** It's of course not enough to just exist in a space and take up air. We want people to want to get to know us—our likes, dislikes, talents, struggles, what we're famous for. If you think of that old hit television show *Cheers*, based on a group of bar regulars, what made it so popular was how well the regulars really knew each other. We can have students come in and out of our classes daily but not know which author is their favorite, or which genre they love to write, or anything about their life. Getting to know a bit about each child we teach and encouraging our children to get to know a bit about each other can be transformative.
- ***Accepted.*** Of course, people can know you well and not accept what they know, so this next dimension of belonging is critical. Perhaps a student has a strong aversion to something that everyone else likes. Are people in the class able to accept that? Are we able to accept that a student is a social processor and might need to talk things through to understand them? Accepting a person as they are and letting them know they are accepted is critical.
- ***Supported.*** Being in a space is not belonging if you cannot do what is expected in that space. In order to belong, we need to know that our needs will be met. If a student needs to sit closer to the front of the room or to wear headphones when the class gets loud, those are supports we can provide.
- ***Heard.*** It is not uncommon, in spaces that seek out diversity but have no interest in true inclusion, to invite people to a space and then not ask for their contributions, thoughts, and feelings. Students need to know that we are eager to hear what they think and that what they express and how they best express it is wanted.
- ***Befriended.*** Being in a space, even a warm space, where we do not feel connected to anyone and have no one to give a knowing nod to or ask how their weekend was can feel isolating, even if everything else is in place. In order to feel like they belong, students need to have a friend or two in the classroom. These do not need to be best friends, just someone who is happy to see them and they are happy to see in return. A someone (or a few someones) who is a little bit closer than the rest of the group. While educators are able to have some sort of

friendly relationship with their students, because of power dynamics it is not a true friendship, so we need to be aware of how we are creating conditions that allow for peer friendships to build. Opportunities to informally chat, shared experiences like field trips or special events that can build shared memories, a joyful learning environment, a balance of work that allows for collaboration and independence—all of these can provide opportunities for students to befriend one another. We also want to keep an eye on budding friendships, whether they're in requests of who to sit near or work with or just noticing who enters the room together, and try to nurture positive friendships when possible.

- ***Needed.*** This dimension refers to the very human desire to be needed. We all want to be where we are needed. When we are not needed, it can feel a bit like people are just being nice to us or doing a bit of charity work by sharing space with us. But where we feel needed for our opinions, our humor, our knowledge, our abilities, our usefulness, we want to be, and we feel called to be. That means as educators we want to look at our class rosters and make sure that every student is needed in some way, whether this is a formal class job or role like line leader or timekeeper or something that is more subtle but a necessary part of the community, like our peace maker, devil's advocate, or fun fact sharer. Spending some time naming how each class member is needed is a huge step in the direction of ensuring everyone belongs.
- ***Loved.*** This dimension sometimes takes people by surprise. I interpret Dr. Carter's idea of love to refer to an action, not a feeling. When we love someone, we take specific actions. I love my friend's child, so I ask her questions about her life whenever I see her, remember her on special occasions, and listen to her when she needs a sounding board. We know what it feels like to be loved by someone and how it changes how we feel in any space when that person is present.

Inspired by Dr. Carter's "Ten Dimensions of Belonging," a large part of this book is grounded in the central idea that every child deserves to belong in our classrooms. Just allowing them in the room without truly knowing them, needing them, or caring about them is not enough. Yes, we need to teach them, but they will find it very difficult to learn, if not impossible, if we do not make our classrooms places of belonging.

Belonging Starts With Us

In order for our students to belong, we have some things we have to ensure are in place, starting with the 10 dimensions of belonging.

Dr. Carter's work started with faith communities. I tend to believe that faith communities and schools have more in common than they appear at first glance.

One of those common things is that schools and faith communities strive to create belonging, to wear it on our sleeves, but the work that is often centered in both places (scripture study, charity, phonics, essay writing) often gets in the way of making belonging a priority.

Second, I want us to remember that the people most at risk of not belonging are neurodivergent people. More than half of adolescents with autism (50.6%) and about a quarter with an intellectual disability (24.8%) have never been invited to a social activity, and 83.5% of adolescents with autism and 41.5% of those with an intellectual disability have never been contacted by peers on the phone (M. Wagner et al., 2003). And while we might feel tempted to say that result is only because the study is so old, kids have so many more ways to connect, we would be wrong. More recent studies unfortunately draw similar conclusions, indicating some of the expected connection improvements due to an increase in tech use among youth (social media, texting, video calls, collaborative video games) have not increased social connections for neurodivergent students (Cullinane, 2021; Raines et al., 2023). It doesn't have to be this way. We can prioritize belonging in our classrooms. We can ensure that our classrooms are warm, welcoming, and worthwhile and that all students know they are learning and growing. We can ensure we see them and are working to be good teachers to them and not leaving all of that to someone else.

As you make your way through the book, I will mention Carter's work from time to time. I hope that when I do, you pause and think about your own role in making classrooms spaces of belonging.

Welcome to This Book!

The biggest idea I want you to know about this book is that from its inception, incubation, research, structure, drafting, and design, it was all created with you, the real human educator, in mind. I hope you see it for what it is: not a definitive source but rather a useful one that gives you or reminds you of what you need to make sure your teaching is as inclusive, joyful, and effective as possible for you and all of your students. And I hope I've done this in a way that makes this a friendly companion that you can read and return to as needed, skim to grab a quick idea or bit of information, dig into when the spirit moves you, or read with others as part of your professional learning community.

I hope this is just a continuation of a longer conversation I get to have with you. I encourage you to reach out to me on the various platforms and I welcome comments and questions that might develop as you read or while you try things.

Finally, and most importantly, I invite you to take this book for how it was designed: a beginning to a new quest.

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Part I

The Fundamentals of Teaching Neurodivergent Learners and Learners With Learning Disabilities

Chapter 1

Essentials for Meeting the Needs of Neurodiverse Students in Inclusive Settings

Estimated time to read chapter: 40 minutes

- Context: What Is Essential for Educators to Know About Neurodivergence and Learning Differences? 15 minutes
- Beyond the Basics: Underpinnings Are Everything—Understanding Legislation and Building Systems: 9 minutes
- Take It to the Classroom: Student Identities Can Be Affected by Our Actions: 8 minutes
- FAQs: 4 minutes
- Next Steps: 1 minute
- Final Thoughts: Remember the Sand Mandala: 3 minutes

Must-know:

Students who are neurodivergent, or learn differently, are valuable members of our communities. There are also specific practices, legal rights, and information that educators who work with them in any capacity need to know in order to ensure that we are meeting their needs.

Truth:

The population of students identified with differences that affect attention and learning in general education and co-taught settings is growing (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). All teachers must have a foundational understanding of learning variabilities and special education.

Context: What Is Essential for Educators to Know About Neurodivergence and Learning Differences?

We are living in a rapidly shifting era for understanding and serving learning strengths and needs. Depending on your personality, you might find this exciting or unnerving. Day-to-day language, procedures, and even laws are changing. It can be hard as an educator, at the center of these changes, to know what to do to best serve our students. It would perhaps be less daunting if we had just a handful of students, or we taught a homogeneous class, all with the same needs. But even for those whose classes are supposedly homogeneous by design (i.e., tracked classes), we know there is no such thing as every student learning the same things in the same way. Add to that the ever-growing load of content, responsibilities, and pressures on educators' shoulders, it is no wonder that most of us do not know where to begin when it comes to learning what we need to know about the evolving educational landscape.

This book centers on neurodivergent students and students with learning disabilities who might not be neurodivergent. While the book will address students with specific diagnoses or those who have been evaluated by a school-based team and who have an IEP or 504, I am also including students who might not have any official recognition of their learning needs because, as anyone who has taught can attest, not every student is identified.

Based on my experiences working nationally and internationally as a teacher and teacher educator, I have come to believe that there are five things every educator—regardless of position, grade, setting, certification, or student demographics—needs to know when it comes to neurodivergence and learning differences.

1. Language Matters and Is Also Fluid

In my time as an educator, and as someone who has a physical disability, I have seen the language used to describe an identity connected with disability or difference vary wildly. Terms like *handicapped*, *differently abled*, *challenged*, *slow, struggling,* and *special needs* have all been used to refer to children and their identity in relation to school. As of the writing of this book, the language around disability and learning variabilities is very much in flux. I have no doubt that whatever terminology I use, some, if not all, will no longer be what is appropriate to use in the coming years.

That said, I do not feel defensive about it. Nor do I see working to be flexible, accurate, and affirming with my language as having my speech stifled or being "politically correct." Instead, I view it as part of the expected fluidity of society, language, and culture. While everyone has the right to use words to describe

themselves that match who they are, I believe strongly that it is especially important for people who are part of historically marginalized communities, who are often named and discussed without their input. As of the writing of this book, the terms most used by those who are speaking about themselves as part of this broad group include *person with disabilities, disabled, disability community, neurodivergent, learning differences,* and *learning variability*. It is important to know that many people will not use any of those terms, they might use older terms, or they might prefer to be seen as part of a more specific group, such as autistic, instead of being seen as part of a larger group. No matter how someone describes themselves, it is their right to use the language they connect with.

While I will use the term *special education* to refer to law, services, and other formal systems, I will not be using *special ed kids, speds, IEP kids*, or similar terms to refer to children who receive special education services. Special education is not a descriptor of people or a collective noun to describe people. I will not use the phrase "in special education" since special education is not a place. I will also not use the popular term *special needs*. Studies show that while that term is often preferred by parents and caregivers, it is not preferred by people who might be referred to by it; nor is it used in special education law or academic writing (Andrews et al., 2022; Gernsbacher et al., 2016).

Of course, in the case of any individual person or student in front of you, the best choice is to use the person's name or ask the person what terminology they prefer. Short of that, I recommend you keep up to date with the most respectful language commonly used by those in the disability community, when or if it is appropriate, to specifically mention their identities. Otherwise, we can use all-inclusive terms such as *students, kids, fifth graders*, and so forth.

Key Terms

- **Neurodiversity** is a nonmedical term, understood to be coined by autistic people, to describe the wide array of ways people interact with the world and that there is no right or wrong way for people to experience the world or express those experiences. The term is decidedly not deficit based but rather celebratory and accepting. Just as our environment has precious biodiversity that is worthy of protection, humans have precious neurodiversity that is worthy of protection. Over time, the term has been used to encompass a wide range of variabilities, including those with autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and dyslexia. It also is used more and more by medical and educational professionals. When speaking about an individual, one might use the term *neurodivergent*.

- **Person with a disability** is an example of person-first language, where the focus is on the human, not the disability. While there are some who do not prefer this term, it is considered one of the better options when speaking about someone you do not know and cannot ask their preference.
- **Disabled** is a word a disabled person might use to describe themselves, placing the identity first. It is typically used when the person is making a comment where disability plays a critical role. When I describe myself, it is the term I use the most when faced with an obstacle and must advocate for myself, for example, "I am disabled. I cannot walk up 10 flights of stairs."
- **Disability community** is a term often used when speaking about people with disabilities who share common needs and experiences and might be working toward common visions. Even when used, though, it is often qualified as being some or many within the community as opposed to suggesting that there is one monolithic community.
- **Learns differently** is a phrase often used in a larger context in a matter-of-fact way, such as, 'When planning a phonics lesson that calls for most of the instruction to be verbal, I want to keep in mind some students learn differently and include visuals and hands-on materials." The term, when used as intended, is simply factual, not deficit-minded or meant to evoke sympathy.
- **Learning variability** is a term often used as an alternative term to disability, or to remind us that there are a lot of learning variabilities to consider in all of us. Sometimes this term is used by people who believe that there is no such thing as a disabled person but there are disabled systems. Other times it is to acknowledge that it is the narrowness of instruction and assessment, not student deficits, that leads to difficulties. No matter the reason, learning variability refers to the idea that we all learn in a range of ways.

For more on language related to disabilities, see this guidance from the American with Disabilities Act (ADA). https://qrs.ly/s9h7rui

2. School Is Often the Place Students Feel the Most Divergent

When I first made the shift from general education to inclusive settings, I called my mentor, Isoke Nia, for advice. I was worried that I wouldn't be a good teacher to "special ed kids." She did not console me by telling me I'd be fine or that I was a great teacher. Instead, she said, "The only place they're 'special ed' is at school."

Oof. I took her point.

School is often the biggest obstacle that many of the students identified as needing special education services face in a day, or even in their lives. When they are at home or hanging out with friends or playing a sport or walking their dogs, they are just kids. It is a grounding notion to remember that the students in front of us are full humans that have strengths, interests, and relationships that we may not get to see in the classroom.

It is a grounding notion to remember that the students in front of us are full humans that have strengths, interests, and relationships that we may not get to see in the classroom.

Yes, we are responsible for the learning they do in our classes, but remembering that who they are in class is not all of who they are can go a long way toward helping us learn about their strengths in ways that allow us to leverage those strengths to support their academics. Children, like all humans, work best when they feel seen as their best selves. Even when this can be challenging, I believe it is important for us to aim for what Stanley Standal (1954) called unconditional positive regard and Carl Rogers later popularized in the field of psychology. Unconditional positive regard is the idea that people respond best to others who view them positively, warmly, and empathetically, even when they make mistakes or struggle.

When I reflect on that perspective-changing comment Isoke made to me all those years ago, I understand not only that it was the truth, but also that it undid wrong-headed and narrow notions about children I had unknowingly carried and replaced them with a firm understanding that all students were full and complex humans with strengths we can build upon.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is the law that ensures the rights of students with disabilities in public schools.

3. Students Identified as Having Disabilities Are More Vulnerable Than Their Nonidentified Peers, but It Doesn't Have to Be That Way

Once, while reading some scholarship on disability, I came across something that I carry with me every day: students with disabilities, *when they are identified and receive what they need,* grow academically at rates higher than their nondisabled peers (Johnson & Barker, 2021). Unfortunately, despite what we know about the possibilities, there is a significant difference between the achievements of

students with disabilities and the achievements of their peers without disabilities. For example, there was a 40-point difference in reading achievement scores on the 2022 NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) test between students with identified disabilities and those without; only 74% of students with disabilities graduate with a high school diploma, compared to 87% of their peers without disabilities (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2022). In addition, while students with disabilities make up only 17% of the student population, they comprised 24% of those who received in-school suspensions, 29% of those who received out-of-school suspensions, and 21% of those who were expelled (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2025).

In other words, students are more "disabled" in school when we do not give them what they need. Full disclosure: my take on this typically falls in the category of the social model of disability. As you may know, there are commonly held views of disability that most of us have, which have been categorized by scholars as the moral, medical, or social models (Olkin, 2022).

- The **moral model** describes the belief that disability has a connection to one's character. It can be a sign that a person is bad (how many villains in media have you seen with a disability?) and the disability is the punishment, or that the person made a poor choice and the disability is their consequence. It can also be seen in a more heroic light—that people with disabilities can help, or are here to help, those without disabilities by teaching about resilience and strength or acting as an inspiration. In the moral model, disability is viewed as part of a good/bad, hero/villain, inspiration/warning dichotomy.
- The **medical model** views disability as something wrong or broken that needs to be fixed. The goal in this view is to repair the person so that they can be more like their typical peers. The medical model rarely views any strengths connected with disability, instead comparing people with disabilities to people without disabilities as the measure of growth for a person with disabilities. Much of the criticism of IDEA comes from a belief that the law was designed with the medical model at its core, always aiming toward addressing the person's identified deficits.
- The **social model** has the viewpoint that disability is one part of someone's identity and that many of the difficulties the person with the disability faces have to do with systemic or institutional obstacles and are not things the student must change. A common meme associated with this concept is that if a flower isn't thriving, we change the soil, water, and fertilizer, not the flower.

It is difficult to admit, but no matter which viewpoint we more closely connect with, many of us accept and expect that students with disabilities underperform in comparison to their peers. We might not like to admit it, but in many schools it can feel like a fait accompli if a student with an IEP is not making the progress one would expect for a nondisabled student at that same age or grade level.

In data meetings and stat studies, I have heard professionals pointing to low test scores or grades, getting curious about the possible causes, and then quickly deciding it is to be expected because those students have IEPs. I have found myself stopping my own curiosity about a child's stalled progress and thinking the same thing: "Oh, they have an IEP, that's why." As if the IEP in and of itself is enough reason for me to stop trying to figure things out to make instructional changes. I get the habit. I've done it. Yet that habit ignores a fundamental truth: that while students with IEPs statistically do perform at lower levels, *it does not have to be that way.*

This should be our lodestar: students with IEPs can grow as much or more than their neurotypical peers, if we give them what they need.

4. When Teaching and Learning Are Accessible, All Students Thrive

It can feel overwhelming to imagine meeting all our students' individual needs, especially as the rigors of academics seem to be increasing every year. However, I believe we are better positioned to meet those demands when we decide to center our neurodivergent students and students with disabilities in our instruction and planning. When we do, we will see that not only can they find success, but the rest of our students can as well. This is discussed in depth in Chapter 2.

5. Every Student Belongs to Every Educator

Lastly, both morally and legally, it is important to know and act with the knowledge that every student is our student. Whether you are a special educator working with a student who is classified as general education or you are a general educator who is working with a student who has an IEP, or any other variation, these are all our students. We may have different roles with them, we may have different job descriptions, but we can and should bring our knowledge and strengths to all of them.

Beyond the Basics: Underpinnings Are Everything—Understanding Legislation and Building Systems

Depending on your current position or experience, much that has already been discussed in this chapter probably falls into one of two main categories for you: you either knew it already or just learned it. Either way, all of it is good to know or be reminded of.

When I first started writing this book, I struggled with where to place the next two chunks of information: legislation and schoolwide systems. This was mainly

because, while I think they are critical, I also know that when you are in the middle of trying to meet the needs of all your students, in the moment, you need things you can do right now. These two things are not those.

However, if you are scanning this book, deciding if the next few pages are worth reading, whether because you are reading this as part of a professional learning community, class, professional book club, or do-it-yourself professional development program, and you have a bit of time set aside to think in more structural ways, I encourage you to read on. These are topics that will help pull pieces together, empower you to better support your students, and allow you to work smarter, not harder, with just a bit of preparation.

Must-Know Legislation

Legislation related to education changes regularly. A new administration on a local, state, or federal level often brings in new educational priorities. The following are the pieces of legislation, or laws, that have had some of the biggest impacts on students with IEPs or 504s and the educators who work with them across the United States:

- *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA):* This act explains the rights of students with disabilities in public schools. While the entire act is worth reading, three important highlights from the act are the following:
    - Students have a right to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) based on their abilities and needs. In other words, citizens can expect that their local public school will provide the instruction, resources, access, and services students need.
    - Students have the right to the least restrictive environment (LRE) that will meet their needs. In other words, if a child can learn and get what they need while integrated with their nondisabled peers, that is where they should be, even if this is not full time or requires additional personnel or other considerations.
    - Students who qualify have a right to an individualized education plan (IEP) to help ensure they are receiving FAPE. For many students and their families, the IEP is the most important document in their educational career. Chapter 3 discusses the IEP in detail. It is important to know these plans come from IDEA and were not always part of special education.
- *Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA):* This act, signed by President George H. W. Bush in 1990, protects citizens with disabilities from discrimination. This includes ensuring that public entities that receive federal dollars are open and accessible to citizens with disabilities and do not discriminate, including employment, telecommunications, infrastructure, public buildings, and services.

- *Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act*: Section 504 is a civil rights act designed to protect a broader swath of students with disabilities, including and beyond the 13 categories covered in IDEA (see box elsewhere in chapter). When students do not qualify for an IEP, they might qualify for a 504 plan to help them access public education. All students who receive special education services and are covered under IDEA are also covered under Section 504, but not all students who have a 504 are covered under IDEA.
- *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA):* Signed by President Obama in 2015, this law replaces other federal laws governing education. Under ESSA, schools are held accountable for all public school students' progress, including students who receive special education services. ESSA is also the law that includes multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), Universal Design for Learning (UDL; discussed in Chapter 2), and the change to adequate yearly progress (AYP). Ultimately, ESSA puts a significant amount of responsibility into state hands, so ESSA application can vary significantly from state to state.
    - MTSS: Even if you are less familiar with ESSA, you are likely familiar with MTSS. It is the delivery model schools are expected to use to deliver interventions. It focuses on increasing growth and achievement for students in three areas: academics, social and emotional learning, and behavior. While much of IDEA and the current way special education systems are designed is built on the old medical model ("we don't worry about you until you're broken, and now we'll fix you"), MTSS leans more on the more modern medical model, which emphasizes preventions (healthy eating, exercise, vaccines) and minimal intervention at first when those things don't work before moving on to more aggressive care (G. Schaffer, 2022). The way this is done is through tiered levels of support:
        - Tier 1: Universal support. Universal Design for Learning (UDL; see Chapter 2) is put into play, instruction and curriculum is of high quality, resources needed are available, and students are screened early to identify any possible red flags such as signs of dyslexia or other learning needs that might need a more intensive response than what is available in Tier 1. Every student receives Tier 1 instruction.
        - Tier 2: More focused support for students who are not growing as expected in Tier 1. This might mean more one-on-one time with the classroom teacher, inclusion in small-group work focused on individual needs, and remediation or alternative strategy instruction. In some communities, Tier 2 looks like the introduction and use of particular intervention programs, perhaps with specialists consulting or doing the intervention work. In others, Tier 2 is still very much designed by the classroom teacher.

- Tier 3: The most rigorous of the tiers. A student might receive Tier 3 instruction when Tiers 1 and 2 are not making the impact hoped for. In literacy instruction this often means the student will work with a specialist using more targeted materials or programs. It often means this instruction happens outside of the classroom. The aim is that with the step up of intensity and focus, the student will at last make the growth they should make and no longer require intervention. However, after a set amount of time, if a student has not made growth, this might be an indication that the student might be a candidate for an evaluation. (See Chapter 3 for more information on how MTSS might fit into the IEP process.)

- *Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA):* While, like ESSA, also not specifically a special education law, FERPA does have an outsized impact on students with disabilities. It protects a student's right to privacy regarding their educational records. It is sometimes described as the educational equivalent of HIPAA, which protects our rights to privacy in medical information. FERPA specifies that only professionals directly involved with the student and their families have a right to see those records, which include IEPs, 504s, grades, and test scores. What this means practically is that schools cannot display, discuss, or in other ways make public a student's private educational information without permission from the student's parent or caregiver. For example, a teacher should avoid calling out in front of the class, "Stephen and Carla, it's time to go to another room for testing so you can get your extended time," or posting a chart with students' names attached to their reading levels, or displaying a daily schedule on the classroom door with students' schedule of service providers and interventions.

The 13 Categories of Disability Recognized by the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

There is huge variability in humanity. We do not fit into neat categories. However, with the aim to guide IEPs and special education services in schools, IDEA outlines 13 categories of disability recognized by law. Many people fit into more than one category recognized by IDEA; however, again for the sake of categorization, a student's disability is usually only named in terms of one category that is included on the IEP. (The multiple disability category only refers to a combination of "profound" disabilities that would require a higher level of expertise and resources than what is typically available in most community schools today. It also does not include deaf-blindness, which has a separate category.) It is also important to remember before reviewing the 13 categories,

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IDEA was written with the medical model in mind, looking specifically for deficits and needs, not strengths.

While we are likely to have students from at least one or more of the categories in our classrooms, not all categories are likely to be represented in general education or co-taught classrooms:

1. *Autism spectrum disorder (ASD)* refers to a specific developmental disability that has a range of different presentations. IDEA describes autism as primarily affecting communication and social interactions. Chapter 7 is focused on ASD.
2. *Deaf-blindness* encompasses students whose hearing and vision loss is significant enough that it affects their ability to communicate and requires specialized programs.
3. *Deafness* refers to when hearing impairment, with or without amplification and/or hearing aids, affects a student's ability to receive information through sound in a way that affects their education.
4. *Emotional disturbance* is a broad category that takes into account many mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and bipolar disorder. The student's behaviors are affecting their education and interpersonal interactions and cannot be explained by other factors or conditions.
5. *Hearing impairment* includes a wide spectrum of hearing differences, including deafness, and can be applied to temporary or permanent conditions.
6. *Intellectual disability* refers to a student's understood intellectual capability and functioning, specifically how it affects academic performance, as being below average. Down syndrome is one example of an intellectual disability.
7. *Multiple disabilities* is a term used not because a student has more than one disability, but rather if a student has more than one disability and each of the multiple disabilities requires specific and specialized approaches, resources, and trained personnel.
8. *Orthopedic impairment* includes issues with physical movement, specifically, muscles, bones, and joints. Examples include spina bifida and cerebral palsy.
9. *Other health impairment (OHI)* is a category that casts a wide net to include anything that affects a student's attention, energy, or physical strength. ADHD is the most common example of OHI. Also included in this category are Tourette's syndrome and epilepsy. ADHD will be discussed at length in Chapter 6.

10. *Specific learning disability (SLD)* includes dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia. This category refers to difficulties with processing, which make learning how to read, write, and or do math more challenging. Its primary characteristic is that the difficulties the student is experiencing are not due to other reasons: "Specific learning disability does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of intellectual disability, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage" (IDEA, Sec. 300.8 (c) (10) ii). This is the most common category of disability seen on IEPs, accounting for 35% of all IEPs in 2020–2021, and seems to be growing. Dyslexia will be discussed at length in Chapter 5.
11. *Speech or language impairment* includes speech differences such as stutters, lisps, as well as difficulties in receptive and expressive language use. In other words, having difficulties in being able to understand what is being said or represented in text or being able to express oneself through speaking or writing, typically.
12. *Traumatic brain injury* involves a child who has experienced a brain injury any time after birth that affects their educational growth. The injury could affect a range of things from cognition to memory to moods to judgment to motor skills.
13. *Visual impairment* includes a large range of vision issues, such as blindness and partial sight, and has a negative effect on a student's education. The category does not include conditions that can be remedied through the use of eyeglasses.

Schoolwide Systems: The "Work Smarter, Not Harder" Way to Make Sure Students Get What They Need

If you are feeling a little bombarded with information right now, it is understandable. There are many terms, guidelines, and laws to know, and whether you knew them and forgot them, never knew them, or use them all the time, it is easy to see how complex it is not only for individual teachers to make sure students get what they need but also for schools to be sure they are following the laws and guidelines. In 2018, the year of the most up-to-date data we had at the time of writing this book, the U.S. Department of Education found that less than half of states were complying with IDEA (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Further complicating tracking that compliance is that different states have different criteria to determine which children are eligible for services, according to a 2019 report to Congress (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2019).

There are many moving parts, yes, but additionally, public schools are rarely organized by centering the needs of students with disabilities. What does that

mean? Every school has priorities that are foundational. The systems a school creates because of its priorities are usually the ones that become automated and part of the school culture. So, for example, an arts-centered school creates systems to uphold their vision, systems such as a budget that prioritizes art supplies, a building with reserved spaces for arts, a hiring committee with knowledge on hiring teachers with a rich understanding of art pedagogy, and scheduling that ensures each child has art. Even when the school is stretched thin with time or resources or energy, those systems will ensure that art remains at the center of the curriculum.

Many schools claim they prioritize all students and that students with IEPs are centered and integrated. The simplest way to make sure you and your school stay aligned with your goals and vision for inclusivity and opportunities for neurodiverse students to thrive, in addition to holding on to current legal and research-based guidance for neurodivergent students and students with disabilities, is to consider or reconsider key systems and the priorities those systems uphold. These systems include but are not limited to the following:

- Class formation
- Personnel
- Scheduling
- Transportation
- Building design
- Community events
- Curriculum selection
- Resource choice and allocation
- Professional development
- Instructional cohesion

As you look through this list, consider whether you, your school, or your district plan any of these systems with neurodiverse children in mind. If the answer is yes, reflect on where they were on the priority list and whether a decision was changed or maintained based on the needs of these children. If no, consider how outcomes might be different if they were. For example, do your school's community events, designed to draw families to build relationships with each other and school personnel, tend to be inclusive of a range of needs? Are they loud and chaotic events without places to take sensory breaks? Do they mostly focus on awarding students for academic achievements such as high standardized test scores or GPA? Are they focused only on performances like speeches, plays, and singing? Or does your school offer events that have different types of activities and spaces, highlighting different strengths and interests?

This idea, of considering who or what to prioritize within a school's systems, can have outsized impact. Yet it is common for schools to see many systems as just

the way they have to be and not something that is designed by the community. It is also common not to see how system creation and revision is one of the least labor-intensive ways to improve student learning and growth, because once systems are set they can run with little involvement. Systems are the crock-pot of education: set it and forget it.

Not too long ago, I was working with a school that ended up doing exactly that. They had noticed a significant discrepancy between how their students with IEPs and their students without IEPs were doing on state standardized tests; the school invited me to work with them to figure out next steps. When we looked at the data, there was a drastic difference in test performance between the two populations. When I visited, one of the first things I did was walk through the building. I saw a lot of incredible teaching. I also saw a bit of not as strong teaching. Whether this was because of inexperience, lack of resources, or because the teacher was a long-term substitute who was not fully invested, I wasn't entirely sure. I also noticed that the schedules for students with IEPs were much more fractured than those of their peers without IEPs. Their schedules had fewer enrichment activities and electives and more interactions with additional adults, with each adult working on different things with very little clear transfer between them.

After spending several days together, working to study data, systems, instructional practices, and more, the school decided to reconsider their systems for the coming school year. First, they changed the way they formed their classes, staffed classes, and created schedules. Instead of starting with students who took popular electives, they decided to begin their planning with the students who had interventions and related services. Once those students' schedules were set, they could take their staff's needs and apply them accordingly, beginning first by matching strong teachers whose scheduling preferences and teaching experience matched the focus students. As part of the staffing choices, they invited some of the teachers with the most experience and interest working with a range of learners to team-teach when that was an option. This was different than what they had done in the past, which was annually rotate which general education teachers on a grade would pair with the special educator. By inviting people they thought might be interested, it allowed people to feel valued for their interests and strengths and hopefully allowed for longer-term co-teaching teams who could build their partnerships over time as opposed to changing each year. The school went on from there, looking closely at the systems they could adjust, always beginning with the students who had previously not been the focus.

The following year, when I followed up with them, they said they already noticed a significant difference in school tone, student engagement, and staff energy. Less experienced teachers had classes with fewer needs, giving them more time and less pressure to develop as professionals. More experienced teachers were enjoying the new learning they were doing with different kinds of learning needs. Students who had previously expressed school was exhausting or boring were now racing to class. They had great hopes for what achievement gains they would see.

When schools focus on systems, many of the challenges that come up when trying to meet the needs of a range of student learning requirements feel a lot less daunting or personal. Things that become systemized require less effort and can become fine-tuned over time.

Takeaways: Strategies for Designing Systems With Students With Disabilities at the Center

- When planning schedules, begin with students who have interventions and related services. Create guidelines that protect arts, athletics, and socializing times so that receiving services is not punitive.
- When creating classes, consider putting students together who will match well with a teacher's strengths first. Next, balance the classes so that no class has an overrepresentation of needs or strengths.
- When matching co-teaching teams, instead of creating a "have-to" culture, create a culture that recognizes the opportunity and honor it is to co-teach. Then create a system that prioritizes long-term partnering with teachers who value collaboration and have an asset-focused view of students.

Take It to the Classroom: Student Identities Can Be Affected by Our Actions

Unlike the way the rest of this book will go, much of this chapter has been geared exclusively toward the grown-ups in a school, that is, the teachers, service providers, coaches, paraprofessionals, and administrators who need to consider our ways of thinking about, planning for, and responding to all of our students, especially and including our neurodivergent students and students with disabilities. Much of it has been reflective, legal, or structural in nature. Although ultimately it will and does have far-reaching effects on students, the work in taking this to the classroom will be less about our instructional choices and more about our awareness and understanding of the role we play in creating classrooms where our students can learn and grow. I believe most of what is truly foundational when it comes to this work begins with us.

Disability or Neurodivergence Is One Aspect of a Person

On a panel at a literacy conference a few years ago, my co-presenter, author and educator Kass Minor, spoke about "disability spread," using an activity that was part of her work with the Inclusive Classrooms Project at Teachers College, Columbia University. It blew me away with its clarity and truth, and I believe it is a critical consideration for any educators discussing neurodivergence, disability, or diagnoses.

Kass asked us to do something that would give a window into who we are. She asked us to think of phrases that describe what we look like and what we're doing right now and to put those things into a bulleted list of low inference notes. I encourage you to pause and try it right now.

Here's my list:

- Early-50s woman
- Wearing workout clothes and hair in messy bun
- Sitting at desk
- Desk has piles of books and papers
- Sticky notes are also placed in a few places
- Open can of seltzer
- Small bag of pita chips
- Pens and glasses also on desk
- Woman types quickly, pauses, eats chips, types quickly

Now review my notes and come up with a few descriptors that you might consider negative or at least not flattering, or return to your own notes.

- Middle-aged woman who doesn't care about fashion
- Messy
- Disorganized
- Inconsistent productivity

Now return to my notes again, or your own, and come up with a few descriptors that you might consider positive or at least giving the benefit of the doubt.

- A writer
- Interested in comfort and freedom of motion
- Focused on task; doesn't stop to get food or drink
- Thoughtful; doesn't just write whatever comes to mind
- Resourceful; organizes materials to be easy to grab and creates reminders for self on notes

Kass asked these questions after we did this at our presentation: Which one was the easiest task to do? Low inference recording? Negative labeling? Positive labeling? What does that make you think?

For me, the negative labeling came the fastest. That's because I know when I am writing I can be so totally immersed that I don't really care about much else. And people in my life (my mom, my kids, friends who see where I write) have

made comments, usually very warm-hearted but not complimentary, about my workspace, pace, and style. Those are the comments that I have heard the most when I have been criticized, so they are at the top of my mind.

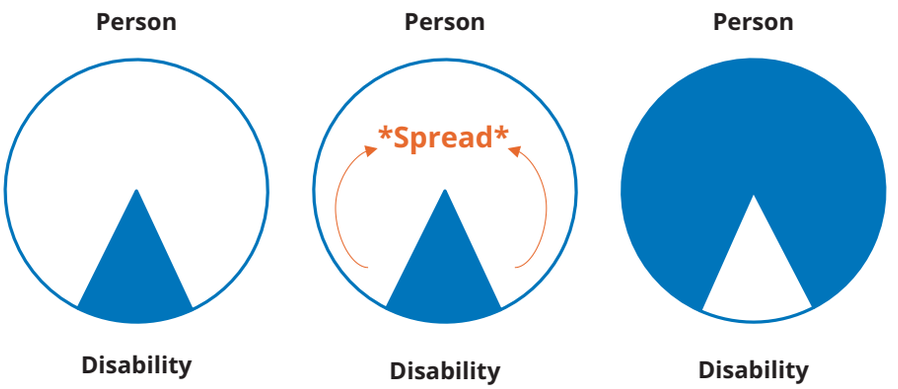
Which leads to the next question: How would you feel if that's how people talked about you or referred to you most of the time? I think most of us would admit that it would not be great. Even though those descriptors were the first things to come to mind, I know they are not all that is true about me. If those people who I loved and trusted described me only in those ways, I would feel awful.

Emma Van der Klift and Norman Kunc (1994) wrote about this phenomenon when it comes to disability. All of us are nuanced people and are made up of a bunch of things that make us who we are. Some of it is stuff we're proud of, some of it we are not, and lots of things are in between. But most of us want to be seen for our complexity, not just one thing. Even if the one thing is something we are proud of.

For many students who learn differently, when they either receive a diagnosis or a disability classification, that becomes another identifier to add to the mix. But, as time goes on, services start, classroom placements are decided, discussions take place about that student, the student's identity, both for the way the student perceives themselves and the way others perceive the student, starts to shift. Tanya, who before her school evaluation was described as a little shy, a nature lover, and a great artist, works hard. After she has been identified as having a learning disability, she is described as an "IEP kid," "SWD," "Struggler," "Striver," "Sped," or a "1." In hardly any time at all, that one identity marker becomes almost all of how she is referred to or thought of by others, even herself.

This is disability spread, the overgeneralization of a disability, the assumption that the disability represents all parts of a student (Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1 • Disability Spread



Source: Thousand, J., Villa, R., Nevin, A. (2004). *Creativity and Collaborative Learning: A Practical Guide to Empowering Students and Teachers*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brooks Publishing Co., Inc. Adapted by permission.

Of this phenomenon, Van der Klift and Kunc (1994) said, "When disability is seen as the largest component of the person, much of what is unique or 'human' about

her or him will be obscured. When needs and deficits are what we see, we only see what that person cannot do" (p. 399).

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As educators, whatever our role as coaches, teachers, administrators, or paraprofessionals, we must step away from the temptation of the short cut. We need to call students by their names, first and foremost. Then, we need to describe and talk about them as the fully complex humans they are. All the time. If, for whatever reason, we need to group them with others based on their needs or what we can do to support them, then that is how we should describe them. So instead of saying, "my struggling readers," I could say, "readers who are currently working on developing their phonics skills," or "students who are working on parsing and phrasing in fluency." While this may take longer to say, it is more accurate and gives us insights into actions, not static, all-encompassing labels.

Understanding and Refining Your Views

The bedrock of any classroom foundation is the teacher. In order for us to define and act in the roles we believe are right for ourselves and our students, we must first be able to articulate our views.

Imani Barbarin, disability rights activist, blogger, and speaker, once asked her social media followers to take a thought journey. She asked us to think of the times when we are sick or injured or just not feeling up to doing the things we typically do. She then asked us to think of what we say to ourselves when that happens. What words do we use to and about ourselves in that moment? I encourage you to pause and consider that. Maybe you caught the flu or wrenched your back, or one of your old physical concerns flared up. What did you say to yourself as you lay on the couch, or you were icing your knee instead of folding laundry? Maybe write it down so you remember it.

Once you have that sentence or few sentences set, consider what Barbarin said next. That voice, what you say to yourself when you are not *able*, whether this is a temporary situation or long term, is your internalized ableism. While you might think you only reserve those words for yourself, the person you are likely toughest on, it is in all of us to look at disability in a certain way, Imani Barbarin teaches. And it is when we talk to ourselves that we can get an honest insight into our deep, often subconscious, feelings, assumptions, or judgments about disability.

When I considered her thought experiment for myself, I remembered a time when I was not able to walk easily because of a chronic knee issue I have. Even though I was in pain, the flare-up happened when I was traveling with friends and family. I remembered exactly what I told myself: "Just get up. It's not that bad. You're just being lazy. If you put a little effort in, you could tough it out. You're going to let everyone down." Ugh.

As ashamed as I am to admit this, I realized that despite how much of my life has been dedicated to, and deeply entrenched in, neurodivergence and disability, I revert right back to messages I have gotten since childhood when faced with my own challenges. And when I dig in a bit more, I realize that voice I think I reserve for myself does come up, quietly, even if it's only in my head and I would never say it out loud, when I get frustrated with a student who is struggling with something. I do, deep down, wonder if they could just try harder, tough it out a bit, they could manage the thing I am trying to teach them and not let everyone down.

While this voice has diminished over time as I become more conscious of it, it is still part of my makeup. Denying that it exists in me doesn't serve anyone. I believe admitting I can think like this is useful for me as an educator because it keeps me conscious when I begin to veer toward any sort of negative thoughts about a student. It is important to be aware of that so that I can proceed with caution and know where that message is coming from. It also gives me some understanding of why a colleague might say something about a child that feels so out of line from what I know about her and helps give me insights I can use to respond to that comment.

It is also useful for me to remember when I hear a child saying similar things about themselves. I can respond, "I think I know how you're feeling right now. Frustrated? Maybe feeling like if you worked harder it would be fine, and you're sort of blaming yourself for how hard this is? Do you know how I have an idea of how you're feeling? It's because it's how I feel when I am having a hard time doing something."

Archeology of Self

As one of the six components in the racial literacy development model, Dr. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, Teachers College, Columbia University professor and author, teaches us about the necessity to "peel back layers" of ourselves and our history in a practice she calls "archeology of self." While her model was designed for educators looking to create equitable classrooms with regard to race, I find the notion of looking deep into our histories and our beliefs critical for teachers working toward equity for students who are neurodivergent or have disabilities as well. When I spoke with Dr. Sealey-Ruiz about this idea, and asked her if she thought her work could be applied to understanding educators' history with ableism and how it could be affecting our teaching, she said, unequivocally, yes.

Our views as teachers, especially when it comes to issues that directly affect teaching and learning, matter. We cannot consider our roles as teachers in the classroom without first exploring those views and how they were formed. In addition to Imani Barbarin's exercise, we might ask ourselves the following questions to help ourselves more deeply understand ourselves:

- What is my earliest memory of disability or neurodivergence? How did that shape my viewpoint?
- What is a turning point moment in my life around neurodivergence and disability? What role did I play in it?
- How has neurodivergence and disability affected or not affected my teaching?

These, of course, are not the only questions to ponder, but hopefully they will lead you to think of others. If you decide to engage in this work, I would encourage you to make some time to consider what your current views are of neurodivergence and disability in students, and how life events and experiences had a hand in shaping those views.

Research Read

Gilmour, A. F., Fuchs, D., & Wehby, J. H. (2018). Are students with disabilities accessing the curriculum? A meta-analysis of the reading achievement gap between students with and without disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, *85*(3), 329–346. https://doi.org/10.1177/0014402918795830

Check your library or institution for access to this article.
https://qrs.ly/fyh7ruz

In "Are Students With Disabilities Accessing the Curriculum?" Gilmour and colleagues do a meta-analysis of the research about the reading achievement gap. They explore a range of research, name some intriguing findings, and discuss possible next steps.

As you read this article, consider the following questions:

1. The article discusses different access points such as location and outcomes. How close do you see the article's claims about those access points aligning with your learning community? What's the same or different?

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2. The idea of an achievement gap is a controversial one. The authors take on the limitations of the concept. What do you think of their findings and discussion?
3. By the end of the article, the authors conclude that students with disabilities cannot access the curriculum. How true would you say that statement is for your classroom, grade, or school? How might it be maintained or changed?

FAQs

How many students with IEPs and 504s are usually in a general education classroom? How many should I expect in mine?

As of the writing of this book, there are no exact statistics of how many students with any specific needs are typically in a general education classroom. There are guidelines in many districts and states that, in a co-taught setting, each class will have 40% or fewer students with IEPs. So, if you co-teach and you have 20 kids in a class, eight or fewer students will have IEPs. If you teach in a general education setting with one teacher, the number can vary according to enrollment and makeup of the student body, how many classes are on your grade, and whether your school tracks students into ability groups. If the class is heterogeneous statistically, there is a good chance that around 20% of the students will be neurodivergent or have learning disabilities. They may or may not have 504s or IEPs.

What are some examples of how FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) might affect the way a classroom or school is run?

The answer to this question varies according to school practices, systems, and routines. For some schools the answer is "not at all," because the school strictly adheres to FERPA. In other cases I have walked into buildings and pulled administration aside to suggest they might want to investigate to make sure they are not inadvertently crossing a privacy line. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, FERPA is not specifically special education law. It is about protecting student records and personal identifying information. For the most part, it should not be a major shift for schools to review how FERPA is applied in a particular site. We just want to be mindful that we are not sharing private

information, or that there is no identifying information connected to private data. Therefore, schools can still have data walls in the administrative offices, especially if those are linked to whole-grade groups or classes but not a roster of names posted with grades or test scores or services provided. If you have specific questions about FERPA, I would suggest you reach out to your community's legal advisor.

I don't think my classroom is welcoming to students who are neurodiverse or have disabilities. How can I make immediate changes if I think I might have some work to do?

While most of the work of creating truly inclusive spaces for all our students takes more than immediate action, it is also true that there are actions we can all take right away. First, we can review our classrooms through Dr. Erik Carter's "Ten Dimensions of Belonging," mentioned in the introduction of this book, and address any dimensions that are not where we would like them to be.

Second, we can do a deep dive into Universal Design for Learning to fine-tune actions that could be taken or techniques applied in order to make our practice more accessible. (See Chapter 2 for information on how UDL can be applied to literacy.)

Finally, we could do an audit of our teaching practices, curriculum, resources, texts. We might look to see if our students would see themselves represented and valued in things like the books available to read, whole-class texts, exemplar student work, visual representations of students, modes of expression valued, and so on. If we see areas where things can be improved, let's make those changes.

I am realizing, after doing some of Dr. Sealey-Ruiz's "archeology of self" work, that I have some things I need to unlearn around neurodiversity and disability. Where do I begin?

While it can feel uncomfortable to know you have some work to do in terms of unlearning, you have already taken the first step. You are not alone in needing to do this work. The Council on Quality and Leadership conducted a massive study of 350,000 participants to determine what or if people were ableist (Friedman, 2019). Using and adapting Son Hing et al.'s (2008) "two-dimensional model of racial prejudice," the study found that while most people hold prejudices about people with disabilities, they *believe* they have positive feelings about people

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with disabilities. The study found that when faced with this discrepancy, people generally disassociated or rationalized. While cognitive dissonance is common for many forms of prejudice (many people do not believe they are prejudiced when they are), for ableism what is striking to me is how often so many of us truly believe we hold people with disabilities in high regard, when we don't. We may be mistaking pity for high regard. Or, as some in the disability rights movement have identified, we see people who are neurodivergent or have disabilities as playing the role of inspiration because of their differences, not because of their full humanity.

I would recommend starting by acknowledging that our society is filled with ableist systems and structures that affect most, if not all, of us. Next, I would do more archeology of self work (see Next Steps for book titles), to try to uncover moments in your life that have helped to form some of the beliefs you hold, feelings you have, or actions you take around disability. Third, I would recommend doing an audit of your current life. Do you live in accessible housing? When you listen to music, watch television, scroll through social media, read books, how often are the artists and creators people who are neurodiverse or have disabilities? What about your friends? If you find that you might benefit from more inclusive experiences, I would encourage you to move outside of your typical patterns. There is a whole big beautiful world of art and culture that is inclusive and will have a big impact on your day to day. Finally, I would encourage you to educate yourself in any areas where you might have knowledge gaps around neurodiversity and disability or maybe even fears or discomfort. Read books by and about a range of people. Bring all of these experiences with you to your teaching, including knowing where you might need to tread more carefully because you are still learning in that area.

Next Steps

This chapter is an introduction to successfully and joyfully teaching students who are neurodiverse or have learning disabilities. While it gives some important foundational information, there is so much more to explore if you are interested. Below are a few texts and other resources you might want to check out for further exploration:

- ☐ *Being Realistic Isn't Realistic: Collected Essays on Disability, Identity, Inclusion and Innovation,* by Emma Van Der Klift and Norman Kunc
- ☐ *Special Education Book,* by Marlyn Pangatungan

- ☐ *Demystifying Disability: What to Know, What to Say, and How to Be an Ally,* by Emily Ladau
- ☐ *A Disability History of the United States,* by Kim E. Nielsen
- ☐ *The Complete Learning Disabilities Handbook,* by Joan M. Harwell & Rebecca Williams Jackson
- ☐ *Archeology of Self: The Introspective Educator's Guide to Racial Literacy,* by Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz
- ☐ *Multi-Tiered Systems of Support: A Practical Guide to Preventative Practice,* by Gary Schaffer
- ☐ The Child Mind Institute, an organization dedicated to mental health and learning differences. They offer regular information, support, and resources for educators and families. Visit childmind.org or follow them on social media.
- ☐ Understood, an organization that shares information about and advocates for students who "learn and think differently." Visit Understood.org or follow them on social media.

Final Thoughts: Remember the Sand Mandala

While every book since books began have faced the awkward reality that time marches on at such a pace that books are out of date before they are even off the press, this reality has become even starker with the dominance of digital information. As I mentioned in the introduction, while I know that this book in your hands is very likely to have some or a lot of things that have changed drastically in terms of laws, guidelines, research, and even federal and state responsibilities by the time you read this, I still feel that it is important to offer a more nuanced, layered, and reflective resource for teachers to use than what is commonly available in the quick information hits we find in internet searches. Change does not mean that the core does not remain the same.

Throughout this chapter I have shared facts, laws, language, and beliefs that are essential to working with students who learn differently than the way schools have been traditionally designed to teach. As of the writing of this book, I believe with my whole heart that these things are indeed foundational. I also know that most of what is in this chapter I was unaware of when I began teaching in the last century. I find that grounding because not knowing or having those essentials at one time did not mean I could not eventually learn them. Why does this matter? Because to me the core and the essentials are not the same.

The core is the central belief or motivation I have for my work as an educator. And for me it is the fundamental belief that all children want, can, and deserve to learn. I do not believe that will ever change, even when all the "essentials" do. For some of us (like me!) who do not love change, this can be a hard notion

to accept—that the essentials can and will and, perhaps most importantly, *should* change.

I believe in the process of teaching and learning above all.

In my book *Unstoppable Writing Teacher* (2015), I wrote about the Tibetan Buddhist practice of creating sand mandalas. Sand mandalas are complicated and beautiful designs that Tibetan Buddhist monks take years to learn to make. These complex and breathtaking pieces of art are painstakingly constructed over days out of grains of colorful sand. At the end of their creation, as part of the practice, they are ritually swept away. "The sand mandala is meant to be a reminder of life's impermanence. That anything made by humans is not permanent. The value of the sand mandala is in the process, the thinking, meditating, and learning as the creation is happening. The finished piece hardly matters because it was never meant to last. This reminds me so much of teaching" (p. 3).

And it also reminds me of what we educators do; that is, we started out our careers, prepared for one sort of art, one type of experience, maybe even one specific grade or setting, only to find the world we inhabit now is virtually unrecognizable. For those of us who got our licenses as general education teachers first, or for those of us who have special education licenses grounded in other philosophies, the very real need or desire to learn more about students and practices we were never given opportunity to learn about is yet another new experience.

Although it is not easy to embrace the changes, whether it is new learning of things we never had access to or an unlearning of practices we held dear for so long, I find it a great comfort to remember that my core belief as an educator does not need to change.