EducationWeek® | SPOTLIGHT®

2026

Moving From Awareness To Action for Neurodiverse And Autistic Students

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EDITOR'S NOTE

This Spotlight explores both the challenges and opportunities schools face in supporting neurodiverse and autistic students. The articles examine how public rhetoric, discipline practices, and traditional school structures can unintentionally create barriers for students with disabilities. They highlight **research-based strategies to better engage neurodiverse learners**, build **more inclusive classrooms**, and design **social-emotional supports** that recognize diverse communication and learning needs. It showcases innovative approaches, from **technology and gaming** to **career-connected learning**, that help prepare students with autism for success beyond school.

Sonia Pulido for Education Week

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OPINION

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Educators Worry About How Trump's Autism Rhetoric Will Affect Students, Parents

By Evie Blad

President Donald Trump's recent announcements about autism didn't center on education. But educators still expect his comments—including an assertion, disputed by scientists, that acetaminophen use during pregnancy causes the condition—to pop up in emotional conversations with parents.

Educators and people with autism have long confronted misinformation about the condition, said Jennifer Paz Ryan, a former teacher and clinical psychologist in Denver who contracts with school districts to assess students with disabilities, including autism. But an address from the Oval Office raises the spectacle of those falsehoods to a new level, she said.

"It's pseudoscience, and it has so much more power" coming from the president, Paz Ryan said. "It's another myth, and it adds to this ongoing battle that autistic individuals have had to endure for a very long time."

Careless rhetoric fuels a stigma that harms students with autism and can make it difficult for educators to build crucial trust with their families, educators and advocates said. Of particular concern: the administration's efforts to identify a singular cause of the condition may heap blame and guilt on parents who need support.

The public narrative about autism "has become political and polarized" following Trump's remarks, said Robyn Linscott, the director of education and family policy for The Arc of the United States, an organization that advocates for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. "It could potentially put educators in uncomfortable positions."

What Trump and Kennedy said about autism

Trump and U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Robert F. Kennedy Jr. spoke from the Oval Office Monday, blaming the use of acetaminophen, commonly sold as Tylenol, during pregnancy for a rise in autism diagnoses. Trump also resurfaced long-debunked claims that childhood vaccines cause autism,

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which have contributed to lower rates of childhood immunizations and concerns about the reemergence of preventable illnesses.

"I think I can say that there are certain groups of people that don't take vaccines and don't take any pills that have no autism," Trump said, apparently referring to Amish people. "Does that tell you something?"

Scientific and medical groups, including the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, quickly refuted Trump's claims. There is no research that shows a causal link between acetaminophen and autism, they said.

Scientists have found weaknesses in the methodology of preliminary studies that suggested a correlation between use of the over-the-counter medicine and changes to neurodevelopmental outcomes, ACOG said in a statement. A more rigorous 2024 study of 2.5 million Swedish children, which accounted for genetic commonalities and other factors shared within sibling groups, found no evidence of increased risk of autism, ADHD, or intellectual disability associated with maternal acetaminophen use, the organization noted.

In a letter to physicians sent after Trump's announcement, the Food and Drug Administration acknowledged studies that dispute Trump's claims.

"It is important to note that while an association between acetaminophen and neurological conditions has been described in many studies, a causal relationship has not been established and there are contrary studies in the scientific literature," the agency wrote. "It is also noted that acetaminophen is the only over-the-counter drug approved for use to treat fevers during pregnancy, and high fevers in pregnant women can pose a risk to their children."

Trump and Kennedy also announced new money for data-driven autism research and plans to authorize the experimental use of leucovorin, a drug commonly used to treat side effects from chemotherapy, for children with certain autism symptoms, like affects on speech. But autism researchers expressed skepticism, NPR reported.

Autism diagnoses grew with expanded criteria, early screening efforts

Scientists and advocates for people with autism have said it's harmful to claim there is a simple cause or solution for the complex developmental disorder, which can affect speech, learning, emotional regulation, and social skills. Scientists believe autism emerges from a combination of genetic and environmental factors.

Rates of autism diagnoses have climbed over the last two decades. About 1 in 31 U.S. children have autism, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated in April. That's an increase from about 1 in 150 children in the early 2000s.

That uptick in cases came after doctors expanded diagnostic criteria to include milder symptoms and worked to expand screening in hopes of identifying and intervening earlier.

Advocacy groups like The Arc worry that, by painting autism as "a crisis" and using harsh and dehumanizing language, federal officials will exacerbate harmful stigma.

In April, for example, Kennedy said "autism destroys families" and called it an "individual tragedy" for those who receive the diagnosis.

"The understanding and acceptance of autism has come a long way," said Linscott, a former special education teacher whose adult brother has autism. "I sometimes wish he was growing up in today's world. But I think [Trump's and Kennedy's remarks] are going to have a significantly negative impact on stigma."

Stigma affects students with autism and their families

The Trump administration's rhetoric around autism has already had real-world consequences, said Paz Ryan, the Denver psychologist. When Kennedy said in May that the federal government would create a database of information about people with autism, parents said they were more reluctant to pursue a diagnosis for their children for fear of how the information would be used, she said.

That plan, which the Trump administration later walked back, would have compiled information from autistic people's insurance claims, medical records, and wearable devices like smart watches to probe a cause. It was met with alarm from a broad span of organization concerned about civil rights.

"This just ignites that same kind of fear," Paz Ryan said of the Monday announcement.

For parents, shame and fear of blame may be a hurdle to early identification and treatment, Linscott said. She's particularly concerned those fears may further fuel racial disparities, like the tendency for Black boys with autism to be misdiagnosed with emotional disturbance instead.

Getting to the root of parental concerns

Misunderstandings about autism also pose a broader risk, said Jessica Calarco, a sociology professor at the University of Wisconsin who studies education, parenting, and medical decisionmaking.

"If autism can be easily prevented ... then it's easy to treat autism as an individual responsibility, a risk that families have to manage without support from the state," she said.

That may contribute, even subtly, to diminished public concern about things like funding for special education, Calarco said. The Trump administration has already bypassed Congress to pull funding for resource centers that support parents of children with disabilities, training for special education teachers, research on how to support students in special education as they transition into college and careers, and efforts to address a shortage of school psychologists, who play a role in assessing and supporting students with disabilities.

It's understandable that parents of children with autism want to understand the cause and nature of the condition, Calarco said, even as public conversation about the subject typically lacks needed nuance. Before debunked research about vaccines and autism rose to prominence in the 1990s, it was common to blame emotionally cold, detached "refrigerator mothers" for their children's autism, she said. The new theory about vaccines helped alleviate that shame, but eventually grew into a new form of self-blame for parents who questioned their decisions to get their children immunized.

While schools don't prescribe medication or treat pregnant women, special education teachers have frequent interactions with students' parents and are often some of the most trusted people in their circles, Calarco said, so it's natural that such a high-profile news event would lead to discussions in schools. Previous research has suggested that when public health issues, like COVID-related school closures, grew intertwined with partisan political debates, it exacerbated mistrust between families and schools, she said.

It's important for educators to acknowledge families' and students' underlying emotions in these conversations, educators said. For example, a parent looking for a cause to blame may need to hear assurances from educators that they value their child and want to ensure they receive needed supports.

Whether or not they agree on the science, educators discussing the recent announcements with parents should have "a lot of compassion, and a lot of empathy," especially if parents are experiencing shame or self-blame, Paz Ryan said.

"Recognize that if somebody is sharing this, they are probably feeling pretty vulnerable," she said. ■

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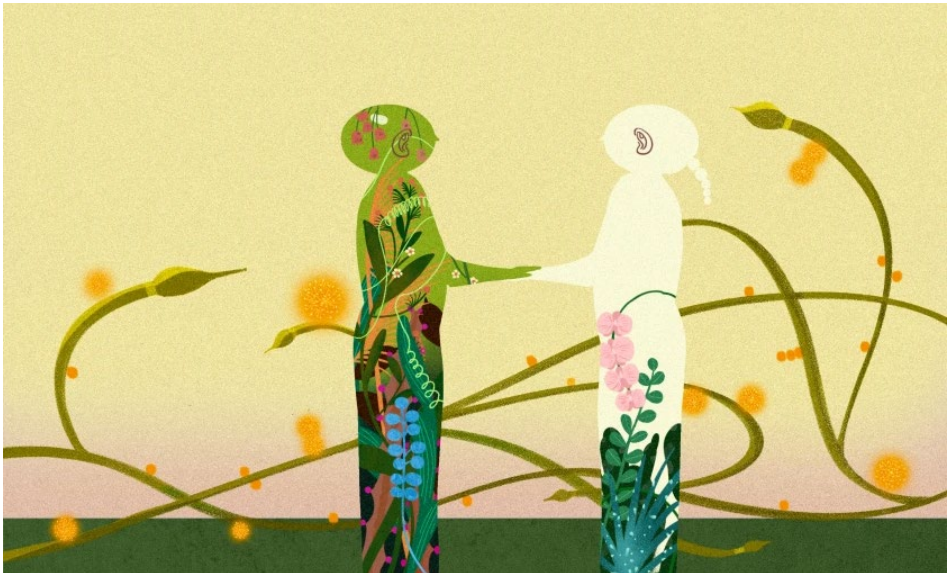
'Handcuffed and Pushed Out': How Schools Fail Some Students With Disabilities

By Brooke Schultz



Nix Ren for Education Week

A North Carolina mother knew her 8-year-old son who has autism had been having difficulty in school—and asked that he receive additional support. Instead, while undergoing a functional behavior assessment, he ended up in a cop car.

The boy was ultimately taken by a school resource officer to a local hospital. It was the second time in one week this had happened. The second time, he was transported to the hospital to be assessed for placement in a psychiatric facility due to the behaviors he exhibited, his mother alleges. The incident occurred in early March. Education Week is not naming the family to protect the child's privacy.

"I'm furious," the boy's mother said in a Zoom interview. "And I want something in the system to change. My son has just as much of a right to an education and to live in his home and community as any of us. ... And he has the right to a free and appropriate public education, not what they have available."

The number of students identified as having a disability—and therefore eligible to receive services as required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act—has been steadily rising for the past few years. Advocates and experts worry the overburdened K-12 special education system, which has faced staffing shortages and trouble with retention, isn't able to properly support the students identified as needing services. Instead, situations like what happened in North Carolina could continue to unfold, with students with disabilities facing steeper punishment in the absence of staff who are trained to de-escalate behavior.

"Unable to receive that [special education services] during COVID, they come back to school, and rather than the support they need to be caught up, they are instead handcuffed and pushed out of the classroom," said Tyler Whittenberg, deputy director of the opportunity to learn program at the Advancement Project, an organization that focuses on racial justice.

Identifications have surged after the pandemic, with 7.5 million students qualifying under IDEA in the 2022-23 school year, up from 7.1 million in 2019.

Students with disabilities were among the most severely affected during the pandemic, with schools struggling to provide accommodations and therapies remotely. Their academic recovery in the years since has been slower than their peers. Experts say that students are being more readily identified for special education due to behavioral challenges, which educators say have increased after the pandemic.

In the mix, too, are long-held concerns that some students, particularly Black students, are overidentified for services—putting them at risk of receiving fewer opportunities and more disciplinary action. But contradictory research shows that those students may in fact be underidentified, locking them out of supports their white peers receive and ultimately causing more harm.

Students are over- and under-identified for having disabilities

When IDEA was reauthorized by Congress in 2004, lawmakers were concerned about a disproportionate amount of students of color in special education. The law was updated to direct states with significant over-representation to spend a portion of their federal special education funds on "coordinated, early intervening services" to help students succeed in the general education environment.

Obama administration-era directives also sought to rectify historical civil rights concerns in education through guidance targeting discipline and special education identification. But stark racial disparities persist.

When students with disabilities aren't properly identified, that means they aren't getting access to services and protections they're legally entitled to, said Amanda Sullivan, a professor at the University of Minnesota who studies disproportionality.

But when students—particularly marginalized ones—are incorrectly identified, they're getting blocked from certain educational opportunities by being removed from general education settings, and are more likely to see exclusionary discipline practices, she said.

"There isn't any one thing that contributes to disability identification, there's not any one thing that fixes it either. The greatest impact is in really zooming out and thinking about what happens well before special education even comes up with a concern," Sullivan said. "It's not that disability identifications have to be prevented or hindered, but rather just, are we providing appropriate educational opportunities and support for everybody? And one manifestation of inappropriate decisions, and

inappropriate opportunities and supports, is in the inappropriate identification of disability."

A majority of students served under IDEA attended general education classes most of the time, with numbers increasing from 61 percent in fall 2012 to 67 percent in fall 2022. Meanwhile, those who spent about 40 to 79 percent of their time in general education shrunk from 20 to 16 percent, and those who spent less than half of their time in general education fell from 14 to 13 percent, according to data from NCES.

In the 2022-23 school year, about a third of children were identified as having specific learning disabilities—the most common disability identification, followed by speech or language impairments (19 percent), other health impairments (15 percent), and autism (13 percent). The largest percentage of Black students served under IDEA were identified as having an intellectual disability, according to 2019-20 data from the Office of Special Education Programs.

For decades, researchers have found that students of color are over-referred into special education, ending up classified as emotionally disturbed, or having an intellectual disability, said María Hernández, a professor at New York University who has studied disproportionality.

Most teachers are white women, Hernández said, creating what can be a "cultural dissonance" between them and students of color. Research has shown, she added, that when Black students have Black educators, they're less likely to be classified into special education.

"The idea is that IDEA's a protection for our children, and at the same time, we continue to see the same pattern around who continues to be excluded once they actually have an IEP/are classified as having a disability," Hernández said.

But researcher Paul Morgan, a professor in the school of public health at the University at Albany, SUNY, contends the opposite: that Black students are actually under-referred to special education, and that's detrimental to equity. Though the research has drawn criticism from others in the field, he argues that his and his colleagues' findings have been replicated.

"We don't want kids to be identified as having disabilities just because of their race or ethnicity, but we also don't want kids who have disabilities not to be helped because of their race or ethnicity," said Morgan, who has a background as a special education teacher. "There does seem to be evidence that the way the system is operating is advantaging white and English-speaking students in terms of who's receiving services."

There's evidence, he added, that special education can positively impact student achievement.

"We could do better in terms of understanding the potential positive impacts of special education and ensuring that those services are well resourced—which typically they have not been—through enhanced federal funding and funding through state and localities, because there is evidence to suggest receiving the specialized services through special education can be of benefit to kids," he said.

The criminalization of disabilities, and inadequate services

In Arizona, advocates working to target the overuse of discipline for Black students led to examining how students of color were faring in special education, said Janelle Wood, the CEO of Black Mothers Forum, an education advocacy group. In talking with parents, Wood and her team found students with disabilities weren't receiving full protections or services. She cited reductions in staff, a lack of resources, and difficulty finding qualified special educators as reasons why.

"Sometimes the teachers don't have the capacity or the resources or the skillset to do it, and they're placed in an awful position at times when they have high numbers [of students with disabilities] in their classrooms," she said.

Whittenberg, from the Advancement Project, said trained specialists and teachers are prepared to help students with disabilities navigate disruptive behaviors. But police officers, he cautioned, aren't. Research has found that when police are on campus, arrests are twice as high compared to demographically similar schools without police.

"When we bring in these outside actors under the false guise of security, and the individuals respond, they come in arms with weapons, and they come in with training to dominate, to control—not to listen, not to de-escalate," he said. "When these are the people we're putting in our schools and putting them around students with disabilities, it is no wonder that these students are assaulted on a regular basis by police officers who are not trained to deal with them."

The North Carolina mother, whose son was taken out of school by a school resource officer, said she was told her son had been having behavioral trouble the second day he was taken to the hospital. The child allegedly was physical with a staff member, when the school resource officer passed by outside the classroom and intervened, ultimately taking him out of the school.

The mother cited a lack of funding to hire qualified staff. She said the school has relied on high use of restraint and seclusion to deal with his behavior. At home, the family has removed his bedroom door, she said, so he doesn't feel like he'll be locked in his room.

Since the incident in March, he has displayed school avoidance, she said, adding that she has been charged with truancy. In a lawsuit against the district, the family is hoping for their son to be placed in a private school with appropriate resources for a year, before transitioning back to public school. The school district did not respond to three requests for comments via phone and email.

"I'm not going to tell you we never see a behavior at home," she said. "We do. He has autism. We definitely have seen, since going through training ourselves, about how to proactively approach behaviors—how to use visuals, target sensory needs—as parents. We definitely have seen that it can be done. He can be successful." ■

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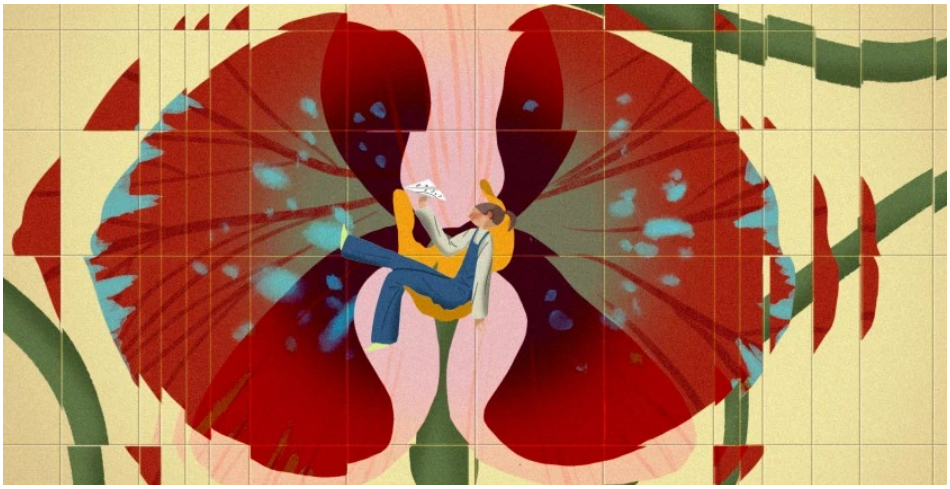

Nix Ren for Education Week

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How Teachers Can Motivate and Engage Neurodiverse Students

The big upsides—and potentials risks—of a "strengths-based" approach to teaching students with disabilities

By Elizabeth Heubeck

Not every student learns the same.

This seemingly simple concept lies at the heart of the term neurodiversity, which refers to differences in the brain's form or function that impact how people receive, process, and respond to information.

Diagnoses such as autism, attention deficity/hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD, dyslexia, developmental language disorder, dyspraxia, and others, which fall under the umbrella term neurodiversity, have affected people throughout the ages. But the term neurodiversity itself has been in existence for less than 30 years and is still not widely understood.

That could explain why there's such a broad range of strategies used to motivate and engage neurodiverse students at school and in the learning process. Experts address some of the more well-known ones, and provide insight into what might work best.

What is a deficits-based approach to teaching neurodivergent students versus a strengths-based approach?

Teachers historically have taken a "deficits-based" approach to teaching students with learning diagnoses. That means they see and assess neurodivergent students based on their skill gaps as compared to their neurotypical peers, experts say.

This stands in direct contrast to a "strengths-based" approach, which embraces the concept of neurodiversity and acknowledges the positive attributes of all students—including those who struggle to learn in traditional formats.

The increasingly common catchphrase, "disability is a superpower," takes the strengths-based concept a step further by encouraging neurodiverse students to take a favorable view of their learning differences.

Such drastically divergent approaches to neurodiversity can be confusing to classroom teachers aiming to find meaningful ways to support neurodiverse students. Many education experts advise that teachers should take a "middle-of-the-road" stance, espousing the benefits of a strengths-based approach to teaching neurodiverse students while cautioning against referring too readily to neurodiverse diagnoses as "superpowers."

Should a learning disability be seen as a 'superpower'?

Emma Cole, a pediatric neuropsychologist in the Kennedy Krieger Institute's department of neuropsychology and school programs, advises adults to use caution when suggesting to children that their disability is a "superpower."

Disabilities, she said, come with traits that can make life more difficult, and require more effort, time, and perseverance; students with dyslexia, for instance, often find reading a painstaking process.

"They [disabilities] require you to do things in a little bit of a non-traditional way," she said.

Ben Shifrin, head of Jemicy School in Owings Mills, Md., a private school that serves students with dyslexia and other related language-based learning differences, also stops short of referring to students' learning disabilities as their superpowers.

"FMRI [functional magnetic resonance imaging] studies have proven that these kids process information differently; thus, they see the world differently," he told Education Week last year. "We don't deny that reading is hard for these kids. We don't gloss over it."

How can educators present a balanced perspective of neurodiversity?

Cole shares Shifrin's balanced perspective of neurodiversity.

"I really prefer to look at these differences in terms of strengths and weaknesses," Cole said, suggesting that when a professional explains the diagnosis of a disability to a child for the first time, the explanation includes a mention of both.

Cole encourages continuing this balanced approach beyond the initial diagnosis.

"We can take a strengths-based perspective and capitalize on those strengths while also helping students to understand what their weaknesses are, and what helps them with their weaknesses," she said.

Students' eventual ability to identify their academic weaknesses independently and know how to ask for support puts them on a path toward self-advocacy, an important strategy throughout their education, Cole explained.

What keeps more teachers and schools from using a strengths-based approach to teaching neurodivergent students?

As a former elementary teacher who is now an assistant professor of teacher education and elementary education at Saint Louis University, Sheldon C. McAfee believes in the value of a strengths-based approach to learning. He experienced it firsthand.

As a student with dyslexia, he had a teacher in elementary school who encouraged him to

give oral reports because he was a strong storyteller but a weak reader and writer. It helped him become better at both reading and writing.

Claire O'Connor and Anthony Warren, both 12th graders at Jemicy School, share similar experiences.

Bringing interactive components into a lesson, as opposed to reading from a text, has helped him engage in school work, Anthony said. Claire agrees, listing collaborative hands-on projects and oral presentations as classroom strategies that have allowed her to demonstrate her knowledge of a subject.

Several obstacles keep teachers from implementing a strengths-based approach with neurodiverse students, McAfee said. The method requires teachers to know their students individually and be aware of their weaknesses and strengths. But with often large class sizes, rigid requirements related to standardized assessments, growing safety concerns, and other challenges, most teachers now don't have the time or training to provide the individualized attention to students that a strengths-based approach to teaching requires, he said.

He also believes that too few educators receive training on strengths-based learning, during teacher-prep programs or while on the job.

"I think we need to give teachers and other related staff more training on how to work with these students," McAfee said. "There's a lot of professional development now around [diversity, equity, and inclusion] as well as culture building, but we've got to add strengths-based education to the fray."

How can teachers better support neurodiverse students, even with limited resources?

Kennedy Krieger's Cole suggests that schools lean on existing district resources, such as access to speech and occupational therapists, to support classroom teachers in meeting students' individual needs.

"As we push for greater inclusion, we need to provide our teachers with more support, and that includes collaboration among the related service providers," Cole said.

Cole also recommends that teachers model the strengths-based approach for students by sharing a little about themselves.

"We need to really keep our empathy skills in tip-top shape, and to show students [this strength-based approach] through modeling," Cole said. "Tell students: These are the things that I do well. These are the things that I have difficulty with, and this is how I work with it." ■

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A Guide to Bringing Neurodiverse Learners Into the Fold

By Olina Banerji

Not all students learn the same way.

Students with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder or ADHD, dyslexia, or dyscalculia may struggle to focus, read, or keep up with math instruction in class. A majority of these students are going to spend most of their time in general education classrooms, which means all teachers have to be equipped to talk to them about how they might struggle with tasks that come more easily to their neurotypical peers.

This is a tightrope walk. Teachers have to find a way to highlight learning differences that empower students, while balancing some students' desires to not be labeled in a particular way. Plus, parents may worry about their children being singled out.

Educators need to understand the different conditions that constitute neurodiversity, and that every condition might have a specific intervention. (For example, 5 to 8 percent of school-age children have dyscalculia, a severe and persistent learning disability in math. These videos can help teachers better understand and teach students with the disability.)

Teachers may believe that calling out a student's learning differences stigmatizes them. On the contrary, experts say, recognizing neurodiverse conditions could be freeing for students—they can make sense of why they struggle to perform the same tasks as their peers. While teachers should be careful about publicly calling attention to students, it is important for them to impart to their students that their learning challenges are related to biology, not their intelligence or willpower.

The challenge is that preservice teachers aren't always taught how to identify and tackle learning differences in their training. They may end up teaching a class where 10 to 20 percent of their students might learn differently, whether their condition has been diagnosed or not.

Here are three ways for educators to accommodate all types of learners in their classes. The skills educators develop to tackle these learning differences can be helpful with all kinds of students, experts say.

Use a strengths-based approach

Neurodiverse learners may respond better to interactive assessments. Instead of always requiring them to read and write, for instance, educators can test their students' knowledge of a subject through oral presentations or hands-on projects. This method can get challenging, however, when educators are dealing with larger class sizes.

Principals can help plan professional development for educators through which they can learn how to apply a strengths-based approach to learning differences, alongside other essential training on equity or inclusion.

Empower students to advocate for themselves

Key with neurodiverse learners is the ability to advocate for themselves as they get into higher grades, meet different educators, or change schools. This means they may rely on their teachers early on to tell them about how their brains function differently, their strengths, and the skills they find difficult to master.

Teachers don't need an in-depth understanding of brain science, but they do need to know enough to help students figure out how they can best learn and thrive in school.

Normalize learning differences

Teachers and principals should prioritize creating a safe space to talk about learning differences. Experts say it's important for teachers to highlight how each student learns differently, not just those of the neurodiverse kids in their classes. Teachers can point out how students have different brains, just like they have different hobbies, likes, and dislikes.

Teachers shouldn't be left alone in this. Principals can help teachers connect with counselors and other experts in the school to learn how to talk about neurodiversity in class.

Learning differences come in all shapes and intensities. This report on the key learning differences is a good primer to get started. ■

Published June 21, 2023

To Prepare Students With Autism for the Working World, Drones Might Be a Good Start

By Alyson Klein

E+/Getty

How do you get students on the autism spectrum interested in STEM careers? And how do you help them feel comfortable in a tech-oriented workplace?

One approach, a group of researchers is finding, is to teach them to fly drones. And specifically, give them opportunities to learn this skill in a classroom environment that simulates a more free-wheeling workplace that embraces neurodiverse people.

Drones are expected to transform everything from retail shopping to the way government responds to natural disasters. And learning how to pilot drones is a useful skill for all kinds of jobs already. Tack on to that the fact that learning to fly drones can be very fun and intellectually rewarding for kids.

That is why a group of North Carolina State University researchers chose drones to be a key part of a study examining how to get students with autism interested in STEM learning and careers. The researchers are currently working with 34 high school students on the autism spectrum. Preliminary findings from the three-year, longitudinal study are scheduled to be presented June 26 at the International Society for Technology in Education's annual conference in Philadelphia.

According to a 2018 report from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 1 of every 60 8-year-olds are diagnosed with autism. Older students on the autism spectrum may have difficulty with social communication, prefer unvarying routines, have trouble expressing emotions, and have a narrow interest in specific topics, according to Autism Speaks, a nonprofit organization.

Learning to fly drones and self-regulate

For the past two years, two cohorts of about 17 high schoolers each have met for six hours over several Saturdays to learn how drones work, through a mix of small group instruction and hands-on learning with a drone simulator. They also get an hour of additional online learning each week, as well as attending a week-long summer session. Students in the program eventually get the opportunity to fly small drones.

As students master the ins-and-outs of the technology, they are also learning how to self-regulate in a simulated STEM work environment, said Jamie Pearson, an assistant professor of special education at North Carolina State who is working on the study.

That might look different for each student, but that is the point. If the students begin to learn what works for them to self-regulate, they will be more likely to learn the concepts of flying drones. For instance, one girl feels most comfortable sitting on the floor of the classroom, even during class discussions.

"She likes the feel of the cold, hard floor. That's just a sensory input that feels good to her," Pearson said. "So, you will often see her sitting on the floor under her chair or under her desk, but she is fully engaged. She raises her hand to speak. She answers questions. She follows up on what they talked about the week before. She's ready to give examples or do hands-on demonstrations."

At many schools—or later, in the workplace—that kind of behavior would be considered "challenging," Pearson said. But in the drone classroom, "as long as you're demonstrating your learning, I really don't care where you're sitting, as long as you're not distracting someone else."

Some students have tried setting an alarm to remind them when it's time to shift to a new activity or walking out of the classroom when they need a quick break. Others have benefitted from written reminders of exercises that can help them stay calm, like squeezing a sensory toy.

"We are trying to teach strategies that would actually translate into the workplace," Pearson said.

Many tech companies in the Silicon Valley have created and encouraged more free-wheeling workplaces, equipped with bean bag chairs, ping pong tables, and other amenities to help workers find the comfort zones that fuel their creativity and productivity.

The study, which was financed by the National Science Foundation, includes students all along the autism spectrum, except those with significant cognitive delays, Pearson said.

"I wanted to make sure that we developed a program that was flexible enough that we could make adaptations for students who had differing support needs," Pearson explained.

She also made sure that the students represented a variety of racial groups and that girls—who are less likely to be identified as being on the autism spectrum and less likely to pursue STEM careers—were part of the mix. ■

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Published July 12, 2021

What Employers Can Teach Schools About Neurodiversity

By Sarah D. Sparks

Thinking differently can be an edge in the work world. Someone with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder may have a drive for novelty that can spark entrepreneurship. And an autistic student's childhood fascination with games could launch a career in software development. Employers and researchers alike are now beginning to understand how issues that challenge students in the classroom can come with benefits for the right job.

Yet even as some of the world's biggest companies, including Microsoft and SAP, have launched hiring initiatives focused on recruiting more workers with autism, ADHD, and other categories of brain differences, experts say schools still do little to teach students how to leverage their strengths rather than make up for their disabilities when preparing for colleges and careers.

"You know, there's a lot of publicity about neurodiversity in the workplace, but it hasn't filtered to the special education community," said Thomas Armstrong, the executive director of the American Institute for Learning and Human Development, which provides teacher training on students in special education, and author of several books on neurodiversity and special education. "Special ed. is still dragging its heels from a past that is oriented around disease, deficits, and disorders."

By law, schools must use a student's strengths to guide the development of their individualized education programs for special education, and beginning at age 14, IEPs must also include goals for students in their transition to work or study after high school. But in practice, most high school guidance counselors have large caseloads and little time for the more intensive coordination with family and special education and general education teachers that may be needed for full career planning for such students, according to Chantall Lowe, senior director of community engagement for IncludeNYC, an advocacy and support group for students with disabilities and their families in New York.

"I think when you do see supported employment being talked about early on for young people, you see a lot of hospitality and retail and service industry jobs," Lowe said. "It's kind of like, we have these couple of buckets, and this is what we're going to do, and there's less of, OK, this is what this young person is interested in. Can we find something that meets those needs?"

As of 2020, the most recent available federal data show, the unemployment rates for those with a disability remain higher than the rates for those without, across all ages and educational attainment levels. People with a disability were more likely to be self-employed than those without a disability.

Traditional approaches can create inequities

The problems for students in special education go beyond just limited formal programs to connect them to jobs. Studies suggest that just being labeled as having a disability can limit students' access to courses they could succeed in, and that these students need to have hope of a broader array of career options later.

"People don't understand that many of these disabilities are not based on low IQ. A lot of those kids with ADHD and kids with learning disabilities, are high IQ and [when] they're achieving below their potential is usually how those were diagnosed," said Dara Shifrer, an associate professor of sociology at Portland State University in Oregon. "But I don't think kids are told this when they're diagnosed, and so it really affects their social psyches and affects the way their teachers perceive them, the way their parents perceive them."

In one 2013 study, researchers compared the course-taking of high schoolers who had an individualized education program for a learning disability to students with no such designation, but who had closely matched 10th grade reading and math assessment scores, ages, backgrounds, academic mindsets of themselves and their close friends, and reported behavior problems in school.

They found that a student labeled with a learning disability was 19 percentage points less likely to complete college preparatory coursework than a student with similar academic placement, performance, mindset and behavior in early high school but who was not labeled with a disability. Among students of similar income levels, there were larger gaps in course-taking between students identified with learning disabilities and similar students without than there was between white students and students of color.

"We found teachers have much lower expectations for the kids with learning-disability diagnoses than they do similarly achieving kids without the diagnosis, said Shifrer, the lead author of the study. "And that kind of tracks through their high school experience to change the way they see themselves and what courses are placed into.

"Maybe for the low-performing kid without the diagnosis, the teacher might attribute their low performance to laziness or home

A NEURODIVERSE WORKER LOOKS BACK

Stephen Braun, a quality assurance lead at Aspiritech, a Chicago technology firm, manages software and game design and development. One of the more than 90 percent of the firm on the autism spectrum, he said he had a hard time retaining information during lectures in school, but picks up things visually quickly.

Braun said he always wanted to go into video game design and programming, but was repeatedly shut down in high school. He had an individualized education program but, "they didn't follow it much," he recalled.

"I didn't really learn much in terms of college prep, since they didn't really think I was capable of going to college," Braun said. "In terms of my career path, I was laughed at when I spoke about my ambitions."

In senior year, Braun switched schools and got involved with PACE, a three-year postsecondary transition program for students with developmental learning needs at National Louis University. From there, he entered Tribeca Flashpoint Academy, a media arts college, where he graduated in 2014.

Today Braun has helped design and produce games in contract work, and at Aspiritech has responsibility for workers in four projects while also setting up training sessions for other analysts to learn about new features and products.

Here are Braun's suggestions on how educators can help neurodiverse students make better transitions to college and careers:

Encourage students to focus on specific skills needed for jobs that interest them. As Braun notes, "I had a general idea of what to focus on. I just didn't really know how to. As I was gearing up for college, I began to use UDK—which is a game engine—and I started to learn c++. It was mainly through trial and error."

Teach "basic life skills" for the work world, like budgeting and dealing with stress.

Allow students to try something new even if they may not succeed. "If a person wants to try a new subject or something that they are interested in, have them go for it," he said. "It's better for someone to fail than to be told they are not capable of doing something."

support, while for the kid with the disability they might think, oh, this kid is neurologically unable to perform. And so why intervene then?" she said. "So it can be a really vicious cycle."

In a separate study published earlier this spring, Shifrer and her colleagues analyzed the data of more than 15,000 adolescents who entered high school in 2009 through three years after high school. They tracked students whose schools or parents reported they had been diagnosed with a learning or intellectual disability, developmental delay, autism, or attention deficits. For those with attention deficits, researchers also noted whether or not symptoms were being treated medically, as prior studies have found students with treated ADHD have better outcomes than those with untreated symptoms.

Students who had been diagnosed with disabilities were significantly less likely to enroll in college—48 percent to 58 percent, depending on the type of disability, compared to 73 percent of students without disabilities. The researchers found that high school achievement in math and science classes was a better predictor of whether a student with disabilities enrolled in college after high school than the student's attitude toward sciences, but once in college, a student's attitude toward science was a more important predictor of whether he or she actually chose a science, engineering, technology, or math major. In fact, undergraduate students with autism or medicated ADHD were more likely to choose a STEM field than students who had no cognitive disabilities.

"Promoting the participation of women, underrepresented racial minorities, and others are seen as cases of equity, but the underrepresentation of people with cognitive disabilities, that's seen as normal and inevitable, because there's this notion that they don't belong in the STEM world," Shifrer said. "It's so ingrained in us that these people lack potential that it's rarely raised as an equity concern and a socially rooted problem."

This employer turns autism into a strength

Helping students plan their careers based on their strengths doesn't mean ignoring their challenges, but helping them learn to manage them and advocate for support from employers, Lowe said.

"It's taking people with a certain challenge and putting them in a job where they are highlighting their talents and supporting their weaknesses—whereas most disability employment models put people in jobs that tend to highlight their weaknesses," said Brad Cohen, the chief marketing officer at Aspiratech, a Chicago-area technology firm that contracts workers with autism. "People that are on the autism spectrum tend to have a great focus, attention to detail. Often they have the ability to do a highly focused, repetitive task without losing concentration when someone else might be jumping out the window—and those talents are precisely what software testing is."

Ninety percent of the company's 130 employees have some degree of autism, and the company keeps five specialists and a dozen job coaches on staff to help employees manage work challenges—procuring headphones to help block out noisy office spaces or helping those who are uncomfortable with social speaking find new ways to keep their managers updated on projects.

The firm hires workers through interviews and aptitude tests, and provides training and job shadowing for those it hires. The company has a wait list for applicants, mainly developed through word of mouth from parents and autism advocacy groups. But Cohen said there is a "disconnect" in the skills and guidance schools give to students in college and career planning and the broader skills for career matching and self-advocacy in the workplace that neurodiverse students need.

Cohen suggested that when planning broader college and career initiatives with local businesses, school and district administrators should actively look for companies interested in hiring neurodiverse workers and find out what other specific skills they need. Organizing cohorts of neurodiverse students for internships—potentially with faculty support—can be better for introducing students and employees than simply helping a student find a solo opportunity interning or job shadowing at a workplace in which he or she would be the only neurodiverse person in the office.

"Success in life has to do with being in a job that makes the most of your strengths and minimizes the difficulties," Armstrong said. "And unfortunately, we're not making that connection for kids or helping them make that connection. And so they end up a student with an ADHD diagnosis in a 9-to-5 desk job where the stress level is going up over the top, and they interpret their stress as just another symptom of ADHD—when in fact, they ought to be a forest ranger or a fire fighter, or an emergency room physician, something with lots of thrills instead of sitting in a cubicle farm somewhere."

In fact, some studies have found disproportionate numbers of chief executive officers and entrepreneurs with ADHD, with a greater tolerance for risk and experimentation.

"Their intensive focus and honed expertise influence the distribution between positive and negative outcomes," found a team of researchers led by Johan Wiklund of Syracuse University. "It thus seems that the impulsivity to act facilitates an ongoing process of experimentation, which is taken to various ends through passion, time commitment, and persistence. Entrepreneurs with ADHD are guided by what is rather than what will be."

The bottom line, said Armstrong of the American Institute for Learning and Human Development is that "we need to go beyond the labels and go to specific skills and interests of the child" in both the workplace and in school. ■

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This Tech Director Is Revolutionizing Special Education With Gaming

By Alyson Klein

Michelle Gustafson for Education Week

Evan Abramson, the director of technology and innovation at Morris-Union Jointure Commission, in Warren, N.J. Abramson spearheaded an esports program to help students on the autism spectrum connect with one another and learn new skills. The gaming arena where students play together may be the first-of-its-kind in the country.

Sarah Sasiak remembers how painful it once was to watch her now 18-year-old son Tanner in elementary school chorus concerts.

Tanner, who is on the autism spectrum, has communication challenges that can make it hard for him to be understood—or be part of a choral ensemble.

"He would just stand there with all these other kids around him, singing," Sasiak said. "He couldn't even get the words out," because of language processing difficulties.

As he grew, Tanner longed to participate in the kinds of activities his three neurotypical siblings do.

But for years, his options for engagement and socialization were limited. Then, in 2022, Morris-Union Jointure Commission, the specialized school district Tanner attends, created an esports arena geared specifically to students with significant cognitive challenges, particularly Autism Spectrum Disorder.

The room looks like a cross between a computer lab and a high-tech gym. It is filled with large monitors appropriate for gaming, but also special consoles that can accommodate players with fine-motor differences and other challenges.

The specialized arena, which its architects think is the first in the country to be housed in a school district, is the brainchild of Evan Abramson, Morris-Union Jointure Commission's director of technology and innovation. It is emblematic of Abramson's creative, student-focused approach to harnessing technology to help students with significant cognitive and behavioral challenges thrive.

In addition to dreaming up the arena, Abramson, a 2025 EdWeek Leaders To Learn From honoree, has become a go-to expert in New Jersey for using artificial intelligence in the classroom, particularly for students in special education. He's the kind of hands-on tech director teachers can rely on to explain cutting-edge tools from a practical, classroom-focused perspective.

It takes a special kind of tech leader to understand how to marry the "wires and pliers" aspects of the job with teaching and learning—all while helping teachers embrace, not fear, technological transformation, said Janet Fike, Morris-Union Jointure Commission's superintendent.

"I think he is a visionary," Fike said of Abramson. "I think he has a lot of energy for new things. And when things don't work out, he can accept that and go to Plan B."

She praised Abramson's communication skills and ability to navigate the political minefields that inevitably accompany district leadership: "He can talk to anyone about anything. As a leader, you have to [meet] people where they are and give them what they need. And I think he does that very well."

'Doing everything you can to make them feel normal'

Though his mother was a teacher, Abramson, 47, didn't set out to follow in her footsteps. A talented baseball player, he attended college in south Florida on a sports scholarship. While there, he interned for the St. Louis Cardinals and prepared for a career in sports management.

Abramson put those plans on hold when a difficult family situation drew him back to New Jersey. To earn money, he started teaching at a Catholic school, eventually making his way to public schools around the Garden State. He taught physical education and even led a class combining physical education and math before becoming a tech coach, then tech director.

In early 2021, while leading technology work at Millburn Township schools in central New Jersey, Abramson saw the job description for a newly created tech director position at Morris-Union Jointure Commission, a nearby district with an unusual structure and mission. The district's board consists of leaders from 30 Garden State districts. It provides their schools with expertise on serving students in special education.

Morris-Union Jointure Commission also directly serves around 225 students with cognitive and/or behavioral challenges that their home districts don't have the expertise to address. Some attend school in Morris-Union Jointure for just a year or two before heading back to their own districts. Others spend most of their educational careers at Morris-Union Jointure Commission, which serves students up to age 21.

The more Abramson considered the position, the more he felt personally drawn to it. His mother and aunt had taught special education. His own son was born premature and later developed a malformed eardrum and other physical problems that inhibited his hearing.

After multiple surgeries, his son, now 13, has regained most of his ability to hear, and is a general education student. But for years, he wore hearing aids and had an Individualized Education Program to support his needs, Abramson said.

"A lot of the passion for what I do now certainly came because of him," Abramson said. As a special education parent or educator, "you're trying to do everything right, everything you can to make sure they feel normal."

'This esports thing is pretty legit'

Abramson's son also inspired the esports arena. When he turned 10, the boy begged his parents to be allowed to play Fortnite, a popular online video game. Abramson relented, though he didn't love the idea of his kid staring at a screen, steering his way through violent scenarios.

But Abramson was surprised by what he saw as he watched his son and his friends play.

"It was pretty incredible, because I was hearing all the conversations that I had always felt he would have on the football field or the basketball court," Abramson recalled. "They were empathetic. They were critically thinking. They were problem solving. They were doing all these things that we want our kids to do. And I was like, 'this esports thing is pretty legit.' "

Not long after those gaming sessions opened Abramson's eyes to the benefits of esports, Fike found herself with a $50,000 technology grant from a local foundation. She wanted to use it for an impactful, outside-the-box project and asked Abramson for ideas.

He told her, "We should put an esports arena in for these kids, because I have seen what it did for my own kid, who has needs," Abramson recalled. Fike's support was immediate and emphatic, he said. "She was like, 'it sounds great, and it sounds innovative.'"

District officials, led by Abramson, partnered with SHI, a local tech company, to build the arena, with an assist from Logitech, a hardware manufacturing company. The district also enlisted vSEVEN, another hardware company, to provide specialized keyboards that can be run through a dishwasher, to keep the arena as germ-free as possible.

The district also got high-end, adaptable controllers from Microsoft that had already been created for competitive gamers and were appropriate for students with limited fine-motor skills, or behavioral challenges. It even built a shout-casting station—the esports version of an announcer's desk—so students with verbal capabilities could further develop their communication skills by explaining what was happening in the games, just as a sports broadcaster might for basketball or tennis.

'Something happened that we didn't anticipate'

But some teachers were skeptical of the project. They thought the money would be better spent on iPads, Chromebooks, and classroom supplies. Fike believed teachers' support for the project was key, so Abramson took them to Kean University, a nearby college with a massive esports arena. For a few hours, they all played video games together.

Within 10 minutes "they started talking trash and playing with each other and having a great time," Abramson said.

Though the gaming session was a good start to helping teachers embrace the project, a majority of the district's roughly 30 teachers still wondered whether the students the districts serve would be able to handle gaming.

But that started to change a few months later at a ribbon cutting ceremony for the 12-seat arena with Morris-Union Jointure families.

That's when "something happened we didn't anticipate," Abramson said. As students played, some of their neurotypical siblings sat down and joined in.

Some of "the siblings had never played with each other before. They didn't know they could play with these kids," Abramson said. Parents' eyes welled up. Teachers got teary too.

"We knew from that point on that we had built a bridge, that our students could feel normal, they could play with their own siblings at home," Abramson said. "And I think for us, that was everything."

'They are just as deserving as everyone else'

Time in the esports arena is used in part as a student incentive, particularly for a subset of Morris-Union Jointure students who struggle with appropriate behavior but have higher cognitive abilities.

It can be a powerful motivator for some of Marissa Zinberg's students, 18- to 21-year-olds on the autism spectrum. She recalled how one, a particularly big technology fan "was glowing and so happy" when the arena was unveiled, she said.

To be sure, the esports arena isn't appropriate for at least half of the district's population due to their cognitive abilities and fine motor skills, Zinberg said.

But for those who can take advantage of it, "it was a great thing," she said.

Students whose learning and physical challenges aren't considered among the most severe can "get lost sometimes, not necessarily in our district, but in a lot of districts, because they're higher [functioning] than a lot of the special needs [students], but lower than typical kids," Zinberg said. "To be able to give them something that they can interact with their peers, interact with their siblings, they are just as deserving as anybody else."

The district also created a smaller space—called the Esports Training Lab—for its elementary students. It features Nintendo Switches where students can play Mario Kart or build in Minecraft, all while learning to work in teams and cheer each other on.

Morris-Union Jointure Commission has used the arena to forge connections between its older students and the broader community.

Students have played against general education students from a neighboring district and against local police officers, who are trying to learn more about people with ASD, in part, so that they can respond to them appropriately when they encounter them in public spaces. The interaction also gave students face time with officers so that they could see them as "friendly and non-threatening" and may feel more comfortable going to them with a problem, Abramson said.

Those community connections are powerful for students in special education, said Lindsay Jones, the chief executive officer at CAST, a nonprofit education research and development organization that works to make curriculum accessible for students with disabilities.

"One of the biggest issues we have is isolation of students. That leads to anxiety, depression. And when you're a student who is not communicating in typical ways, there's even bigger isolation," said Jones, who noted that there are higher rates of anxiety and depression across all disabilities.

Getting to play games with law enforcement, with general education students from nearby schools, and with their siblings helps

others see students with ASD and other challenges as a "whole child, a whole person in many ways," Jones said."They aren't just their disability."

'The first one out of the gate' on AI

Recently, Abramson's quest to harness cutting-edge technologies to support teaching and learning has lead him to generative artificial intelligence. He is learning how AI tools like ChatGPT and Google's Gemini can help educators—particularly those who work with students in special education—do their jobs more efficiently.

He's spoken to some 40 districts about the technology. His message: AI must be used with caution, but it isn't anything to be afraid of. It can help educators brainstorm, craft lesson plans, even write emails to parents. And it has potential as an assistive technology for students in special education.

"He was the first one out of the gate," said Melissa Signore, the superintendent of River Vale school district, a northern New Jersey district where Abramson gave AI trainings. "He's always on what I like to call the bleeding edge, where he's out there, trying to get in front of what's coming so that he can prepare [educators] for what needs to be done, not only for his district," but around the state.

It's a significant undertaking at a time when districts around the country are racing to offer teachers training in AI. A little less than half—43 percent—of teachers said they have received at least one training session on the technology, according to a nationally representative survey of 1,135 educators—including 731 teachers—conducted last fall by the EdWeek Research Center.

That's a nearly 50 percent increase from a survey EdWeek conducted in the spring of 2024, when 29 percent of teachers said they'd received such training—a signal that professional development on AI is in high demand.

Abramson's PD sessions are grounded in a practical, teacher-focused point-of-view, Signore said. Abramson developed the material himself. He's drawn on extensive research and interviews with experts and created different types for different audiences, including aimed at staff, administrators, and parents.

"Evan understands the infrastructure and the technology side, but he really understands the educational piece of it," Signore said. "That's a huge flip. You don't get that combo in one human resource very often."

Tech can engage students in special education 'in a different way'

In addition to sharing his knowledge about AI and esports, Abramson is happy to pop into classrooms to give tech demonstration lessons, sometimes paying particular attention to individual students' interests.

For instance, Alex, one of Zinberg's former students, is passionate about electric cars. Abramson spent time taking him on a virtual field trip to the New York auto show, where he could see inside dozens of models and check out their interiors. The highlight: A Tesla.

"I think he's just really tried to bring a different viewpoint to the district and really open up our eyes to technology," Zinberg said.

She, like other teachers, has long had "the same repertoires, the same websites that I've used for however long they've existed. And all of a sudden, he's bringing us these other concepts and ideas, which I think is just so helpful, and it really engages the kids in a different way."

The exposure to esports has certainly been powerful for Tanner.

When he and other students are in the arena and at the controls, competing in teams, they look just like any other video-game obsessed adolescent or young adult, disability or no, the district's staff say.

Gaming has helped Tanner "develop confidence, a sense of pride and independence," said Sasiak. Maybe even more importantly: "It's just a great bonding for him, with his siblings. It's something that they can all do together." ■

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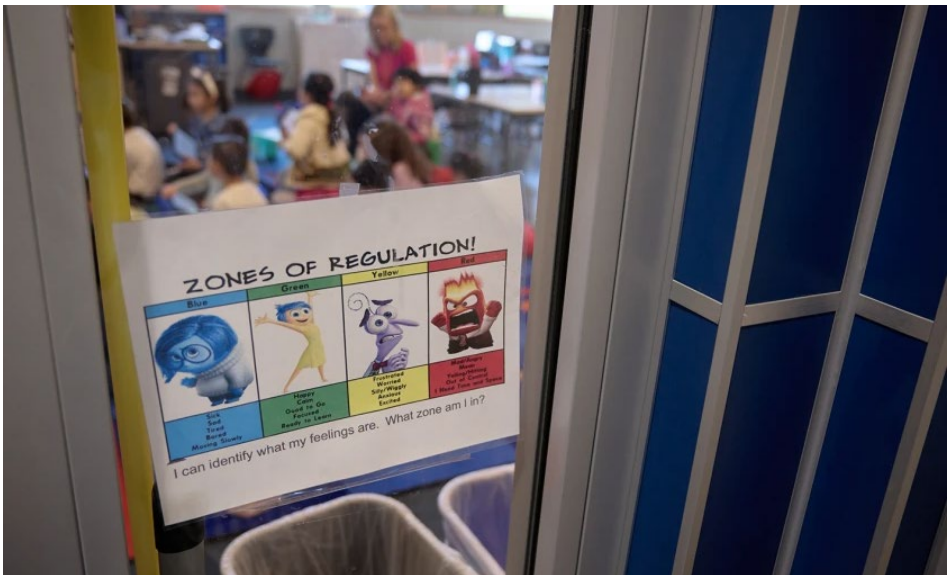
A Missed Opportunity in SEL: Centering Students With Disabilities

By Madeline Will



Meron Menghistab for Education Week

A sign asking children to identify their feelings decorates the door of a classroom at an elementary school in Woodinville, Wash. Experts say schools should design social-emotional-learning curricula and programming with the needs of students with disabilities at the forefront.

Explicitly teaching students social-emotional skills, like social awareness and goal-setting, can lead to stronger relationships, academic gains, and a greater sense of well-being, research shows.

Experts say that may be especially true for students with disabilities—but they're not always considered when schools are designing or implementing SEL curricula.

That's a missed opportunity, given that most students with learning differences spend the majority of their time in general education classrooms. It's also a critical disconnect because SEL instruction often targets skills that these learners might especially need help with, like self-regulation, remaining resilient in the face of mistakes, and advocating for themselves.

"Oftentimes, students with learning disabilities have had negative experiences with schooling to date because they have struggled with academics or with reading or with math," said Nicole Fuller, the associate director of policy and advocacy at the National Center for Learning Disabilities, a nonprofit that advocates for equal opportunities for students and young adults. "Enabling them to see the growth that they've made or that they can continue to make is really critical. And social-emotional learning is a critical piece in doing that."

Social and communication skills can also be difficult for students with learning or attention disorders to master. Children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, for instance, might have a hard time listening without interrupting, waiting for their turn to speak, or controlling their impulses. Students with a nonverbal learning disorder or autism might miss jokes or social cues. Students with dyslexia might struggle to retrieve the right words in conversation, which could lower their confidence in social settings and make them hesitant to speak up.

SEL emphasizes these social- and self-awareness and relationship skills, a focus that can help both students with disabilities and without better relate to each other.

"We know inclusion of students with disabilities in public schools is so important," Fuller said, "and fostering the ability to do that through social-emotional learning really does help students to develop a sense of belonging."

Yet, how well SEL programs and curricula incorporate the needs of students with learning differences is unclear. Students with disabilities are underrepresented in the research on SEL programs, according to a meta-analysis, in which researchers reviewed 269 studies on elementary school SEL programs and interventions from 2008 to 2020.

While just 4.1% of the studies explicitly excluded students with disabilities, most studies didn't explicitly include them, either. Only 7.4% of the studies reviewed looked at how SEL-intervention outcomes differed for students with disabilities or specifically focused on intervention effects for these learners.

"That is concerning," Fuller said. "When you are studying curriculum, when you are studying programs and interventions, how do you know that it works for all students?"

And data on the social outcomes for students with disabilities suggest they might not be getting as much help as they need.

For instance, in 2024, the National Center for Learning Disabilities surveyed a national sample of young adults (ages 18 to 24) with learning differences about their high school experiences. Half of them reported being bullied by a peer because of their disability. Young adults who experienced bullying were more likely to leave high school before graduation or think about dropping out.

"Those kind of findings do really underscore the need for social-emotional learning," Fuller said. "In terms of what happens if we're not implementing programs effectively or designing them with students with disabilities in mind—these are the kind of outcomes that we're trying to move away from."

Exposing students with disabilities to broader, holistic skills isn't just important to support their social development. It can also help put them on track for success in college and in their careers, she said.

What noninclusive SEL can look like in classrooms

In order to make SEL programs and curricula truly universal or inclusive, they must incorporate a degree of flexibility in what's

being taught, and how, said Christina Cipriano, an associate professor at the Yale Child Study Center in the Yale School of Medicine and the lead author of the meta-analysis.

For example, "emotional regulation is taught across nearly all SEL programs, but ... there's a huge range in what profiles of regulation can look like," Cipriano said. "When you take a student who has an [individualized education program] or a 504 [plan] and has a different way of regulating their emotions, and we put them in a program that maybe isn't teaching their way of regulating emotions, or even acknowledging or affirming their regulation as acceptable—this is where we run into a problem."

Typically, a teacher teaching emotional regulation might encourage taking a deep breath, silently counting to 10, or practicing a brief meditation—activities that can be done while sitting quietly. But a student with autism or ADHD might need to move their body, or fidget, to self-regulate, she said. And that's OK, too.

Another disconnect may come when educators are designing activities. Many SEL programs include practice on how to speak freely, without preparation—say, by giving a prompt in a "turn and talk" or asking students to go around the circle to share something.

In a general education classroom, a student with anxiety sitting in that circle may have "nothing to say by the time we get to them," Cipriano said. "And that's not a meaningful learning experience."

Similarly, a student with executive function challenges who's being given a prompt in a classroom discussion for the first time and then is told, "OK, go ahead, talk about it," may struggle to immediately articulate their experiences—or listen to what a partner in class is doing, Cipriano said. The activity, she said, is "setting them up at a disadvantage."

'Everybody needs coping skills'

At the Girls Athletic Leadership School, or GALS, in Denver, a public all-girls charter middle school, the social-emotional programming was designed with the needs of students with learning differences at the forefront, said Leah Bock, the head of school.

When designing SEL curricula, "it's going to go better if you realize that no two people are the same and no two people have the same needs," Bock said. "You have to design with: What is your [desired] outcome, and then am I going to get there?"

That means figuring out first how educators are going to support the students with the most significant needs, and then considering how they can also help students who already have some skills but need to deepen their understanding.

"And how can I do both of those things at the same time in a classroom and still foster a sense of community and inclusiveness?" Bock said.

Differentiation is key. At GALS, the school psychologist often co-teaches SEL courses with general education teachers to make sure the skills being taught and modeled are appropriately differentiated for students with disabilities.

For example, Bock pointed to a goal-setting lesson that's centered around running a mile. Some more athletic students might set a goal to run a mile in a certain number of minutes. But educators should work with other students—including those with physical disabilities or a mental block against running—to help them set a more attainable goal, like running a certain distance before stopping.

It has also helped for all the school's teachers to develop a common language around social-emotional skills, Bock said, which they do through frequent collaboration between general education and special education teams.

Take a 6th grade SEL course that teaches self-awareness and respecting boundaries, which some students with learning differences need more help with. The lessons are reinforced when all teachers give feedback in the same way, Bock said—like, "Please take two steps back, so I can protect my personal space," or "I love how Imani saw that I was on my computer and decided to not come up and talk to me."

All students, in Bock's view, need social-emotional support. And students with disabilities benefit from receiving those lessons in general education classrooms because then they're not getting a message that "something's wrong with you," the Denver school leader said.

"You need to learn this coping skill—everybody needs coping skills, right?" Bock said. "Yours might be a little different than theirs, but that's true for everybody." ■

OPINION

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Educators Share Their Best Ideas For Unlocking Student Learning

By Larry Ferlazzo

As the saying goes, none of our students is bad—they just might be having a bad day (or a series of them).

Today's post is the second in a series examining success stories of teachers and students who have turned those days around.

You might also be interested in a very short video I recently made where I describe the strategies I use in this kind of situation.

'Teachers' Perceived Biases'

Sonya Murray-Darden is a leadership coach and former administrator. She is currently a leadership coach with the Missouri Leadership Development System and the CEO and founder of Equity Matters Consultants.

Gwen Turner is an emeritus professor of teacher education.

Their latest book is Serving Educational Equity: A Five-Course Framework for Accelerated Learning*:*

The Event

As executive leadership coaches, staff and students often ask us for support to provide students with behavioral interventions. There are no quick fixes; instead, relationships are key.

Building rapport with staff, students, and colleagues is crucial for a new administrator. My staff and I set the stage for student success by getting to know students beyond the school walls and labels that many people had ascribed to them. It was critical to get to know students holistically.

At my (Sonya's) school, the mission was to focus on building positive developmental relationships, environments filled with safety and belonging and rich learning experiences, knowledge development, and the development of skills, habits, and mindsets as proposed in the Essential Guiding Principles for Equitable Whole Child Design (Learning Policy Institute, 2021).

One of the issues that we faced at our new school was behavior bias, in which teachers focused solely on students' disciplinary incidents rather than academic potential. Our story is about Mark Doe (a pseudonym), a 7th grader. He was the subject of many staff comments because of his disciplinary record. All descriptions of him addressed his incomplete assignments and inappropriate behavior. Mark was accustomed to the negative interactions and experiences with the school team.

During our first encounter, Mark informed me that he was failing, had a discipline record, and hated school. His entire demeanor was one of defeat. Because I knew the importance of establishing trust and a positive working relationship with every child, I informed him that I was excited to meet him and looked forward to a great working relationship.

However, he was skeptical and disclosed tremendous personal and home struggles. He informed me that no one cared for him except an aunt, who he knew loved him, but she, too, had grown weary of his constant school issues. Mark's behavior was part of a self-fulfilling prophecy: "Adults expect inappropriate behavior; therefore, the child misbehaves." Children will become what you say they are. (Blease, 1983; Palardy, 1969).

The Solution

Our first effort was to engage Mark in meaningful and supportive experiences. As a staff, we had to establish a community of trust to work with our students and each other. His teachers were asked to examine how they provided guidance, communicated with him, and engaged him in learning activities. We helped him create a joint action plan and schedule to work on assignments.

Mark played an integral part in his education, but he also needed to improve his learning (metacognition). Breaking this cycle of failure was not always easy. Changes in mindset for teachers and students have to occur if students are to overcome challenges and improve academically and socially.

A significant turning point was Mark's participation in an essay contest. When I first introduced the idea of writing an essay, Mark responded, "I cannot write, and besides, my discipline record is too bad. Nobody will read it." I replied, "I will read it and believe in you." He initially told me he was not interested and stated his inability, but later, he asked me about the essay and began crafting a draft. We established a plan, and working on the paper became his center of focus each day.

Mark did not struggle in isolation; he had mentors and tutors who helped him improve his writing. There were challenges and setbacks, but Mark had begun to trust the adults and himself. He became a better writer and student because of the positive relationships with the small cadre of adults who demonstrated commitment to his success. Mark completed his essay and was selected as one of the finalists. He was asked to wear a yellow scarf as a finalist, signifying his status as a winner. Yellow symbolizes optimism, confidence, creativity, and emotional strength (Wright, 1995).

Indeed, Mark shared a newfound sense of trust, commitment, and determination that had not previously existed. His teachers connected the essay celebration to his ability to make better choices, and he did. Teachers started seeing his potential, not his past failures. His aunt shared her gratitude and appreciation for changing his trajectory. Mark's story and many others solidify how underlying messages relating to expectations, perceptions, and subsequent actions could allow or deny students access to future success.

Teachers' perceived biases and low expectations can deny students the tools for academic success. One way to address this is to engage in honest self-reflection. We suggest starting with simple questions:

1. How am I building solid and lasting relationships with the students I serve?

2. Have I considered their trauma and the impact their experiences have on learning?

3. Do my students have the capacity for academic excellence?

Answering these questions offers a starting place for educators to address equity and build relationships in the classroom.

'I Leaned Into Her Interests'

Renee Jones was the 2023 Nebraska Teacher of the Year. She teaches AVID and 9th grade English at Lincoln High School. Follow her on Twitter @ReneeJonesTeach:

Last year, I had a student who was struggling, not only in my class, but with the transition to high school in general. I respectfully double-downed on my expectations. I expected her to be in class on time, to turn in her assignments, and to handle her business in class. I spoke with her parents, and together we made a plan of how I would support in her class and how they would do the same at home.

Every day, I'd make a point to tell her I was happy to see her and then continue holding high expectations. I'd call home to check in about how she was doing in class. I was honest about what the student needed to work on and also intentional about letting her parents know something their child was doing well.

I leaned into her interests and made sure to talk to her about that—to play a song she might like—all while holding the line of tardy is tardy, etc. It took us nearly the entirety of two semesters; yet, when she left for summer at the end of the school year, she made sure to come and find me, to give me a hug and tell me to have a good summer.

Project-Based Learning

Jodi Asbell-Clarke is a senior leader at TERC, an innovative not-for-profit STEM education R&D organization where she focuses on game-based learning, computational thinking, and neurodiversity in K-12 education. Her latest book is Reaching and Teaching Neurodivergent Learners in STEM: Strategies for Embracing Uniquely Talented Problem Solvers*:*

I met Joey and his educational assistant when I was recently co-teaching in a 7th grade class doing project-based learning. Joey immediately showed a passion for geography. In fact, that was all Joey wanted to talk about, so I brought him an atlas. He was very engaged, but even after a few weeks, he was only drawing the same maps—Canada, U.S., Mexico—and had no interest in moving on to other regions. He is very rigid and simply will not do what he doesn't want to do.

So his teacher, assistant, and I let him continue with maps of North America. He was very particular about which countries were filled with which colors and where the state or province boundaries went.

A few weeks later, I had an idea. I told Joey that sometimes maps have capitals denoted with a black dot, and that he might consider adding this feature to his maps. He replied in complete clarity. He was NOT going to put black dots on his color-coded map.

So I left him to his maps and went to talk with other students. About 20 minutes later when I circled back around to Joey, he had created a list on a separate sheet of paper—still no black dots on his color-coded map—but on the paper, he was listing the U.S. states and their capitals—in alphabetical order and from memory.

His teacher and his assistant were astonished. They had no idea of his prowess in this area. I soon began a conversation with Joey that started with the capital of Illinois, led to a discussion about Abraham Lincoln, and ended up with his telling me how the Electoral College works and the current polling numbers for candidates running in upcoming elections in the U.S. and in Canada. When I asked Joey how he gets his information, he said he sees headlines on his phone, but he finds reading the full articles on The New York Times website much more informative. Again, his teachers were dumbfounded at Joey's encyclopedic knowledge, which went masked until he started talking about what he personally cared about.

So, in the example above, a student who was given all kinds of remediation for academic and social skills was able to suddenly thrive in a project-based learning class. By giving him an atlas, a window into his universe, we empowered him to demonstrate his knowledge in his own way. Joey creates and understands sophisticated arguments using probabilities and math skills far beyond grade-level outcomes.

He excels at meeting many of the outcomes for social studies and civics and he's becoming media literate in a way that analyzes information and data and then makes sense of it. These are precisely the problem-solving skills that kids need for the future, and Joey is a rock star in these areas when he cares. It is through the context of his passion that he learns everything else.

PBL is not new, and PBL is not a magic bullet, but it allows differentiation so that each student comes to the learning outcomes in their own way.

It's a different philosophy. That doesn't mean that the lesson or class is not structured or that the teacher needs to create new structures for every learner. The teacher should be equipped with a set of good executive-function supports and differentiation strategies so that no matter what lesson the teacher has, they have a perspective on how to help each child see their own path through the same lesson.

Thanks to Sony, Gwen, Renee, and Jodi for contributing their thoughts!

Today's post answered this question:

What is a story about how you turned things around with a student or many students in a single class who faced a number of challenges and exhibited those challenges in the classroom (no real names, of course)? ■

Larry Ferlazzo is a former award-winning high school English and social studies teacher of more than two decades.

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6935 Arlington Road, Suite 100
Bethesda, MD, 20814
Phone: (301) 280-3100
www.edweek.org