

Neurodiversity in K12: Supporting Every Learner's Success



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EDITOR'S NOTE

Neurodiversity recognizes and celebrates the unique strengths and challenges of all learners. This Spotlight explores effective strategies for supporting neurodiverse students and fostering inclusive environments. From motivating and engaging neurodiverse students to facilitating open conversations about learning differences and providing targeted support for specific learning disabilities, these articles offer valuable perspectives. Discover how to ensure ed-tech accessibility for all students and more.



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How Teachers Can Motivate And Engage Neurodiverse Students

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 deficit/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 neurodiverse 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 neurodiverse 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." ■



Tools and resources to help you make the connection

Identifying the unique strengths of autistic individuals and finding ways to capitalize on those strengths truly takes a team, a team we are proud to support. From tools to help you connect the pieces to pertinent events such as CE Webinars, Focus events, and an Autism Summit, as well as insightful pieces written by experts in your field, our resources will help you adopt a multi-faceted approach on your journey forward.

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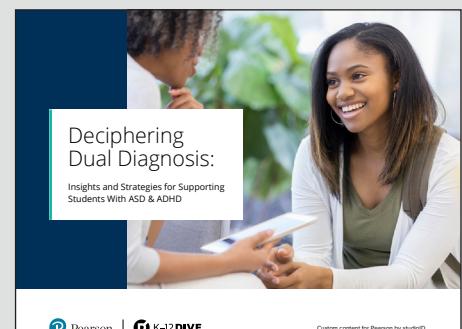
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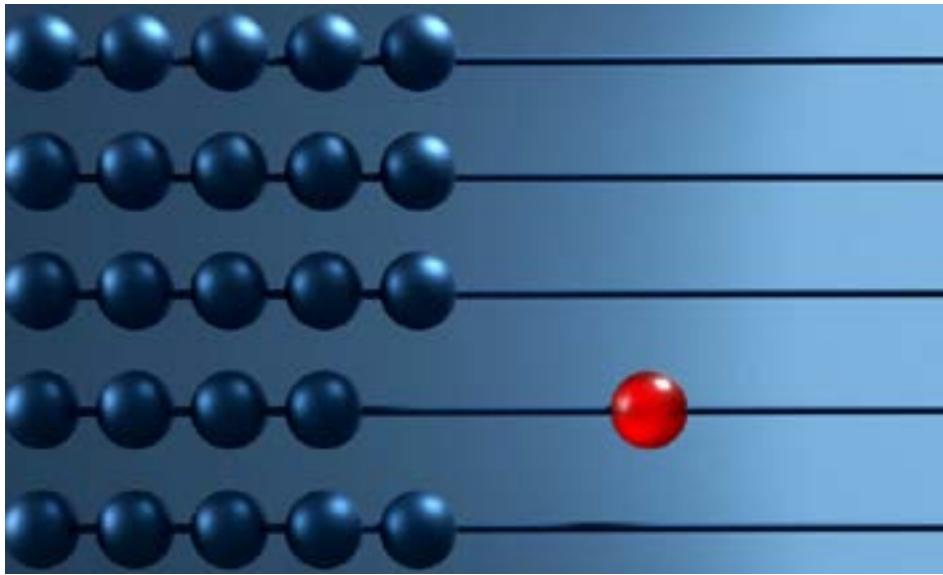
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3 Things Every Teacher Should Know About Learning Differences

By Arianna Prothero

Teachers often graduate from their preparation programs without a firm grounding in common learning differences like dyslexia, which affects the ability to read.

This is the case even though teachers will, over the course of their careers, educate many students with learning differences—putting them, and their future students, at a disadvantage, experts point out.

Dyslexia, for example, affects 3 to 7 percent of people, with some estimates putting that number at 20 percent. Similar percentages of people have dyscalculia, which can hurt the ability to do math. Estimates for how many people have dysgraphia, which affects the ability to write, range from 5 to 20 percent.

There is much to know about these learning differences and how they affect students' ability to function in the classroom. But what are the most essential concepts every educator should know?

We asked an expert in educational psychology, an elementary special education teacher, and a student with dyslexia and dyscalculia to answer the following question during a recent EdWeek K-12 Essentials Forum: What do you wish all teachers knew

about students with learning differences? Here's what they had to say.

1. Don't mistake poor performance for lack of motivation

Over time, society has come to expect children to master more and more complex material, said Edward Hubbard, an associate professor in educational psychology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison who studies dyscalculia. That perspective is important to understanding the challenges students with learning differences or other neurodivergent conditions face, Hubbard said.

"I remind my college students, 350 years ago, there were only two people on the planet that knew calculus," he said. "Now all of them are supposed to learn calculus if they want to get into a university."

And that leads to Hubbard's next point: Even knowing that a student has a learning difference, it's easy to mistake their struggles for a lack of motivation.

"I think that that's perhaps one of the most important things to understand: that these are kids who are trying, they're working hard, they're doing everything they can to learn, and that they really can be super successful with the appropriate supports, with the appropriate interventions," he said.

2. Teachers don't have to be experts in learning disabilities, but they should get to know each student well

Just getting to know a student really well—their interests, fears, what motivates them, and what causes them to shut down—can make a big difference in finding the right approach to teaching a student with a learning difference, said Danielle Kovach, a 3rd grade special education teacher in New Jersey and a mother of three—two of whom have special needs. When asked what she wishes teachers knew about students with learning differences, she said the question was personal for her.

"I'm going to put my mom hat on for a sec and I'm going to say, 'I wish you knew my kid. I wish that you knew his struggles,'" she said. "'I wish that you knew what motivated him, what gets him to learn. I wish you knew where he came from and where he's going to.'"

Kovach is also an adjunct professor of special education at Centenary University and the past president of the Council for Exceptional Children, a nonprofit that works on improving education for students with disabilities. She said teachers should form their own opinions about their students with learning disabilities and not rely on what they have heard from their colleagues.

For students with learning differences, strong relationships with their teachers are key, Kovac said. That relationship makes the classroom a safe place for students with learning differences to try, fail, and eventually learn.

3. Undiagnosed neurodiverse students are sending distress signals. Watch for them

Teachers can play an important role in identifying neurodiverse students early if they know the signs, said Jacquelyn Taylor, a student at the University of Rhode Island who became an advocate for people with learning disabilities while she was in high school. She has both dyslexia and dyscalculia, the latter which went undiagnosed throughout elementary and middle school.

"If a student is consistently inconsistent in a certain aspect of a subject matter, pay attention to that please. Because you could really help a student get an official diagnosis," she said.

There are other subtle signs to look for, Taylor said, such as when a student turns in incomplete assignments, makes an excuse to leave class during certain subjects, asks a lot of clarifying questions, or looks "really confused in the classroom."

"I feel like body language says a lot, so pay attention to that in your students," she said. ■

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Talking to Students About Their Learning Differences: A Guide for Teachers

By Arianna Prothero

If, as a teacher, your student asks you what dyslexia is, can you answer? What about dyscalculia?

Most students with learning differences are going to spend the majority of their time in general education classrooms. That means their teachers need to be prepared to talk with them about why they struggle to read, write, or do math so students are equipped with the knowledge needed to learn and advocate for themselves to the best of their abilities.

Unfortunately, many general education teachers are not prepared for those conversations, say experts.

That's for a variety of reasons. There's lingering stigma around using terms like dyslexia. Myths and misconceptions about how brains function abound among educators. And teacher-preparation programs don't often give budding educators a grounding in the basics of common learning differences, said Holly Lane, the director of the University of Florida Literacy Institute and an associate professor of special education.

Talking to students about their learning disabilities and understanding how those differences will affect their academic progress shouldn't solely be the purview of special education teachers and school psychologists, she said. But many general education teachers don't have the understanding, the training, or even the language to have those conversations.

"I hear so often from teachers, 'this child has an IEP and I don't know what to do,' or, 'I don't understand the nature of their difficulty,' and I think the way that a lot of school systems have set up their systems, it's a mentality of, 'those kids' needs are addressed elsewhere and I don't have to know what to do.' That's the problem," Lane said. "Teachers are spread thin, overworked, and expected to know a whole lot of things—it's not a slam on teachers."

Whether a student has dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, or any other neurodivergent condition that makes learning harder for them, such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, it helps for them to have a basic understanding of why they struggle to learn or do things when their neurotypical peers don't.



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It can improve students' confidence and their ability to advocate for themselves in the classroom, which is an especially important skill when they get into high school, college, and the workforce, say experts.

Helping students—and teachers—understand learning differences starts with naming them, said Robin Zikmund, a parent of a high school student with dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, and ADHD. Zikmund is also the founder of the Idaho chapter of Decoding Dyslexia, an advocacy organization.

She has met many teachers and other school staff who shy away from using "the D words," Zikmund said.

But for her and her son, learning that there were labels—and ultimately a reason—that he struggled academically was a huge relief. Zikmund's son was officially diagnosed with dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dysgraphia when he was in 3rd grade. It was his struggles with reading that prompted Zikmund to get her son evaluated independently by a neuropsychologist.

"By the time you're in 3rd grade, children are reading to learn, they're no longer learning to read. You know how mean kids are—he couldn't read, and it started to stand out," Zikmund said. "He came home to me at 9 years old, [and said], 'Mom what is wrong with me? I just want to kill myself.'"

When her son learned the word for what ailed him, it was "everything," Zikmund said. She bought children's books about dyslexia to read to him. She told him dyslexia is probably hereditary and that it's not that uncommon.

"I had that conversation and it was such a game changer," she said. "You could see it in

his eyes, like, 'oh, I'm not just dumb?'"

But using correct terminology can be fraught. Students may not want their learning difference discussed publicly in class, and parents may fret about their child being saddled with what they perceive to be a negative label, said Zikmund. And teachers should never say a student has dyslexia without a formal diagnosis or evaluation.

But, Zikmund said, it's critical for terms like dyslexia to be at the very least used on internal documents, like an individualized education program, or IEP, and in discussions among educators and parents working with a student with a learning difference.

The U.S. Department of Education issued guidance in 2015 clarifying that schools could use terms like dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia when developing IEPs for students.

Even among a student population almost entirely made up of students with dyslexia, Maria Paluselli has found that parents can be tentative about using labels. Paluselli is the CEO of Provident Charter School in Pittsburgh, which specializes in serving students with dyslexia.

Dyslexia can be an emotionally raw topic for families and students, she said.

"You might have 10 people who want you to talk about it; you might have 10 others who say that's something for me to discuss with my child, why are you going there?"

Why teachers need to know what's happening inside the brains of their students

Students with learning differences benefit from knowing more about how their brains function—that specific areas in the brain related to, say, language, quantity, and motor skills process information differently—and how common specific learning disabilities like dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dysgraphia are.

Dyslexia and dyscalculia both affect 3 to 7 percent of people, with some estimates suggesting that 1 in 5 people have dyslexia. Similarly, estimates for how many people have dysgraphia range between 5 and 20 percent.

That doesn't mean that teachers need to be prepared to launch into lectures on neuroscience, said Edward Hubbard, an associate

professor in educational psychology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. But it is important for teachers to impart to their students that their learning challenges are related to biology, not their intelligence or willpower.

It's vital for students to understand that brains are not static—they change, said Hubbard. Teachers are in an ideal position to help students learn how they learn.

Students should understand the idea of brain plasticity and "how much the brain can change in response to learning, and the idea that with extra support, with extra practice, you will be able to get better at these skills," he said. "Maybe you won't be as good as somebody who doesn't have the same sort of setbacks or difficulties to overcome. But you can get a lot better."

Having a deeper understanding of their learning differences helps students advocate for themselves and their needs, especially as they get older when they may have to describe their condition and the accommodations they need to teachers, professors, and bosses.

That's why teaching students how to advocate for themselves—as well as refining their studying and test-taking skills—is a major focus for 7th and 8th graders at Provident Charter School before they graduate and head to a regular high school, said Paluselli.

"Your family knows [you have dyslexia], we know this, but you're going to a different school and you need to be able to speak up for yourself," she said.

All of this means that students benefit greatly if their teachers also have some baseline understanding of how the brains of students with learning differences work differently. While teachers don't need to be able to name the intraparietal sulcus, a part of the brain related to dyscalculia, Hubbard said, they should know enough about how dyscalculia affects students' math learning. That helps them tailor their instruction to the students' needs.

"When we start to think about why kids struggle, a lot of people will say, 'all we need to know is if they're succeeding or not. Isn't that enough?'" said Hubbard.

He answers that question with an analogy.

"If I go out to the garage and my car doesn't start, it might be useful for me to know if it's out of gas or if the battery is dead. Because I'm going to do very different things to fix [it]," he said. "I am not very mechanically inclined, but I have to know a little bit about what is happening under the hood to decide what is going to be the right strategy to solve this problem."

Teachers should be able and willing to dispel common myths around learning differences for their students—or at the very least not perpetuate them, Hubbard said.

Surveys of teachers in England, the United States, and the Netherlands have shown widespread beliefs about the brain that aren't true, he said. One of the most entrenched "neuro-myths" is the belief that students are either visual or auditory learners.

"I see a lot of preservice teachers taking my classes, and they are often surprised by some of the things they have heard about that aren't true," Hubbard said. "They often have heard about dyslexia, but they are often gratified to find out about dyscalculia and get some insights into why some kids may struggle."

Debunking common myths and misconceptions about learning differences

Widespread myths about dyslexia include the belief that dyslexia is more common among boys, that it only affects English speakers, that children will grow out of it. Another one is that dyslexia is related to vision and that giving students text in a specific font will help them read, said Lane.

Although not the same as a myth, Lane worries about a trend that is generally seen as a best practice: telling students that while their learning difference will cause them to struggle in some academic pursuits, it will lead them to excel in others.

"You can be very smart and have dyslexia, but there's a tendency almost to overplay that part," she said. "That's a really common approach that people will say to kids: 'All these really smart people with all these really great talents have dyslexia.'"

But that can make kids feel worse, Lane said. "People talk about dyslexia being a gift," she said. "I think that's a problem, because for a lot of kids there's nothing gift-like about it. It can be a real challenge."

Taken together, this advice might start feeling like an impossible tightrope to walk:

- Don't shy away from talking openly with students about their learning differences, but not if it makes them uncomfortable;
- Be honest about how the makeup of their brain may make learning certain things more difficult for the rest of their lives, but don't stigmatize them; and

- Encourage a growth mindset and an understanding of the plasticity of their brains, but don't prime them for failure by building them up too much.

It seems like a mess of contradictions, said Peter Faustino, the president of the National Association of School Psychologists, but it's a mess that teachers are likely used to navigating.

Every student, whether they are in special education or not, learns differently, said Faustino. Teachers need to take their lead and cues from the student on how much information they need about the inner workings of their brains and the specifics of their learning difference, he said.

"Learning is a complex set of processes," he said. "We want a student to pay attention to something, we have to input the information through their senses, they have to organize it, and then we want them to retrieve that information at some point. That looks very different for every single person. When we have a challenge in doing a task, it's really the difference between a fixed mindset and a growth mindset."

But just as important as understanding students' learning differences, is that general education teachers develop strong relationships with them, said Benjamin Tillotson, a long-time special education teacher in Salt Lake City.

It can be hard for students to open up about their disability, he said, because often times their learning differences only come up in school when they're failing at something, he said.

"That sets up a negative pattern in the student's mind and in this educational relationship," he said.

Teachers should get ahead of that, he said, by talking with students early about their learning difference and what they need to be successful in an upbeat, forward-looking way.

"It's about fostering not only a relationship with a student, but I'm creating a safe environment for them to communicate that they have a disability, and not punishing them."

Educating the rest of the class—and teachers—about learning differences

Talking about how everyone has strengths and weaknesses is a good way to message learning differences to all students.

Teachers have an important role in normalizing learning differences for the rest of the class, said Rachel Ganz, a pediatric neuropsychologist for the Child Mind Institute.

Teachers shouldn't focus solely on the students who have them.

She recommends teachers use phrases like, "Johnny learns differently than Sarah," she said, or "Sarah might need to sit in a quiet setting to read." Say that students have different brains, she said, just like they have different hobbies, likes, and dislikes.

"Talking about it openly as a class, I think, leads to more acceptance and, hopefully, for students to advocate for themselves," she said.

If teachers feel out of their depth talking about learning differences with their students, they don't have to do it alone. They should ask for help, said Paluselli. She recommends teachers lean on in-house experts, such as a school psychologist, to talk to the class about learning differences and other neurodivergent conditions.

Zikmund, the parent, said she really appreciated when her son's 4th grade teacher invited her into his classroom to give a talk about dyslexia. Zikmund handed out pencils to the students, with one out of every five pencils being red instead of the standard yellow, to represent some estimates of how common the characteristics of dyslexia are. She said students were curious and nonjudgmental, and she felt like the exercise helped create a more hospitable environment for her son to learn in.

Including the entire class in discussions about how people's brains are wired differently, affecting how they learn, helps create a positive classroom culture where students with learning differences feel comfortable enough to try and fail, rather than stigmatized, said Faustino. It can also help students develop those all-important self-advocacy skills, he said.

Teacher-prep programs fall short in grounding all teachers in learning differences

While experts say it's valuable for general education teachers to have a baseline understanding of what common learning differences are, how they present, and how to work with students who have them, teachers often aren't receiving that guidance in their teacher-prep programs, said Lane.

All educators in a school should have some familiarity with common neurodivergent disorders and their students' IEPs, said Zikmund. She remembers her son coming home from school "in a puddle" because the music teacher didn't understand his dyslexia and embarrassed him in front of the class because he couldn't read music.

Not requiring preservice teachers to learn about learning differences in schools of education is a missed opportunity and not good practice, Lane said. Every teacher will encounter and need to know how to teach students with learning differences. Between 10 and 20 percent of students in any given class could have a learning difference, Lane said, whether or not they have been evaluated or diagnosed.

And what works for students with learning differences usually works for everyone, she said.

"Very seldom is there a particular instructional practice that a child with a disability needs that wouldn't also help some other child in your classroom or maybe all children," Lane said. "It's not just like you're learning something just for those specific children. Those are practices that are going to be beneficial to everyone—they're not going to be harmful to anyone." ■

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Dyscalculia FAQ: The Math Disability Teachers Should Know About

A Mother's Journey Supporting an Autistic Loved One— and What Fellow Educators Can Learn

By Shelley Hughes, OTR and Director of Portfolio Management and Delivery, Pearson Clinical Assessment



As an OTR (registered occupational therapist and Director of Portfolio Management and Delivery at Pearson Clinical Assessment), I have extensive experience working with students who have been diagnosed with a variety of conditions. And, as a mom of an autistic daughter, I understand on a personal level how challenging it can be to get the diagnosis that's needed — and why it's imperative that schools join caregivers in their quest for answers.

Advocating for your child — the long journey when doors are shut

My daughter, who is now 20, was diagnosed with autism at the age of five. While that might seem relatively early — and it definitely is compared with many — I knew from the time she was two that it was a possibility. That instinctual notion set off an arduous journey of speaking with professionals who would suggest she had speech and language needs rather than autism.

It's hard to endure that frustration as a parent: when you are certain your child needs something, and practitioners and other experts push back. But, I remained persistent and

eventually got her the specialist care that has helped her flourish and which she still needs today to manage her everyday life.

However, not everyone has the capacity to continue when they feel as though they aren't being heard, and I realize my professional background gave me an advantage. If I hadn't known what to look for and hadn't pushed, she probably wouldn't have been diagnosed until much later, delaying the start of critical support and therapy she needed.

As a parent, we know to trust our instincts because we know our child. It's our role to advocate for them to ensure access to the right supports as early as possible, which will contribute

to better long-term outcomes.

Yet, large gaps remain in getting children diagnosed with autism, especially those in specific demographic groups. It's why I'm always eager to speak out, but certainly now during Autism Awareness and Acceptance Month.

The role educators have in more equitable diagnoses

One of the issues I discovered was that there are multiple barriers to getting a diagnosis in females. These include parental perception, but also lack of information and even clinical bias, where many in the field continue to view autism as a "boy's disorder." Additionally, with less readily available

information regarding females and autism, it's more difficult for concerned parents to find out what they need to know.

Taken together, all these factors can lead to delays in recognizing autistic profiles, which, in turn, delays referrals. It's no surprise that research indicates many girls with autism are not properly diagnosed.

Screening is the first step in the early intervention and identification process, which is vital to begin implementing supports and therapy to facilitate success. Early detection is key in terms of improving both academic outcomes and social needs. Students who are diagnosed later might not thrive to the extent possible, which in turn can impact mental health, social skills and more.

Early detection also helps families better understand their child's needs and advocate for them, as schools can act as a gateway to the resources and services caregivers need but might otherwise be unable to access or afford.

Autism screening should be included as part of a comprehensive mental health approach, given how the two conditions are intertwined. Studies show around 70% of children and young people with autism experience one mental health condition, while 41% experience two or more mental health diagnoses.

Assessments and support that can help promote better outcomes

While the benefits of screening for autism are clear, I know schools are constantly challenged to find funding for any programs, even those with clear benefits. That's why I am proud of the wide array of tools in the

[**Mental Health Resource Center**](#) that Pearson has assembled.

I also believe in the power of staff education and training. Working with autistic students can be challenging, but the more educators understand, the more support they can provide. A whole host of environmental and interpersonal factors can impact students' participation level,

but fortunately, there are ways educators can adjust their physical classroom set up and daily routine to accommodate a wide variety of needs. Pearson provides a number of assessments that can identify students with autism and their needs, which can initiate the journey to provide the individual supports that will foster success:

- [**Vineland™ Adaptive Behavior Scales \(Vineland™-3\)**](#) provides a standardized way to assess an individual's social and practical skills to meet the demands of everyday living; it uses multi-faceted inputs from caregivers and teachers to triangulate those different perspectives.
- The [**PEDI-CAT**](#) can be used to support a key assessment goal of gaining understanding of the support needs required to participate in daily activities.
- [**Sensory Profile™ 2**](#) offers insight that can help educators make the right accommodations and help autistic students become masters of their own environment.

Focus on the strengths

By working together, we can make sure the right processes are in place to facilitate screening and make sure it's carried out effectively and efficiently.

The most essential support — as with any area of child development — is to embrace their strengths. Don't spend your energy lamenting what an individual can't do or won't do. Focus on where they thrive — what they can do and what they choose to do.

That's what will set the child up for success within the classroom environment as well as in all other facets of their life. "Focus on the positives" is my mantra, and it can be yours too.

Hughes recommends districts tap into the myriad of free tools Pearson provides. For more resources to support all of your students, visit Pearson's [**Autism Resource Center**](#).

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5 Key Ways to Support Students With Learning Differences

By Arianna Prothero

Many teachers don't receive training in their teacher-preparation programs on common learning differences, say experts. And that can leave teachers feeling uncertain about how to best support students in their classrooms who have dyslexia, dysgraphia, or dyscalculia.

Dyslexia affects the ability to read, dysgraphia impacts the ability to write, and dyscalculia impairs the ability to do math.

Given that students with learning differences spend most of their time in general education classrooms, educators should to be prepared to discuss with students why they struggle to read, write, or do math.

Here are five tips on how to do that, according to several experts who spoke with Education Week for a recent special report on understanding learning differences.

1. Set the tone by building relationships

It's much easier for teachers to support students' learning if they can hear directly from students what they need. But students aren't going to open up about their struggles without first having a positive relationship with their teacher, said Benjamin Tillotson, a special education teacher in Salt Lake City.

Teachers should set the tone by talking with students directly about the fact that they have dyslexia and what that means for them. That conversation should be upbeat and forward-looking, focusing on potential progress so that students' learning differences aren't only highlighted when they're failing academically.

"It's about fostering not only a relationship with a student, but I'm creating a safe environment for them to communicate that they have a disability," Tillotson said.

2. Create a supportive classroom environment

Students with learning disabilities are going to be more risk-averse if they feel like they will be shamed by classmates when they struggle to do math, read, or write. Teachers play an important role in normalizing neuro-



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diversity, said Rachel Ganz, a pediatric neuropsychologist for the Child Mind Institute, a nonprofit that supports children with mental health and learning disorders.

Ganz recommends that teachers talk to the entire class about how everyone has strengths and weaknesses, using phrases like, "Johnny learns differently than Sarah," or "Sarah might need to sit in a quiet setting to read." Explain that students have brains that work differently, Ganz said, just like they have different hobbies, likes, and dislikes.

"Talking about it openly as a class, I think, leads to more acceptance and, hopefully, for students to advocate for themselves," she said.

If teachers feel like these types of classroom conversations are out of their depth, they should enlist the help of a school psychologist, counselor, or parent of a student with a learning disability to come in and give a talk to the class.

3. Know about common learning differences

Teachers don't need a neuroscientist's understanding of how students' brains are wired, but it is important for them to have a basic understanding of common learning differences, said Edward Hubbard, associate professor in educational psychology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

He uses this analogy: "If I go out to the garage and my car doesn't start, it might be useful for me to know if it's out of gas or if the battery is dead. Because I'm going to do very different things to fix [it]," he said. "I am not very mechanically inclined, but I have to know a little bit about what is happening under the hood to decide what is going to be the right strategy to solve this problem."

Not only does this help teachers tailor instruction to their students better, it helps prevent them from unintentionally shaming students.

Robin Zikmund is a mother of a high schooler with dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dysgraphia. She said all educators in a school should be familiar with common neurodivergent disorders and their students' IEPs. She remembers her son coming home from school "in a puddle" because the music teacher didn't understand his dyslexia and embarrassed him in front of the class because he couldn't read music.

4. Don't fall for 'neuromyths'

Teachers should be familiar with common myths about learning differences so they are prepared to dispel them among students and don't perpetuate these myths themselves.

One of the most entrenched neuromyths, said Hubbard, is the belief that students are either visual or auditory learners.

This matters because some research has found that preservice teachers who can separate brain science facts from fiction are also more likely to understand evidence-based teaching practices.

People often falsely believe that children outgrow conditions such as dyscalculia, dysgraphia, and dyslexia—or that dyslexia is more common among boys or only affects English speakers, according to the University of Florida Literacy Institute.

5. Promote a growth mindset, but be honest with students about challenges

Teachers should tell their students that a learning difference is a fact of biology, not the outcome of a lack of intelligence and willpower. But all brains have plasticity and change in response to learning. With time and practice, students will improve.

However, teachers should be careful not to prime students for failure by telling them that while their learning difference will cause them to struggle in some academic pursuits, it will lead them to excel in others. That can backfire, said Holly Lane, the director of the University of Florida Literacy Institute and an associate professor of special education. If students find that they aren't geniuses or superstars in other areas, they can end up feeling worse.

"People talk about dyslexia being a gift," Lane said. "I think that's a problem, because for a lot of kids there's nothing gift-like about it. It can be a real challenge." ■



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The Steps Schools Should Take So All Students Can Use Ed Tech

By Lauraine Langreo

Much of what a student needs to do for school is online nowadays. Students need to access and submit their assignments on learning management systems; teachers use videos, online quiz apps, or digital games for student engagement; and an increasing number of schools are using adaptive learning programs to help supplement instruction.

But these digital tools are not always built to accommodate all students, especially those with disabilities or multilingual learners. Some educational technologies might not have captions for videos, their content might not be easily readable by students who need to use screen readers, or they might not have the option for students with physical disabilities to verbalize their responses.

To help schools create more accessible digital learning environments, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Technology and the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services in January published a brief on digital accessibility that provides recommendations for districts to consider. The brief was produced under the direction of the Biden administration, not the current Trump administration.

The accessibility advice for schools came nine months after an update to regulations for Title II of the Americans with Disabilities



Desmond Rudd
Professor,
American University

Act, which calls for public entities—including schools—to verify that those with vision, hearing, cognitive, and manual dexterity disabilities can access their online content.

In a conversation with Education Week, Desmond Rudd, an American University professor who works on special education issues and served as the project lead for developing the Education Department brief, discussed what accessibility is, why it's important, and what schools need to do to ensure their digital infrastructure meets the needs of all students.

This interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

What does the brief mean by 'digital accessibility'?

We're really focused on making sure that

when we're talking about online platforms and engaging students from the digital perspective—anything that is based online or using any form of technology—students should be able to have equal access and opportunity to whatever is happening within that classroom, regardless of their disability. [It's about] specifically making sure that we're reducing the barriers within our classroom environment when using technology.

Why do K-12 schools need to think about this?

When we talk about digital infrastructure, accessibility is a prerequisite. It is foundational. [The digital infrastructure] impacts our daily lives. It's a huge part of us making sense of what is happening, of being able to determine whether something is factual or not factual. It's also the distance between whether or not someone's going to have a solid education.

For instance, let's think about someone who may be hearing-impaired or has a visual impairment of some sort. That can be very difficult if their resources online aren't accessible. It isn't conducive for learning.

That is why it is so important that we should be talking about this, that schools should be worried about it, because it is producing the next generation of leaders within our society.

What's one thing districts and schools need to do if they want to make their digital infrastructure more accessible?

The first thing that they could do is stop working in silos. When we talk about creating things that are accessible, it's not just a special education department's job. The school leadership needs to be on board with it. The IT department needs to be on board with it, as well as procurement. We need to make sure that we are communicating with each other, sharing ideas and thoughts around what we think about accessibility and how we approach it.

What other steps should schools take?

Assess what you have, what you don't have, and bring in everyone in the room, including special educators, your speech language pathologist who deals with the assistive technology pieces; you want to bring in school leaders'

voices, as well as your procurement team. Bringing them all to the table is going to be really important as you talk about the idea of digital accessibility.

Once you do that, gather information, thoughts, and opinions around how you all define digital accessibility and create specific pieces around who's responsible for what.

Engage with other school districts. People are doing this work across our country. We've seen it, and it's highlighted within our accessibility brief, as well as our national ed-tech plan. Be in community with those who are also having the same issues, because you're not the only school having issues around digital accessibility.

The last part within that is to develop a rigorous plan so that everyone understands who's a part of what. Educate your families on what's happening. ■



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The Essential Skill Students With Learning Differences Need

By Arianna Prothero

It's not enough for schools to help students with learning differences or disabilities shore up their academic weaknesses. Students also need to learn how to communicate with others—particularly adults—about their unique needs, experts say.

Self-advocacy is a vital skill for future success in college and the workforce for students with dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or other learning challenges. Throughout their lives, neurodivergent students will find themselves in situations where they must explain the particulars of their learning differences or disabilities to teachers, coworkers, and employers as well as what accommodations they need to succeed—whether it's a formal individualized education program, extra time to perform tasks, or simply what they know helps them do their best work.

They won't always have their parents or a school psychologist there to help them, say experts, so it's important that schools start teaching students how to advocate for their needs, starting as early as elementary school.

"I've had to push for IEP accommodations specifically my entire life," said Jacquelyn Taylor, a student at the University of Rhode Island. She is also an advocate for people with learning disabilities, sharing her experiences as a student with dyslexia and dyscalculia.

"A lot of students go through this," she said during an Oct. 17 Education Week K-12 Essentials Forum about how to help students with learning differences.

Taylor said convincing high school teachers she was struggling was particularly difficult because she was a straight A student.

"On the surface level, it seemed like I'm totally fine, I understand the material," she said. "But beneath that, I was spending so much time on a specific assignment that probably should have taken kids 30 minutes. I was spending an hour-plus."

She also sought out a lot of additional help from friends and family members to complete her assignments. Taylor said she had to learn to speak up in her IEP meetings and push back against adults in her school who said her grades were an indication that



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she was doing fine, when she knew she was struggling.

Asking for help can be very difficult for some students

For some students, self-advocacy comes naturally, said Danielle Kovach, an elementary special education teacher based in New Jersey and the past president of the Council for Exceptional Children. But others will need help flexing those muscles, she said.

"A lot of times asking for that help is so difficult—it doesn't happen overnight," she said, speaking on a panel for the Education Week forum. "As educators, we encourage them, move them along, and teach them leading by example on how to advocate for yourself."

That means teachers need to notice when students with learning differences are struggling or getting frustrated in class, she said, as well as asking students if they need help and what could help address what they're struggling with.

It's also important for teachers to develop strong relationships with students and create supportive classroom environments, experts say, where those students feel like they can take risks and voice their challenges and needs without fear of getting shamed.

That starts with educators assessing their own sometimes misguided perceptions of students with learning differences and other

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As educators, we encourage them, move them along, and teach them leading by example on how to advocate for yourself.”

DANIELLE KOVACH

Elementary special education teacher,
New Jersey

neurodivergent conditions, Kovach said.

"I hear sometimes from teachers, 'Well, I can't do this for them. That's not fair. I can't give them extra time when the other kids don't get extra time,'" she said. "It's important to realize that when we accommodate students, when we differentiate, we're just leveling the playing field. We're making it equally as challenging for that student as it would be for anyone else."

Students should learn how to explain the details of their learning differences

It can also help students better advocate for themselves if they know and can explain some details about the learning difference they have been diagnosed with, experts say. For example, specific areas of their brain related to, say, language or quantity may process information differently.

These skills are especially important when students transition into post-secondary education or the workforce, where professors and bosses may have little to no information about their students' or employees' learning differences.

Edward Hubbard is an associate professor of educational psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who studies dyscalculia. He said during the Education Week forum that he frequently makes changes to his classes based on feedback from students with specific learning needs, and he finds that his other students also benefit from those accommodations. For example, he started providing recordings of his lectures with captioning to all his classes based on the accommodation he was asked to provide to one student.

Because of privacy rules, Hubbard said he receives very little information on his students' learning differences. That's why it's important for students to learn how to advocate for themselves before they get to college, so they feel confident to approach their professors—or bosses—with their needs.

"Your professors can help advocate for you if you are able to go—and willing to go—and talk to them about what you need to be successful," he said. ■

OPINION

Published April 7, 2023

Autistic Isn't a Bad Word: The Case For Rethinking Your Language

By Elizabeth Greenwell

He's autistic," I say, responding to a question about my 9-year-old son.

After shifting in her chair, a co-worker responds: "It must be hard to have a child on the spectrum."

A version of this conversation has happened many times during the past year or two, as I'm trying to switch from person-first language to using the identity-first terminology recently preferred by many autistic adults.

As a veteran teacher, I've taught the Psychology of the Exceptional Child course for many years to teacher-candidates. I work every day in special education teaching middle and high schoolers with learning differences. I've also fostered and parented neurodivergent children. So, I've been the poster child for person-first language for the last 20 years—a linguistic approach that puts the person ("child") before the disability ("autism"). This long-taught technique is the equivalent of saying, "John has autism like Sue has cancer." In the past, I might argue, "We don't say John is autistic just like we wouldn't say Sue is cancerous." It would be a classic argument.

But here is the problem: Cancer is bad. Who would argue with that premise? Cancer is a disease. It isn't part of who you are, intrinsically. Autism is neither bad nor good. Instead, it is a neurodivergence—a way of communicating differently, of sensing things more or less than others, of having hyperfocused interests—not a disease that needs eradicating.

This shift in my language started a few months after I joined Autism Inclusivity, a Facebook group that as of April 3 is run by 16 autistic adults with 150,003 group members and growing. The group has several thousand autistic adults who help parents learn how to relate to their neurodivergent children. The group description states, "This is an Autistic-led group for parents and caregivers of Autistic children to ask questions. ... As such this group respectfully centers upon Autistic voices. We seek to educate in this group so that current and future generations of Autistic

children can be better understood and supported with their needs."

The Autism Inclusivity group can be tough on neurotypicals at times but also provides invaluable insight because some members are the first generation who have grown up with a diagnosis and can say what language, teaching, and parenting style worked for them and which may have been harmful to their well-being or self-image.

When asked by parents why autistic members self-identify as "autistic," group members sometimes post a meme showing a person standing on a rainbow (on a spectrum), carrying a rainbow bag (has autism), and then being the rainbow (autistic). This was my aha moment—when it all started to make sense. They are not a puzzle to be figured out and prefer the infinity sign over the puzzle piece that is promoted by Autism Speaks, an advocacy group that is not run by autistics. Many autistic adults don't want money raised to find a "cure"—because they already like who they are. Every condition has varying degrees of functionality—a spectrum.

During April—Autism Acceptance Month—I hope you take a moment to step back and listen to the youth and adults who are part of a movement to change the way we refer to them, using identity-first language, as the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network encourages. Just as the Deaf community doesn't want to be called people with hearing impairments since they see the value of Deaf culture, so, too, do the autistics in the world have a right to a cultural voice. Some neurodivergent people prefer different terminology than what many educators are used to. We need to focus on empowering their neurodivergence instead of our comfort level as neurotypical educators taught best practices by neurotypical instructors. Maybe it isn't best practice after all.

Perhaps the best way to do better is simple: Listen to other voices in the community and ask each person what they prefer to be called. That is putting the person first in real life, not just assuming their preference in language.

My son is 9. For now, he loves learning sports facts and geography. He can beat me on any trivia question about U.S. presidents or British

monarchs, but I'm still better at math than he. (He had his times tables memorized by 5, so he's going to catch me soon!) He's a great writer and loves to play soccer. He enjoys hanging out with our cats, his sisters, and his Uncle Rob.

I often find him wearing colorful mismatched shoes—one tie-dye Croc and one slip-on shoe with superhero designs. He likes to keep his hair long and pants short—even in winter. He'd rather eat asparagus or broccoli than brush his teeth—even with bubble-gum-flavored toothpaste. And when I asked him if he had an opinion on autism language, he shrugged his shoulders and said, "I prefer to be called Jez," the nickname we have called him since birth. I find value in that, in allowing my 3rd grader the space to be uniquely himself just as I allow my students to be fully autistic without having to mask their neurodivergent characteristics in my classroom.

With 1 in 36 children now diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders, most of my fellow teachers will spend some of their careers teaching autistic students. Consider listening harder to the neurodivergent voices in the room and try saying "autistic," instead. If it makes a fellow educator squirm, explain why you changed to identity-first language. We all have an obligation to listen to the voices different from our own and to be advocates for the students we teach. ■

Elizabeth Greenwell is a teacher at Wye River Upper School in Centreville, Md., and the author of four children's books. Her writing has been featured in Education Week, the Baltimore Sun, and several local news outlets.

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