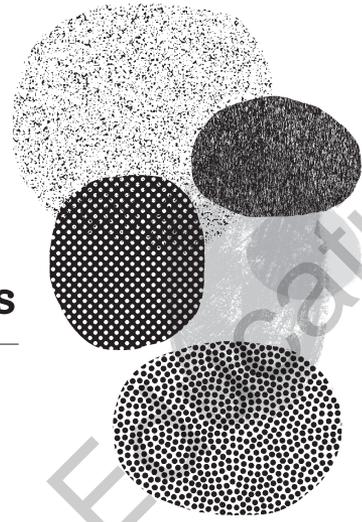


Building *on the* Strengths of Students *with* Special Needs

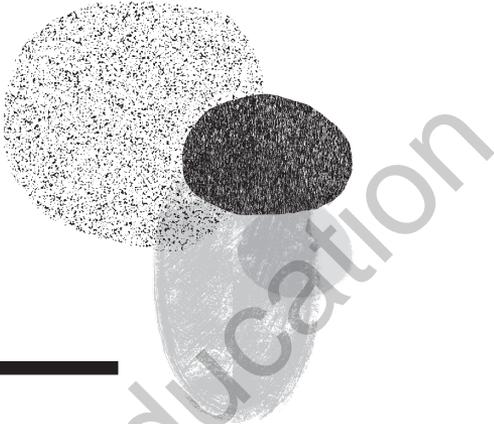
How to Move Beyond Disability Labels in the Classroom



Introduction.....	v
1 Students with Dyslexia and Other Reading Differences	1
2 Students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).....	14
3 Students with Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Differences.....	26
4 Students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLDs).....	35
5 Students with Executive Function (EF) Disorder	48
6 Students with Speech and Language Disorders	56
7 Students with Auditory Processing Disorder (APD)	68
8 Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)	73
9 Students with Intellectual Disabilities (ID).....	86
10 Students with Deafness and Hearing Impairments.....	96
11 Students with Blindness and Visual Impairments	103
12 Students with Physical Disabilities.....	110
13 Students with Multiple Abilities.....	116
Appendix A: Capitalize on Strengths.....	123
Appendix B: Strategy-Rich Practices	125

Appendix C: Personalized Learning Map	127
Appendix D: Bibliotherapy Choices.....	130
Appendix E: Acronyms	134
Appendix F: Professional Organizations	136
Index.....	140
About the Author	146

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Introduction

Building on the Strengths of Students with Special Needs describes the characteristics and strengths of specific disabilities as well as inclusion strategies to implement in your classrooms. Inclusive curriculum scenarios for younger learners and secondary students in elementary, middle, and high schools are included. Each chapter highlights a specific disability, but it is essential to note that students are individuals, regardless of whether they share a disability label. In addition, characteristics of certain disabilities often overlap with one another. In other words, a student who is classified with a specific learning disability may also have attention and social differences. A student with dyslexia may demonstrate signs of ADHD, whereas a student with an intellectual disability may also have a speech or language difference. Therefore, the classroom inclusion strategies in this book are not restricted to their respective chapters.

Also typical is a combination of symptoms and characteristics with a range of severity. All human beings, whether they have a disability or not, exist on a spectrum with a profile of strengths and weaknesses. A student with dyslexia may have weaknesses in reading and writing skills yet also exhibit strengths that need to be recognized and nurtured. Perhaps he or she is a wonderful musician or artist, in which case you provide opportunities to create a rap or folk song, collage, or digital presentation about a novel. A student with emotional disturbance may be an excellent writer, or a student with a hearing impairment may have an affinity for science. The bottom line is that teachers and other staff can ease the classroom struggles a student may have by capitalizing on his or her stronger skills, interests, and abilities and by valuing who the student is with responsive, appropriate inclusion interventions. Our aim is to circumvent a disability label from defining that student.

My first year of teaching, back in 1976, was in a private school in a Brooklyn brownstone. The population of learners was diverse. The students had varying socioeconomic levels, ethnicities, and cognitive, communicative, sensory, and physical abilities. Some carried the labels of Tourette's, scoliosis, cerebral palsy, autism, emotional disturbance, and learning disability. Some were classified with terms that are

no longer used today, such as *mental retardation* (now known as intellectual disability) and *minimal brain dysfunction* (generally referred to today as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD).

When I handed one student any two writing implements—whether it was two crayons, two pencils, or two markers—he would shout out “Sword fight!” and duel with himself. I had a student who swore a lot, another who only wrote capital letters, and yet another who had echolalia and would repeat what was said to him or what he heard from television commercials. Some students spoke English, some used sign language, and some spoke languages other than English as their primary language. Some learners entered the classroom with a lovely packed lunch, some had no lunch, and some came off the bus with physical and emotional bumps and bruises.

Even though the public school system decided that these learners were best educated in a separate environment—that was not their neighborhood school—I never viewed any of these students as broken or unable to learn. All of them shared a few commonalities: they were in the same school, in the same class, and had me as their teacher. As a young new educator, I eagerly and enthusiastically figured out how to teach and reach each student. Some of the methods were conventional, and some were unconventional at the time. We recited rhyming words, read books, wrote captions for pictures in magazines, created stories, wrote in journals, solved math word problems, and completed research reports. We also traveled the New York City transit system to visit museums, took nature walks, spent time in local parks, bought items in bodegas, rode through a car wash, and visited Chinatown.

Along with direct-skill, whole-class instruction, and individualized learning, I provided my students with more real-life experiences (infused with academic and functional skills) so they could be part of their community and city. The school was not a microcosm of the world, since it had learners with atypical behavior and learning characteristics that did not emulate those of their age-level peers. These students had what others viewed as obstacles, but I viewed their differences as educational challenges that were mine—not theirs. It was *my* challenge to teach them. And, happily, I did.

Years later, I taught learners in both public and private schools in several states; coached special and general educators; collaborated with administrators in school districts; prepared university students to become educators; and presented professional development sessions in several different countries. Having met so many diverse learners, I realize that a student’s label is inconsequential. A label may be legislatively required to ensure that a student receives services, but that label does not offer insights into his or her likes, dislikes, interests, strengths, and potential.

The infancy of groundbreaking legislation for students with disabilities coincided with my preservice years in special education. During my junior year in college, Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA), was passed. The year was 1975, more than four decades ago. This landmark legislation has since been amended, improved, reinterpreted, and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Prior to 1975, students with disabilities were often not included in classes or schools with nondisabled peers. The mindset was that students with learning, attention, memory, emotional, social, behavioral, communicative, developmental, and physical differences were not on par with students who were considered to be *typical* learners. Limited access, lower expectations, and negative stereotypical thoughts yielded a generation of learners who often dropped out of school (Vaughn, Danielson, Zumeta, & Holheide, 2015).

Today, as a requirement of IDEA, each student who receives special education services has his or her learning needs identified in a legal document known as an individualized education program (IEP). The contents of an IEP include, but are not limited to, a statement of the learner's present level of academic achievement and functional performance (PLAAFP), learning goals, and related services provided, such as occupational and/or physical therapy, psychological, audiological, vision, orientation and mobility, and speech and language services and supports. The IEP also outlines the rationale for the placement, the extent of participation in the general education classroom, types and length of time for the services and supports provided, the specific location of the delivery of services, and necessary accommodations and modifications (e.g., additional time on tests; closer proximity; visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile presentations). As necessitated, transitional services are planned for in a student's IEP, and extended school year (ESY) services—if required—are also specified if it is determined that the learner will regress over the summer months.

The *I* in IEP mandates that the goals and instructional decisions are individualized ones—never based on a school district's availability of services but linked to a student's determined current level of performance. The goals are also measurable, designed to involve the student in the general education curriculum to the maximum extent appropriate. The general education classroom is considered to be the least restrictive environment (LRE), with other placements on a continuum from least restrictive to most restrictive. This continuum ranges from a general education classroom with supplementary aids and services to a general education classroom with a coteacher and/or consultative services. These services could also include a combination of in-class and pull-out services with a resource teacher, services provided in a self-contained special classroom, placement in a special school or through homebound or hospital instruction, or separate placement in a residential school or

setting. Decisions are based on each student's unique needs and levels, with instruction that acknowledges each learner's challenges and strengths.

IDEA's intent is to offer each learner with a disability a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) with continuous monitoring and communication of progress achieved toward outlined learning goals. IEP teams include school staff, families, invited guests who have information to contribute, and the learner if he or she is willing and able to participate in the process. A student is evaluated to determine his or her level of functioning. There are 13 disability classifications under IDEA, which include autism, visual impairment (including blindness), deafness, deaf-blindness, hearing impairment, specific-learning disability, emotional disturbance, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, traumatic brain injury, speech or language impairment, and other health impairment. Developmental delays include learners from birth to age 3 and children from ages 3 to 9. Children with developmental delays are identified by each state in areas of development that include cognitive, physical, social, emotional, communicative, and adaptive-behavior.

If a child does not qualify for services under IDEA, then he or she may be eligible for services under what is referred to as a 504 plan. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is intended to eliminate discrimination against students with disabilities, regardless of the nature or severity of a disability (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2015). As an example, a learner with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder may not qualify under other health impairment (OHI) under IDEA but instead receives educational services with a 504 plan. A student who receives services under a 504 plan is determined to have a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities (e.g., breathing, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, learning, working). Services and placements include, but are not limited to, general education classrooms with supplementary supports and/or the provision of special education services in a separate setting. As with an IEP, a 504 plan is individually based and collaboratively planned, monitored, and evaluated to determine the location and appropriateness of services. Funding differs, but services are always individually based.

Another piece of legislation, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), was first enacted in 1990 to prohibit discrimination against people with disabilities—in reference to employment, public accommodations (including school settings), commercial facilities, and access to transportation. Like IDEA and Section 504, ADA has been amended over the years to improve services. ADA broadened the definition of *disability* in the latest amendments to prohibit discrimination and ensure equal opportunities for people with disabilities. School examples include a bathroom or classroom door widened to permit access for a student in a wheelchair, note takers

provided for learners who have difficulty writing, sign language interpreters provided at a school play, and other classroom and extracurricular supports as necessitated. Children who qualify for IDEA eligibility criteria are also protected by Section 504 and ADA, with identified impairments.

Even though legislation protects the rights of learners with disabilities, both within and outside school settings, diversity is often viewed through different lenses. Thankfully, much progress has occurred since policies such as sterilization, institutionalization, and exclusion of people with differences went into effect. The so-called ugly laws (Schweik, 2011), which prohibited deformed—or what was considered “unsightly”—people to be seen in public in some locations of the United States, gave birth to substantial civil rights legislation. However, some disabilities today are viewed through more positive lenses and given more acceptance than others. For example, there is still a lack of information and a stigma for students within certain disability categories. Before brain research revealed that differences such as dyslexia and ADHD were not willful but had brain etiology, some people viewed learners with these labels as lazy or deliberately defiant.

The characteristics and effective classroom strategies that capitalize on the strengths that a student with a difference, such as emotional disturbance or deafness, possesses are often misunderstood. Some categories of disability are more tolerated than others considered “hidden” or less visible to the eye. As examples, a staff member would never ask a student seated in a wheelchair to just stand up and walk like everyone else does, a student who is blind to see, or a student who is deaf to listen, so why would a student with an emotional disturbance be asked to behave differently or a student with a specific learning disability be asked to perform classroom expectations without the necessary supports and scaffolding? A student with a physical disability may require a wheelchair or braces, whereas a student with a visual impairment will need magnified pages and digital recordings. Accordingly, students with learning and behavioral disabilities also require specific evidence-based strategies to succeed in school settings. The definition of *diversity* has greatly widened in today’s classroom to view a disability as a characteristic—not a deviance to be hidden or erased. The definition of *normal* often indicates that a problem exists within a student instead of expecting or requiring educational contexts to be more responsive (Moore, 2013).

All students are exceptional, whether or not they have a label. As stated throughout this book, each child is different. Reinforcement, motivation, modeling, collaborative planning, and scaffolding help educators provide learners of all ability levels with opportunities to achieve greater academic, social, emotional, and behavioral goals. No student has a monopoly on being a learner, and no learner is perfect. Special and general education teachers collaborate to intervene with strategies that

are tailored to personalize instruction. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) speaks about challenging and personalizing student learning. This includes providing diverse supports, interventions, and assessments that reveal and measure individual growth. Each child is born as a unique individual that personalized education addresses, whether or not a student has an IEP or an assigned label. ESSA describes a competency-based approach that values not only summative assessments but also formative and performance-based ones.

Learning is a process. As a novice yoga practitioner, I can finally *almost* maintain a tree pose for a full minute without toppling over—after more than a year of classes. A yoga instructor pointed out that we are each at a different stage of development and that yoga includes a mind-body connection. She poignantly told the class not to measure our worth by what others are doing but to praise ourselves for being part of the class—each of us cherishing our efforts and unique levels of participation.

Change is an evolutionary process. Learn how to value the plan, stay the course, and weigh options. Not every day is a perfect one—nor does the perfect child or the perfect lesson plan exist. We are all malleable, inclusive educational partners on the journey together—whether we are considered gifted, autistic, twice-exceptional, or are identified as having a learning, speech/language, or emotional disability. We require professional knowledge, a plan to move forward, and the fortitude and patience to stay the course. It is okay to mess up, but it is *not* okay to stay that way. Most important, a positive attitude and a belief that all students are capable of achieving self-efficacy and making strides alongside their peers are critical.

I once stopped a lesson when one of my students was overly concerned with a comment that another student made to him and took personal offense. No matter what I said or did, he would not let it go. I then wrote in large letters on the board, “BIG DEAL, SO WHAT—NOW WHAT?” Suddenly, I had the attention of the whole class, and the student paused to think. We all need to pause to think and then plan our next move. We use data to guide our decisions, regardless of the perceived obstacles or hurdles presented. Always keep the inclusive wheels turning.

This book maintains that diversity is first identified and then embraced to honor learner differences with the appropriate systematic instruction. Students should never be viewed as failures but as learners who require the effective strategies that capitalize on and strengthen their levels of performance. *Typical* instruction needs to match the diversity of *atypical* learners, without viewing a disability as being on a lower rung of the educational ladder.

Points to emphasize in your classroom include the following:

- Each student is different!
- Reinforcement should be consistent, realistic, and enthusiastic.

- Motivators can be both extrinsic and intrinsic.
- Desired responses need to be modeled.
- Appropriate collaborative planning, pacing, and step-by-step scaffolding increase skill sets.
- Academic, social, emotional, and behavioral objectives are often intertwined.
- Data should drive instructional decisions.
- Classroom organization includes multitiered systems of support (MTSS).
- Accountability includes staff, students, and families.
- Every moment of the day is an educational one!

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