

Neurodiverse Teachers and Self-Advocacy in Action

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Abstract

Including diverse educators, including neurodiverse teachers and teachers with disabilities, benefits school systems in an intersectional lens. Schools and other places of employment must provide reasonable accommodations for employees with disabilities to ensure access to the workplace. Educators with disabilities also must use self-advocacy skills in order to navigate obtaining accommodations and being fully included in schools. Inclusion is co-conspirator work, meaning individuals with and without disabilities co-labor to ensure belonging for all individuals. This article focuses on ways neurodiverse *and* neurotypical educators and educators with *and* without disabilities can utilize elements of self-advocacy such as self-reflection, understanding rights and responsibilities, and using Circles of Support in order to support more inclusive school systems.

Key Words: Disability, Inclusion, Intersectionality, Neurodiversity, Self-Advocacy, Teaching

Introduction

Inclusive education has made excellent strides in providing opportunities for neurodiverse students and students with disabilities. True inclusion should also celebrate disability and neurodiversity of its teachers, staff, and administrators. According to Waitoller and Kozleski (2013), inclusive education is a continuous struggle toward

- a) the redistribution of quality opportunities to learn and participate in educational programs,
- b) the recognition and value of differences as reflected in content, pedagogy, and assessment tools, and
- c) the opportunities for marginalized groups to represent themselves in decision-making processes that advance and define claims of exclusion and the respective solutions that affect their children's educational futures (p. 35).

What better way to encourage critical redistribution of opportunities, value diversity, and allow for representation and decision-making of marginalized groups of students than to model this with faculty and staff in our schools? Just as schools are making efforts to hire more *Black, Indigenous, and People of Color* (BIPOC) and Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and *Queer/Questioning* (LGBTQ) teachers and staff, schools also have a long way to grow in terms of employing more educators with disabilities.

Even if neurodiverse and disabled educators find positions in schools, there are challenges with accessibility, inclusion, and belonging when working in an environment that was created with able-bodied and neurotypical

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people in mind, as with most of our society. While we are co-conspiring in making our schools more inclusive places, the other side of this double-edged sword is the reality that neurodiverse and disabled individuals must learn self-advocacy skills in order to gain access in the schools, the workplace, and the community. This article discusses the benefits and application of self-advocacy skills for teachers who identify as neurodiverse and/or disabled as they navigate their jobs in the school system.

Positionality Statement and Notes on Language

I would like to describe myself to give helpful context to this paper. I am a white, heterosexual, cisgendered, English-speaking female. I am autistic, and I insist on the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in all parts of society, while acknowledging their unique experiences, challenges, and assets.

As of the People First Respectful Language Modernization Act of 2006, Person-First Language replaces Deficit-First Language (sometimes called Disability-First Language) to state that a person *has* a disability rather than *is defined* by their disability (Office of Disability Rights, 2014). For instance, Person-First Language says “person with a disability” instead of “disabled person.” Person-First Language also limits the use of derogatory terms in regards to disability, such as prohibiting the r-word and refraining from using language around disability to carry negative connotations. Other examples of Person-First Language would be phrases such as “person with a mental illness” or “student who uses a wheelchair,” instead of “insane person” or “wheelchair-bound student.”

Some individuals in the disability community use Identity-First Language (such as “I’m autistic” or “I’m Deaf”) to emphasize that their disability is an integral part of their person and something to be proud of (Brown, 2011). In the field of Disability Studies, many individuals who identify as having disabilities themselves choose to use Identity-First Language instead of (or in addition to) Person-First Language. Identity-First Language is not the same as Deficit-First Language, though it may sound similar because of the placement of the disability before the person in the sentence. Examples of Identity-First Language include “wheelchair user,” “autistic person,” “d/Deaf,” and “disabled faculty” (instead of the Person-First “person who uses a wheelchair,” “person with autism,” “person who experiences deafness,” and “faculty with a disability”).

As an autistic person myself, I identify as disabled and use Identity-First Language when referring to myself, and use Person-First Language when talking about students (unless I know that they have an individual preference towards identity-first language). When writing, I use Identity-First Language (“disabled teachers”) in congruence with the Disability Studies field. For myself and many other disabled scholars and Disability Studies academics, the reason behind using Identity-First Language is both a reclaiming of disability status and a recognizing that disability/neurodiversity is an integral part of our intersecting identities; it is a difference, not a deficit (although we still are presented with challenges in an able-minded society). I use Identity-First Language (“I am autistic”) when describing myself because I would not *be* myself if I was not autistic. While many individuals with disabilities do prefer Person-First Language (i.e., “students with disabilities”) over Identity-First Language, it is necessary for professionals and organizations to consider all of these perspectives. According to the Association of University Centers on Disability (AUCD), “It is important to note that whether a person with a disability prefers people-first or identity-first language is not universal. If you are unsure as to whether you should use people-first or identity-first language in order to be respectful, the best thing to do is to ask people themselves” (AUCD, 2011). For consistency, and for the

reasons described about my personal choice to use Identity-First Language, this paper will refer to autistic, disabled, and neurodiverse individuals/teachers using Identity-First Language. The terms “autistic” and “on the autism spectrum” will be used interchangeably.

My experiences as a special education teacher and an instructor in advanced teacher education programs are lived and practiced through the lens of being autistic. I have a unique, detail-oriented perspective and strategic way of thinking about problems. I also face social and sensory challenges every day. I was not diagnosed as autistic until after I graduated college, so I did not realize the source of challenges with the social and emotional aspects of school while I was facing them. I am able to share resources with my students, both K-12 and postsecondary or graduate, through first-hand experience. Many hours of self-reflection have propelled me to encourage my students to value their support networks and utilize out-of-the-box resources. I teach my graduate students the benefits of neurodiversity and can share a perspective they may not have encountered before. Even though I am autistic, I only fully know the experience of one autistic person. My experience as a neurodiverse person makes me passionate about inclusion and belonging of individuals with disabilities. As a disabled person, social justice is important to my research and practice to strive toward equity for all individuals and groups of people, especially those traditionally marginalized.

Self-Advocacy in Action

Self-Advocacy in Action (SAA, see Figure 1) is a curriculum developed to teach self-advocacy skills to students on the autism spectrum and with other disabilities (Sarchet, 2022). SAA was originally iterated to support autistic middle school students with the beginning of transition process for their Individualized Education Plans, because students on the autism spectrum are least likely of all students with disabilities to participate in their transition planning meetings (Griffin et al., 2014). Since its initial creation, SAA has been used with school-age students with and without disabilities K-12 and in postsecondary settings, such as college transition programs, inclusive higher education programs, and teacher education programs.



Figure 1: A blue and white image with the letters “SAA” going up stairs, and the words “Self-Advocacy in Action”.

In this paper, the topics of a few of the lessons in SAA are described and applied to practical use for situations neurodiverse (and neurotypical) teachers and educators may face that would necessitate self-advocacy skills. While some of the lesson topics are defined as prerequisites or sub-skills of self-advocacy, as with many soft skills, self-advocacy is a broad array of skills that a person is always growing in and refining. There is no need to feel mastery in a topic before diving into another topic within self-advocacy. When teaching SAA with students of any age, I encourage teachers to space lessons apart by at least a week to have time to facilitate natural application of the skills learned in each lesson, and to also revisit past lessons throughout the school year or semester to help students engage in self-reflection about how their skills have grown and how to continue to use the skills in new ways. For educators, the lessons can be more self-paced, and the topics are meant to be referred back to at any point. Some of the vignettes may be especially helpful when you run into a similar situation on the job, or when you have time to reflect back on past experiences.

What Is Self-Advocacy?

Self-advocacy is defined as communicating one's strengths, needs, preferences, and interests. Communication includes, but is not limited to, verbal speech, writing, use of technology and assistive technology, body language and facial expressions, and physical action or behavior. For example, someone can self-advocate by speaking up in a meeting about their preference for participation in a project. A self-advocate could also physically move away from a group of people discussing a topic that makes them uncomfortable. These are just a few examples of how communication can look in different ways across instances of self-advocacy. It is important to note that one person doesn't always communicate the same way when self-advocating as well. Many autistic individuals and other people with disabilities have to work at practicing to communicate, generalizing communication strategies across settings, and consistently applying communication skills. I may be comfortable in one setting using verbal speech, and more inclined to use writing or typing in another setting; this can even vary day to day.

Rights and Responsibilities

As a person with a disability, you have rights and responsibilities, just as you have rights and responsibilities as a member of your school, union, and country. Many rights we have access to, are also our responsibility to advocate for. For instance, we have the right to accommodations in the workplace with the responsibility to tell human resources or an administrator what accommodations we need.

Teachers at one school where I taught did lunch duty, supervising students in the cafeteria. After my first day doing lunch duty immediately after teaching a class, I had a meltdown due to sensory overload. Thankfully, when I went to my principal, they accommodated me by giving me another administrative duty during that time: overseeing the library. The quieter environment, fewer fluorescent lights, repetitive nature of book cataloging, and smaller number of people in the library was a needed alternative that still allowed me to complete my responsibilities outside of my teaching load, but it was my responsibility to advocate for that accommodation.

Freedom to disclose information about my disability to whom we choose is another right we have. While I personally choose to share my status as an autistic individual with all of my colleagues in order to work towards dismantling ableism, it is not necessary to disclose in order to receive accommodations, and it may

be some individuals' preference not to disclose because of their identity relationship to their disability. It is also okay to disclose to some people, such as a person we are close with at work, and not disclose to other people.

Other rights and responsibilities as a neurodiverse or disabled educator include: access to assistive technology and support knowing how to use it if appropriate, telling someone trusted if you have been discriminated against, knowledge of resources available, and being allowed to participate in communities you choose. Advocating for staff training on disability and neurodiversity can benefit all educators at a school, and may assist with inclusive attitudes of colleagues. This creates more of an environment of belonging for all educators.

Circles of Support

Self-advocacy is not a journey we must take alone! According to Ryan and Deci (2000), relatedness, belonging or relationships with others, is one of the main factors in motivation and well-being for all people. Identifying individuals and groups that we celebrate with and ask for help from is called Circles of Support. Circles of Support reflect Person-Centered Planning (Mazzotti et al., 2015) in that the individuals with disabilities decide who is part of their Circles of Support. Primary supports are the people closest to us whom we feel most comfortable with and who are most helpful in advocating alongside us. Family and friends are other supports who are close and can rally for us and celebrate with us. Community supports are those who we may seek support from in specific situations. See Figure 2 for a blank template of Circles of Support.

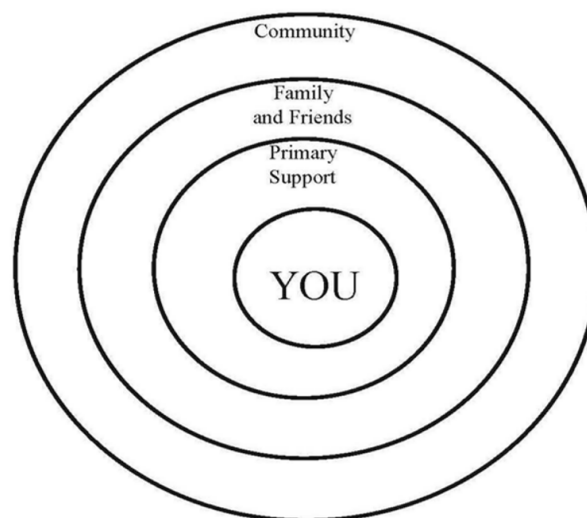


Figure 7: Circles of Support Template

Figure 2: Circles of Support blank template, four concentric circles, starting from the innermost circle with “YOU,” “Primary Supports,” “Family and Friends,” and “Community”.

In my Primary Circle, my husband and my best friend are my most important advocates. These are the first people I go to when I have something exciting to share, when I need advice, and when I am feeling overwhelmed. Family and Friends include siblings, parents, and other friends from church. I am likely to

seek support from these people on a regular basis. Community Supports for me are my boss, my doctor, and other colleagues. These supports are important in specific settings, such as when I have a question about work or my health. All of the people in my Circles of Support are those who I trust and that I know have my best interest in mind. They advocate with me and for me, and encourage me in my self-advocacy skills and growth.

Conclusion

Teachers with neurodiversity and disability are an asset to our schools. Leaders should make efforts to welcome diverse faculty and staff. Neurodiversity and disability are part of human variance that can be celebrated (Armstrong, 2010; Gillies, 2014; Higgins, 1992; Jones, 1996; Rosqvist et al., 2020; Wendell, 1996). Encouraging all educators to utilize self-advocacy skills makes schools more inclusive and better models for our students.

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Laura N. Sarchet is an autistic self-advocate, Adjunct Professor at Niagara University, PhD student at University of Rochester, and professional in Special Education and Inclusive Higher Education who uses her experiences as a neurodiverse person to raise awareness about autism and disability through her research and practice. She taught in middle school special education settings for 6 years prior to beginning her PhD. Laura's research interests include teacher education and teacher preparation programs, self-advocacy, developmental disabilities and autism, and inclusive higher education.