Your Students, My Students, Our Students explores the hard truths of current special education practice and outlines five essential disruptions to the status quo. Authors Lee Ann Jung, Nancy Frey, Douglas Fisher, and Julie Kroener show you how to

• Establish a school culture that champions equity and inclusion.
• Rethink the long-standing structure of least restrictive environment and the resulting service delivery.
• Leverage the strengths of all educators to provide appropriate support and challenge.
• Collaborate on the delivery of instruction and intervention.
• Honor the aspirations of each student and plan accordingly.

To realize authentic and equitable inclusion, we must relentlessly and collectively pursue change. This book—written not for “special educators” or “general educators” but for all educators—addresses the challenges, maps out the solutions, and provides tools and inspiration for the work ahead. Real-life examples of empowerment and success illustrate just what’s possible when educators commit to the belief that every student belongs to all of us and all students deserve learning experiences that will equip them to live full and rewarding lives.
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“Special education class is the place they make you go to do the things
you're not good at all day long.”

These words of wisdom were spoken by Kevin, a middle school stu-
dent with autism* who spent most of his school day in a segregated class-
room for students with significant disabilities. When overwhelmed,
Kevin sometimes exhibited behaviors like hand flapping and rocking. He
presented as a child with low communication skills, but he actually had
a lot to say.

One day, when Kevin and his older brother were waiting on a corner
after school, his brother was struck by gunfire, sustaining relatively minor
injuries. However, there is nothing “minor” about getting shot, and the
incident left the entire family traumatized. Kevin’s parents wanted to
move their children to another school within the district, away from the
scene of the incident. But Kevin's disability was a sticking point. His mom
and dad were distressed by the regression their son had experienced in
the wake of his brother's shooting, and they wanted to ensure he had the
best opportunities possible. Would it be better for him to stay where he

*This diagnosis is formally known as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), but we will use autism for
brevity and to avoid the term “disorder.”
was, with no disruption of service? What other options were available to him in other district schools?

Seeking answers, Kevin’s parents attended workshops sponsored by the state parent training and resource center. There, they learned about a new possibility for Kevin: that he might be educated in a general education classroom. As luck would have it, the district was piloting schoolwide inclusive education practices at one middle school and one high school as part of a research study. The boys transferred to these schools. Kevin left his traditional “special education” behind, and this change transformed his life.

Kevin no longer spent his days compelled to do things he wasn’t good at all day long. Yes, he required a bit of support in general education courses, but the study project plan spelled out systems for responding to the academic, behavioral, and social needs of all enrolled students. For example, when Kevin’s individualized education program (IEP) team noticed that he did not participate in any extracurricular activities, they created goals for him that included attending a dance and a football game and joining an after-school club. Kevin later remarked, “When did the school teach everyone else to go to these things? How come I never learned to make friends?”

Kevin thrived in his new environment. During the summer before his junior year in high school, he earned an enviable amount of money debugging software for a local tech firm. After graduating from high school with honors, he earned an undergraduate degree in engineering and went on to work for a company that—like Microsoft, JPMorgan Chase, and Walgreens—prioritizes hiring people with autism. As enterprise application software company SAP’s Silvio Bessa has noted, corporations recruit people with autism because they need the “analytic mindset” that allows them to collectively “think outside of the common boundaries” (SAP, 2013).

Today, Kevin proudly identifies himself as a person with autism and says that he “works well with NTs” (*neurotypicals*, a neologism for people without autism) and appreciates “what they have to offer, too.” His inclusive workplace is an extension of the inclusive schooling he was first
introduced to in middle school. The world experiences Kevin as a fully integrated member of society. He pays taxes, gets stuck in traffic jams, laments the losses suffered by his favorite sports team, and wishes his romantic life were better. In other words, Kevin is pretty much like everyone else. Yet he is also himself. He has autism, engages in some repetitive behaviors when he is feeling stressed, and sometimes struggles with communicating with colleagues in the workplace. The difference is that he is in a professional community that seeks to understand his differences while never overlooking the human condition that binds us all together.

**Where We Are and Where Our Schools Aren’t (Yet)**

Globalization has flattened our world, and it’s also supported greater accessibility to information and services. As one simple example, look at the accessibility features available on your smartphone. You can change the font size and alter colors to make the contrast sharper and therefore easier to read. There is voice recognition software that allows you to text and search without typing out words. Voicemail messages can be read through transcription. These and other innovations reflect the sensibility that “design is a way in which we can uphold a person’s dignity and human rights” (Burke, 2017). They grew from the intersection of people with and without disabilities participating together in the social and physical world.

And yet school remains a place where these intersections are systematically minimized. This is the result of 200 years of viewing disability through a medical model that catalogs impairment rather than considers disability as a social construct that is shaped by policy, theory, and ethics. It’s impossible to untangle disability from race, culture, and economics, and equity cannot be realized if some members of society—and members of school communities—are marginalized and segregated. As a retired superintendent who oversaw the shift to inclusive education practices
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in his school district would remind his principals, “Show me your master schedule, and I’ll tell you what your values are.” Who within a building has and does not have access to “regular classes” is often a reflection of who and what matters to the educators who work there.

If students with disabilities and their peers without disabilities are to achieve at higher levels, increase the satisfaction they experience in life, and contribute as members of the community, the education system needs to change—and this will be no easy task. It requires undoing the marginalization of people with disabilities that dates back centuries and changing the expectations for students with disabilities. Yet we must try. The current system is not working for many students, and that’s a problem we cannot ignore.

**Understanding the Human Experience**

Disability is part of the human experience. Once viewed as a static binary construct (disabled/not disabled), disability is now understood as a dimension of a person’s identity, alongside race, ethnicity, language, gender, sexual orientation, and experience. It is the intersection of these “identity influences” that make each of us who we are. To segregate students according to a single identity influence—disability—is to sentence them to a “literal disenfranchisement” that marginalizes and threatens their identity as citizens of the world (Kliwer, Biklen, & Kasa-Hendrickson, 2006, p. 186).

Further, the practice of setting up separate classrooms and schools for the education of students with disabilities also limits the experiences of students without disabilities. Consider that about 10 percent of the student population has a disability. This means an equal percentage of families—10 percent—have the experience of either rearing or growing up with a child who has a disability. What does that mean for the 90 percent of students and families—the future employers, co-workers, landlords, neighbors, medical professionals, law enforcement officers, teachers, and
parents—who may not have opportunities to spend time around people with a disability and get to know them as individuals with personalities, quirks, challenges, and successes? It’s not an overstatement to say that society would be changed for the better if every school child had the chance to know and learn alongside people with disabilities and see them as peers. It’s not about pity; it’s about the recognition of fundamental rights and human dignity.

The good news is that there are places where inclusive education is happening. These schools are populated by teachers and leaders who recognize that students with disabilities are rightfully part of general education classrooms. They are working relentlessly to align supports and services with the students’ needs and, in so doing, ensure that every single student has a full and powerful learning experience. These schools and systems are models of success, and they can be a guide for undertaking widespread change.

**Characteristics of Successful Inclusive Practice**

American teachers often assume that the United States leads the world in special education, largely because of the decades-old legislation mandating that students with disabilities be served by public schools. But many other countries have also been successfully including students with disabilities for decades. Take, for example, Italy’s approach to inclusion, which departs from the U.S. system in several important ways. In their study of Italian schools, Giangreco and Doyle (2015) describe four fundamental attributes that distinguish inclusive efforts in Italian schools from those in the United States. Let’s look at them one at a time.

**A Universally Welcoming Environment**

It’s widely acknowledged that open and welcoming environments lead to engaged students and families, and that increased engagement yields
better long-term outcomes for students. We have yet to meet teachers who don’t aspire to be inviting and welcoming to students and their families. But for families of students with disabilities in the United States, the reality does not always match the espoused aspiration. Too many parents find they must advocate for their children to be included or adequately served in general education classrooms. Students with significant disabilities are too frequently served in segregated settings for part or even all of the school day. More than 20 percent of students with multiple disabilities are educated in segregated environments (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

By contrast, the norm in Italian schools is that students of all levels of ability, including those with significant disabilities, spend their full day in general education classrooms. According to Giangreco and Doyle (2015), Italians are often shocked to hear that many students with disabilities in the United States are denied access to the general education classroom and only receive services in special education classrooms. They add, “For the most part, including students with disabilities in Italy is not controversial, an experiment, a passing fad, or a right that needs to be earned by meeting certain criteria or functioning at a particular level. Students with disabilities are welcomed simply because they are human” (p. 26).

**A Narrow Definition of Disability**

Giangreco and Doyle point out that the Italian category “disability” applies only to students with more significant needs. What the United States would diagnose as learning disability, for example, is not seen as a disability in Italy; it’s simply part of the range that any general education teacher is expected to support. In the United States, 10 to 15 percent of students in a typical school qualify for special education services, which they receive on the basis of their individualized education plans (IEPs). But in Italy, only 2 to 3 percent of students are identified as having a disability for which they require specialized supports. Most of the students in the United States with IEPs would not be considered to have a disability
in Italy; they would simply fall into Italian education’s broader scope of “normal.” Italian laws do require that students who have learning needs receive appropriate accommodations, but no student needs to have a disability label to receive this support.

**General Education Ownership of All Students**

Given the narrower definition of disability in Italy, it is not surprising that general education teachers have a sense of ownership for the learning of all students in their classroom, including those who, in the United States, might be identified as having multiple or severe disabilities. In U.S. classrooms, students with more significant disabilities almost always have additional support in the classroom, usually assigned to the student. Most U.S. students with significant disabilities also spend part or all of their day at school in segregated, special education classrooms (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

By contrast, few “special education classrooms” exist in Italian schools. The presence of students with learning needs is expected in general education classroom, meaning “pullout” services are rare. Italian general and special education teachers collaborate and develop solutions for educating all students in the same classroom. Additional support is available to many general education classrooms, but only for part of the day or week. Both the general education teacher and special education teacher or paraprofessional support all students, not an assigned subset.

**Less Reliance on Paraprofessionals**

In the United States, there is an increasing reliance on paraprofessionals to provide instruction to students with disabilities, with families and teachers commonly making the case for one-on-one assistants attached to individual students (Giangreco, 2013). Often seen as a cost-effective way to get individualized support to more students, paraprofessionals are charged with supporting instruction, oftentimes beyond the scope of what they have been trained and prepared to do. Italian schools, on the other
hand, rely very little on paraprofessionals, and the paraprofessional's role is largely to provide assistance with feeding, toileting, and mobility within the classroom and around the school; it is not instruction. Italian schools view the design of intervention and supports as the responsibility of the general and special education teachers.

Transforming Inclusive Education to Serve Every Student

In a team-based model of inclusive education, all students receive the benefit of support within the general education classroom setting. The full scope of this approach's benefits may be impossible to measure fully. Consider that because true inclusion elevates teaching practices in general education classrooms, many students will likely never need “supplemental” instruction or intervention. Students who might have been identified as at risk for school failure under older models will succeed without intervention and never be stigmatized, labeled, or othered.

Benefits for Students Needing Support

Decades of special education studies have demonstrated that students who are taught in inclusive settings show higher achievement than those who are pulled from the general education classroom (Cole, Waldron, & Majd, 2004; Manset & Semmel, 1997; Rea, McLaughlin, & Walther-Thompson, 2002; Westling & Fox, 2009). Students with learning differences who are served in inclusive settings are also more likely to pursue post-secondary education (Baer et al., 2003; Flexer, Daviso, Baer, Queen, & Meindl, 2011; Joshi & Bouck, 2017; Lombardi, Doren, Gau, & Lindstrom, 2013; Rojewski, Lee, & Gregg, 2013). Inclusion’s benefits to students with learning differences, however, extend beyond academic achievement. Inclusive service delivery also leads to higher social and communication outcomes for students (Calabrese et al., 2008; Foreman, Arthur-Kelly, Pascoe, King, & Downing, 2004; Katz, Mirenda, & Auerbach, 2002).
Stories like Kevin’s appeal to our sense of human rights and social justice. The right to be included should have been sufficient to ensure that Kevin participated fully in his schooling from the very beginning. But what drives us—and you—is figuring out effective ways to support all students. We maintain that supporting students with a wide variety of learning profiles in the general education classroom is good for everyone, and research backs this view. Szumski, Smogorzewska, and Karwowski (2017) performed a meta-analysis of 47 studies examining the effect of inclusive education on students without disabilities. The almost 5 million students from seven countries—including the United States and Canada—did not have disabilities but were educated in inclusive classrooms. The researchers found a small but positive effect on the academic and social growth of these students. In their conclusion, the researchers made this statement:

This result may be important to educational policymakers responsible for decisions about the promotion of inclusion, but also to parents of children without [special educational needs]. Even more importantly, the main effect of this meta-analysis supplements and supports argumentation in favor of promoting inclusion. . . . The effects we obtained—both the main effect and the results of moderator analysis—consistently support the concept of inclusive education, understood as effective school for all. (p. 47)

Benefits for Educators and Other Professionals

Szumski and colleagues also describe inclusive education as a vehicle for “a radical concept of educational system transformation” (p. 47). The desired outcome, of course, is ensuring access and high achievement for all students. One of the reasons inclusion works so well for everyone is that it elevates the quality of instruction in the general education classroom. When general education teachers have a broader range of learning profiles in their classrooms, they have to adapt and gain new strategies to teach each of these students. Some of these new strategies are gained
through the teacher’s own reflection and examination of classroom-level data. Other strategies are gained through learning from a co-teacher or specialist in the room. Through both routes, the general education teachers become better teachers with more robust practices (Fisher, Sax, Rodifer, & Pumpian, 1999).

Similarly, specialists brought into the general education classrooms as co-teachers gain a deeper understanding of the general curriculum. Skills are no longer a checklist of isolated items; they come alive in the context of the general curriculum and daily school routines. Having this context is essential for effective goal setting and support planning (Fisher & Frey, 2014b).

**Your Kids, My Kids, Our Kids**

The stories of students and teachers in this book are real; we directly experienced each of the situations that we describe. Although we have changed the names of people involved, all of the good, the bad, and the ugly portrayed really happened. The four of us—Lee Ann, Nancy, Doug, and Julie—have a combined 100 years of experience in schools, and we have spent those years working to create educational environments that welcome the full range of human experience.

This book is for school leaders and any educator for whom people with disabilities are people first: family, neighbors, part of the community, and students in the classrooms and hallways of our schools. All educators have a circle of influence in their capacity as professionals, and we hope that you will use yours to work toward creating equitable and inclusive learning environments for all students.

The work of transforming school practices and organization to improve the learning lives of every student begins with educators and relies on our ability to increase our own efficacy. Yes, you are likely to encounter some ideas in this book and think, “I can’t change that. I’m just one person.” Perhaps you aren’t in a decision-making role as it applies to some of the
programmatic, fiscal, or human resources recommendations we make. But you do have a voice. You can advocate for incremental changes. You can influence one, who can influence others, to spark the change. After all, it was a groundswell of many voices that brought about two monumental pieces of legislation: the desegregation of schools based on race and the mandate that children with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education. These events fundamentally changed the education landscape in the latter half of the 20th century. Now, well into the 21st century, it is past time to build on these foundational principles.

We see the education of students with disabilities as an equity issue. This book focuses on areas that must receive attention in order to realize the promise of providing a meaningful educational experience for all students, including students with disabilities. Toward that end, we have identified five disruptions to the status quo that are needed to move inclusive schooling practices to the next level—Inclusion 2.0, if you will. These areas of focus build on the work that others have done to open doors for students with disabilities:

- Establish an inclusive culture that champions equity and inclusion (Chapter 1).
- Reimagine the long-standing structure of least restrictive environment and resulting service delivery (Chapter 2).
- Leverage the strengths of all educators to benefit each student (Chapter 3).
- Collaborate on the delivery of instruction and intervention (Chapter 4).
- Honor the aspirations of students and plan accordingly (Chapter 5).

Like you, the four of us are involved in the day-to-day lives of students, families, and teachers. Our work in schools charges us with solving problems. In each chapter of this book, we present solutions to address the issue of building capacity so that each student receives an equitable education. Only by addressing issues of equity for students with
disabilities—a historically marginalized group—is it possible to build a system for creating equitable solutions for all students. And it’s only by relentlessly pursuing change (the topic of Chapter 6) that we can realize true inclusion.

We hope this introduction has intrigued you to read on. We hope the real stories of discrimination and failure, of empowerment and success, in the pages ahead will appeal to your sense of social justice. Ultimately, we hope that this book will inspire you to take up the charge and advocate for a stronger education system that values the contributions of every member of our society. Your voice matters.
Establish a Culture of Equity and Inclusion

Andrew rolls down the hallway of his middle school with two other students walking alongside him. Suddenly Andrew’s wheelchair stops, and he looks at his lap tray. Sean and Jesse notice and back up to flank Andrew again. He is pointing to a word on his tray.

“Wait, what did you say?” asks Sean.
Andrew looks at his lap tray again and touches the word you.
Jesse repeats it aloud: “You.”
Then Andrew moves to the letter area, touching f, o, r, and g.
“Forgot?” Jesse offers.
Andrew nods, smiling, and then looks back to his tray, touching you and r.
Jesse says, “Your.”
Andrew starts spelling again: b, o, o, k.
Jesse gets it. “Oh man, you’re right! I gotta have the book for English. Thanks for reminding me. I’ll catch up. Maybe you guys can distract Ms. VanArk so she doesn’t notice I’m late!”
Andrew and Sean head off to class while Jesse runs back to his locker. When they get to Ms. VanArk’s classroom, Sean opens the door and Andrew rolls in. Sean moves a chair that is blocking Andrew’s path, probably mistakenly left there by the last group of students. It’s all very ordinary, and no one seems to notice the give-and-take between the boys.

In another part of the building, a group of teachers is meeting during planning time and working through a series of learning progressions for a unit of study on the American Revolution. They are discussing the flow of the daily lessons and which materials they want to use to build student mastery of the content. Teacher Brad Henderson says, “In our last unit, I’m not sure we had students reading enough from primary sources. I’d like to see our students do more of that. There are so many great sources from this time period. We could select some and then have them ready in large print, audio, and adapted versions. I would like to use them in small groups this time so that I can see how students are responding to the texts.”

There is general agreement. Then teacher Amal Ali says, “Before we go any further, can we revisit the assessments we’ll use? I’ve been thinking about it, and we need to give students more choices for how they can demonstrate mastery. And I think they all should have practice with a formal assessment and options for how to demonstrate understanding in creative ways. Thoughts?”

The team continues discussing their plans and building an inclusive set of experiences for students. They do not talk about “what to do about SPED students” or how to adjust developed lessons to accommodate specific learning needs—the sort of conversation that is prevalent in many schools. It’s not even clear which of the teachers are “special educators” and which are “general educators.” What is clear is that all of the teachers present value the learning of all students in much the same way that Andrew, Sean, and Jesse value each other—casually, as an ordinary matter of course. This way of regarding all students as “our students” is far from common. But that could change, and it needs to.
Beliefs Drive Inclusive Education and Equity

We start with the culture of inclusion because it’s foundational to the creation of schools that work for all students. The philosophy of the staff within a school directly and significantly affects the systems of support that are available for students. We have learned the hard way that meaningful improvements in what a school does only stick and have purpose when the adults in the school reevaluate what they know and come to a new understanding of the labels and language they use, how instruction and intervention should be delivered, where students are served, the roles of everyone in the school, and what their expectations are—for both their students and themselves.

Shanice’s family moved to a new city the summer before she started high school. The first 10 years of her school experience were spent in self-contained special education classrooms with no participation at all in the general education classroom. During elementary school, she and the other students with disabilities even ate lunch at a different time than the rest of the student body. They were different, a group apart.

At Shanice’s new school, all of her classes were general education courses: Earth Science, English 9, Algebra I, Art, and Biology. When Shanice’s mother called at the end of the second week and asked to meet with the principal and special education teacher, they worried that something was wrong. In fact, when they sat down to meet with Shanice’s mom, the first question they asked her was, “Is everything OK?”

Shanice’s mom started to cry. It took her several minutes to compose herself, and when she did, this is what she said:

It’s like you gave me a different kid. She has grown so much in academics and social skills. I can’t believe that I agreed to keeping her out of regular classes all those years. I’m glad I trusted you this summer when we met and you said that your philosophy was that students belonged together and that you could
organize supports. I let you try, but really, I was expecting you to call and tell me that it wasn’t working. But you didn’t, because it is. Thank you for all that you’re doing for my daughter.

Did Shanice’s needs suddenly change over the summer? Or did Shanice change in response to her new experiences in a school committed to the belief that all students had the capacity to meet high expectations and committed to maintaining systems of support to align with that belief? We, and the actual parties involved, know it was the latter. Shanice became different because the new school she went to was different. It was more sophisticated, and the members of the staff valued the membership of all students and had figured out how to support students’ various needs. We have never encountered an inclusive school in which the faculty did not believe in what they were doing. As you will see over and over again in this book, it’s the philosophy that drives an effective system.

With the rapid growth in programs to support students who are struggling, it can be tempting to latch onto one of those as a starting point. School leaders may, for example, attempt to nudge the needle of inclusion by launching a full-tilt multitier system of supports (MTSS) effort, implementing a reading intervention program, or digging into a complete overhaul of their individualized education program (IEP) process. While all of these are essential components of successfully inclusive schools, starting with procedures rather than with the vision dooms a school to a series of never-ending “tweaks” and a seemingly infinite number of “initiatives.” Achieving the outcome students deserve requires a complete reimagining. Equity and inclusion must become the ethos of the school. Excellent education for all should be the objective and the impetus—what drives every initiative, program, or strategy.

Shifting the culture of a school to embrace inclusion is much more complicated than simply sharing the research that says inclusion works (e.g., Fisher, Roach, & Frey, 2002). It involves dismantling the status quo, disrupting long-held beliefs about learners and about teaching.
Establish a Culture of Equity and Inclusion

Fundamental to this work is replacing a climate of sorting and ranking students with one of mastery—believing and expecting that all students can achieve at high levels.

Having a culture of mastery means every single person in the school embraces every student, without exception, as worthy and deserving of their best. It means never turning our back on a student because “she’s yours, not mine.” It means never giving up on any student, because there’s an expectation that every student can achieve at a higher level than ever before. In a culture of mastery, everyone on staff believes that in order to meet the needs of all students, it’s necessary to meet the needs of each student.

Language and Labels Matter

If excellent educational outcomes for all is the goal (it is), the sobering truth is that there is a long way to go. Regardless of whether the measure is achievement scores, graduation rates, post-school employment, or college acceptance rates, the conclusion is the same: students with disabilities are not faring well in the current education system.

These poor outcomes are fueled in part by the damage done when disability labeling lowers expectations. Students identified as having disabilities encounter bias from their teachers, especially in the form of lower expectations, more negative evaluation of behavior, and negative predictions about whether they are likely to earn an undergraduate degree (Shifrer, 2013). And this culture affects all marginalized students, not only those with disabilities. Because of the evolution of essentially separate systems, special education has long been used as a way to label and segregate instead of support. The dichotomous sorting of our education system has led to inappropriately labeling a disproportionate number of African American students, particularly boys, as having behavioral disorders (Cooc & Kiru, 2018). The majority of U.S. school systems are staffed by adults who are largely white, female, and middle class, and they can
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struggle to understand behavior expression unlike their own (Delpit, 2006). Most often, the problem isn’t even students’ behavior per se; it’s the mismatch in cultural expectations and a misunderstanding of high- and low-context behaviors.

When Hattie (2012) used meta-analyses from 50,000 studies to calculate the magnitude of 250 different influences on student achievement, he determined that the overall effect size (the magnitude of an influence) equivalent to a year’s worth of academic growth in school is .40. The practice of not labeling students (e.g., as “struggling,” “gifted,” “high achieving,” “special ed”) has an effect size of .61, meaning that it accelerates learning. Although it is necessary to identify whether a student qualifies for an IEP in order to receive special education services and safeguards, in the daily classroom, labeling has a negative effect. The label often becomes “the reason” why the student is not progressing. Students develop low expectations for themselves, because that’s what everyone else does, and the self-fulfilling prophecy is realized when students meet these low expectations. Kirby (2017) notes that the combination of poor self-concept and negative views of teachers has a lasting effect on students, which is counter to the mission of educators. As he puts it, “The education system should be decreasing the impact of disability on a student’s academic performance, not exacerbating it” (p. 183). In short, labeling can too easily marginalize and hurt rather than help.

The practice of “tracking” students, common in the 1970s and 1980s, illustrates exactly the harm that results from leaving student needs unmet. As early as kindergarten, students were sorted into ability groups based on their academic performance and perceived potential (low, medium, and high). The idea was to provide greater academic challenges for students who were ready to move forward and greater support to those who struggled. In actuality, though, students in the lower groups received slower-paced instruction as a replacement for core instruction—which effectively trapped them within their track throughout their elementary
and secondary years. They sank further and further behind, and by high school, many of these students were grade levels behind in crucial literacy, problem-solving, and mathematics skills. This service delivery model failed students who could have been college- and career-bound by not providing them with simple interventions in early childhood. For students with disabilities, the situation was even worse: they were tracked into segregated special education classrooms with an even weaker curriculum.

Unfortunately, tracking lives on. There are still permanent ability groups of low-, middle-, and high-achieving students in some elementary classrooms. Students remain homogenously grouped with similarly achieving students throughout the day. The low-achieving groups are especially vulnerable, as they lack the language, social, and academic models that are present in heterogeneous groups. Although needs-based small-group instruction is an effective practice, permanent ability grouping and tracking have a detrimental effect on students’ self-efficacy and on their level of school engagement (Dumont, Protsch, Jansen, & Becker, 2017).

Changing the culture of a school to be receptive to real inclusion starts with changing the language educators use. First, labels belong in the conversation only when discussing services and rights; they have no place in a conversation about the systems of support for a student. Second, in times when it’s necessary to speak of disability categories or supports, all faculty should feel the importance of, and embrace the use of, people-first language. Rather than “autistic child,” say “a child with autism” (when talking about services and supports)—or just call the kid by his name: Timothy. Rather than say Angela is “wheelchair-bound,” you might mention that Angela “rolls to class.” Changes in language serve as the foundation for the widespread change in mindset that must occur if schools are ever to deliver on the promise of equity for all students, including those with disabilities.

Not only is there a history of the overuse of disability labels, but too many schools have also acquired the habit of labeling students based on
the supports they need: “Let’s have a meeting about our Tier 2s and 3s this afternoon.” There are no “special education students” or “Tier 2” or “Tier 3 students,” and students are never exclusively “yours” or “mine.” Every student in the building is our student first and foremost. Special education and Tier 2 and 3 interventions are supports that are provided. They are nouns, not adjectives, and they should never be used to describe a student’s permanent or long-term status. They are not any student’s identity.

What’s more, all students in the building are on the specialist’s or special educator’s caseload. Any child who can benefit from a specialized strategy, accommodation, or modification is their responsibility. And do you know of any student who has never needed support with anything academically, socially, or otherwise during their formative years? To deny expert assistance to a student in need because there is no IEP in place is to deny that student an equitable education.

Everyone Deserves to Belong

The 1970s also introduced the practice of mainstreaming—an early attempt to create less restrictive placements for students with mild disabilities. In this model, students who demonstrated competence could receive their education in the general education classroom. But this approach placed the burden on students: they had to somehow catch up to grade level while receiving a lower-level replacement curriculum, and then they had to maintain progress in the general education setting. In other words, these students had to continuously prove they “belonged.” As problematic as this was for students with mild disabilities, it proved to be even more discouraging for students with significant disabilities.

This “prove you belong” mindset persists. During one IEP meeting Julie attended, a therapist said, “When Justine develops some of her daily living skills—like toothbrushing and feeding herself—she might be able to spend some time in general education.” In this therapist’s mind, membership in the 4th grade class was dependent on personal care. Doug
attended an IEP meeting during which a special educator said, “Once Brad has mastered 100 sight words, he can probably go to the regular class.” Does mastery of any number of sight words predict success in the general education classroom? And what better place for Brad to learn sight words than alongside his peers, who already know them? Reading instruction does not stop or start at sight words, and the instruction necessary for all aspects of reading can be provided in the general education classroom. Students with disabilities in general education classrooms deserve the supports and services their IEP teams have designed. In addition, general and special educators deserve to teach in environments engineered so that students can perform at high levels.

In many schools, the default for students with disabilities is still to either put them into the lowest track in general education or assign them to a segregated special education classroom. Although this could technically provide access to grade-level curriculum, too often the special education class is taught by someone who does not have deep content knowledge, and thus, expectations are lowered. We visited a high school in which the special education teacher was expected to teach three different history classes (World History, U.S. History, and Government) in the same period to different students. And the special education teacher had neither a history degree nor credentials in that area.

The long-term outcomes for this practice are dismal. The gaps in learning that persist are evidence that teaching students below-grade-level content is not working. The model of “pull out and replace the curriculum” isn’t effective for students who need support. The approach that works is an inclusive one in which students receive the general education instruction and supplemental instruction (Fuchs et al., 2006; Torgesen, 2002).

**A Culture of Intervention for All**

The inception of special education legislation in 1975 established, via funding mechanisms, the practice of sorting students into two groups:
those who have a defined disability and those who do not. Ever since, the “disability” label has determined whether students qualify for an IEP, special education services, and the legal protections of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2006).

For example, a student could receive an intellectual disability diagnosis by scoring at least two standard deviations below the mean on a standardized test of intellectual functioning. A student with an IQ score of 70 or below would be eligible for intellectual disability diagnosis and thus qualify for and receive special education services and support. A student with an IQ score of 72 would not be eligible for the diagnosis, the services, or the support. There is no grey area in this model; students are “in” and get support, or they are “out” and don’t.

Of course, narrowly missing the test range doesn’t mean that a student’s academic struggles will suddenly disappear. What about the student who “narrowly misses” the definition of autism? Or learning disability? Or any other disability? The truth is that the students we serve are on a continuum, and while some will formally qualify for special education supports and services, others will not—and yet, these students still have needs to be met.

While this overly simplified sorting strategy may meet the technical definition of providing students with disabilities access to the general curriculum, it has little to do with addressing the core question: What do students actually need to be successful in the general curriculum? Some students who need intensive support do not meet the criteria for a disability label. And many students who have a disability label do not need intensive support. The definitions are simply a way to identify some students and provide them with, as Snow (2005) says, “a sociopolitical passport to services” (p. 2).

It’s essential to remember that a student’s disability status is not the same as a student’s needs, and the two should not be confused. Disability status is a means for schools to assign fiscal and personnel assets. A student’s need for support may not result in a formal designation or paperwork such as an IEP, but those needs are also met through fiscal assets in
the form of personnel, curriculum, and technology. Think of it this way: a student who needs intensive intervention to learn to read fluently should be provided that intensive intervention. It doesn’t matter if the student isn’t reading fluently because of a learning disability, because English is a second language, because past years’ reading instruction was dreadful, or because of frequent absences. It doesn’t matter if no reason is ever identified at all. The student has a need, and it’s the school’s responsibility to provide the support to address it. Disability labels are largely irrelevant to everyday teaching because they tell us so little about what individual students need; there isn’t “autism math” or “physical disability reading.” By removing a focus on labels, we can concentrate on the important work of planning and providing meaningful instruction for each student. Students who have disabilities do not have “special needs”; they only have special rights. And any student who has a need, with or without a disability, may benefit from the expertise of a specialist.

Accommodations and Modifications for Every Student

Disability status doesn’t inform instruction; it should not be the sole criterion when making decisions about providing accommodations and modifications. If students need support to succeed, it should not matter whether they have been identified as having a disability. If a child needs help, why would we not provide it?

Issues of fairness are often raised in response to this question. Maybe you’ve heard, “It’s not fair to give a student extra time on this test unless they have a documented disability.” But think about where the lack of fairness really lies. Taking a close look at what accommodations and modifications actually accomplish, it becomes clear that these are simply necessary strategies to help students learn. In other words, they are part of the equity efforts schools use to ensure that all students ultimately succeed. Just as the expertise of specialists can benefit all students, truly
inclusive environments ensure that accommodations and modifications are available for any student who needs them.

**Accommodations**

*Accommodations* (see Figure 1.1) are changes to the curriculum or assessments that provide access to the general curriculum but do not fundamentally alter the learning goal or grade-level standard. These supports

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Size</td>
<td>Reduces the number of items a student must complete, with no change to difficulty</td>
<td>• The student is assigned 10 multiplication problems rather than 20, but the difficulty of problems is not altered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Adjusts amount of time allotted for learning, task completion, or testing</td>
<td>• The student is allowed extra time to complete a test.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Input</td>
<td>Specifies the way instruction is delivered to the learner</td>
<td>• The student gets guided notes to use in Earth Science.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Output</td>
<td>Specifies how the learner can respond to instruction</td>
<td>• The student creates a poster instead of writing a research paper for World History.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• The student dictates answers to worksheet questions about addition facts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of support</td>
<td>Identifies the amount of personal assistance to an individual learner</td>
<td>• The student uses a LiveScribe pen to record a conversation with a teacher for later use in writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• A peer helps the student with the physical construction of a diorama of the first mission in California.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“level the playing field” (Freedman, 2005, p. 47). Put another way, accommodations are support for a skill that is different from the skill being taught and assessed (Jung, 2018a). Take, for example, a student learning to drive. The skill being taught and measured is driving. If the student is near-sighted and needs glasses during driving instruction and during the driver’s exam in order to read street signs and see other vehicles more clearly, wearing glasses is an accommodation. It makes mastering the skill of driving easier, but it doesn’t make it easier than it would be for anyone else; the accommodation simply levels the playing field. And it does not matter if a person who wears glasses does not fit into a disability category; the accommodation is provided any time it is needed. In fact, if a person needs glasses, driving skills cannot be measured with validity if the glasses are not allowed. Putting fairness aside, this is a basic measurement issue.

The same applies to academic content. Consider a social studies class where the purpose of a lesson is to teach students to evaluate the credibility of sources. At present, Akemi, a student who is an English learner, is much better at expressing what she knows verbally than in writing. So the social studies teacher, Ms. Kintzler, allows Akemi to complete the lesson task orally instead of in writing. The teacher sits with Akemi and asks her to describe how she evaluated the sources of evidence for credibility. Ms. Kintzler asks follow-up questions, as do two other students who are included in the conversation because Ms. Kintzler believes exposure to Akemi’s explanation will help them strengthen their own written responses. The content of Akemi’s responses is evaluated as any other student’s response is evaluated, against the same requirements or standards. It’s an accommodation made to allow for valid measurement.

There are likely several students in any class that would benefit from these types of supports. One key to meeting the various needs in a classroom is to mobilize peers. Collaborative learning allows students to engage in meaningful tasks while the teacher meets with individuals or small groups. In addition, peers can provide support to members of their class.
In Ms. Kintzler’s social studies class, some students with test anxiety need additional time or a separate setting when undergoing assessments. The teacher also reads questions or prompts for one student who has significant difficulty with reading. These basic adaptations are accommodations because they support skills that are different from the social studies standards being taught and measured. And, just like wearing glasses while driving, it doesn’t matter whether a student fits into a disability category; the accommodation should be provided any time it is needed. Accommodations do not make the content easier; they permit access to it. Again, this is a measurement issue: without providing these students these accommodations, Ms. Kintzler would be unable to measure the students’ skills in social studies because the expression of those skills is affected by an outside influence (e.g., test anxiety, reading difficulty, writing difficulty). Disability status is irrelevant here; all Ms. Kintzler needs to know when designing and implementing accommodations is that there is an issue, separate from an understanding of the social studies content, that prevents her students from being able to show what they know or are able to do.

**Modifications**

*Modifications* (see Figure 1.2) function differently from accommodations; they are changes to the curriculum and assessments that do fundamentally alter the learning goal or grade-level expectation. Unlike accommodations, which simply level the playing field, modifications “change the game” (Freedman, 2005, p. 48) and support the skill that is being taught and measured (Jung, 2017b). Returning to the vision example, if a person wears glasses or contact lenses during an eye exam, this changes what is being measured. In reporting the results of any assessment with modifications, it is important to record the modification provided, because something different was being measured. In this example, the optician might be measuring the effectiveness of the contact lens prescription.
Figure 1.2

SAMPLE MODIFICATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Same only less              | The number of items is reduced or content is adapted to change the level of difficulty or complexity | • The student chooses between two possible answers on a multiple-choice quiz rather than five.  
• The student’s timed fluency measure is shortened to meet the student’s developmental level.  
• The student is assigned a book at a lower reading level. |
| Streamline the curriculum   | The assignment is reduced in breadth or focus to emphasize the key points   | • In English, the student creates a list of main points instead of writing an essay.  
• The teacher simplifies vocabulary for a social studies unit. |
| Same activity with infused objective | The activity emphasizes IEP objectives or skills from the infused skills grid | • The student answers yes/no questions using his eyes to locate words on his lap tray; teachers and classmates phrase questions in this format. |

Suppose students in a class are working on algebra problems that require multiplication of fractions. Erik needs support. He is working below grade level in math and is learning multiplication with whole numbers. Erik’s practice work and assessments do not include the grade-level algebraic problems that require multiplication of fractions. Instead, he is practicing with whole-number multiplication problems and one-step algebra problems requiring addition and subtraction. This is a comparably rigorous skill for this student; the adapted skill is just as difficult for this student as the grade-level skill is for students who do not need
support. What is being taught and measured has been changed, however, and the math skill being assessed is the skill that is being supported.

It is important to clearly record when a student’s progress is based on modified expectations. Making modifications to assignments or other tasks and reporting the student’s performance without acknowledging the modification sends the message that the student is performing at grade level. Teachers should always aim for accurate communication regarding how students are performing.

It is also essential to note that modifications should be provided any time they are needed, but not unnecessarily. As we like to say, only as “special” as necessary. Modifications change what is expected of the student, in effect saying, “This student is not currently on track to master the grade-level expectation. We are putting into place a comparably rigorous modified expectation.” This is serious business, and modifications should be used only when absolutely necessary—and this should be a team decision, supported by data on the student’s performance in the context of high-quality instruction and intervention. Teachers also need to be on guard against providing “accidental modifications” through well-meaning support. A teacher might not go so far as to formally modify expectations for a student, but sometimes cueing and scaffolding and prompting and hinting result in providing an accidental modification.

The Power of Expectations

The voicing of low expectations for students with disabilities and their families often starts very early in their lives. Lee Ann’s friend Susan has a daughter named Irene who was born with a rare genetic condition called chromosome 5p deletion syndrome. The medical team told Susan and her husband that Irene would never walk, talk, or be able to go to school. Alfredo shared in a transition planning meeting that after he was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, his mother was told by members of his special education team that he would “never
be successful in life” and that he would never do well in school. They told her that he would never graduate from high school or be able to hold a job. His mother was devastated, and who wouldn’t be?

With any diagnosis, it’s impossible to know exactly what the future will hold. Today, Irene is a healthy, happy, spunky teenager who walks, talks, runs, reads, writes, jokes, laughs, lives a full life, and spends her time at school in the general education classroom. Alfredo went on to graduate from high school with a 3.8 grade point average, and he has completed his first year at a four-year university as a criminal justice major. Some might say Irene is a miracle. Perhaps it is a medical marvel that she is healthy and has the physical abilities that she does, but it is no miracle that she is achieving her potential. Her entire family has worked very hard to make sure Irene’s dreams were realized. Similarly, Alfredo’s mother decided that she wouldn’t let her son’s disability define him; she focused on possibilities and ensured that others on Alfredo’s educational team did the same. This is what happens when we have high expectations and put supports in place to ensure students have every chance to reach them.

Too often, students and their families run into the wall of low and limited expectations. Educators should be very careful about predicting the future. We have no idea what the future holds, what innovations and inventions will come, and how students will respond to great learning experiences. The least dangerous assumption we can make is that students will learn and that they will have amazing lives. The most dangerous assumption we can make is that students will fail. Imagine the difference when our assumptions come true.

When professionals focus on what can’t happen, they are also putting limitations on a student’s ability to dream. The professionals in these stories surely didn’t intend to crush children’s and parents’ dreams. Educators don’t go into the field because they want to squash children’s aspirations. But in far too many instances, well-meaning physicians, therapists, counselors, psychologists, and educators enter the conversation about a student’s future with their own ideas and expectations of how this future
should look. Who are we to decide what is or isn’t possible for a student? No disability—whether a specific learning disability, physical disability, intellectual disability, or any diagnosis—should limit the future for any individual to have a life of fulfillment, one in which they feel they belong and contribute and receive joy in their everyday lives. This is what every human being deserves.

It is the responsibility of adult mentors to guide young people along the path to success however *those young people* define success. Attending to the aspirations of students and their families is an issue of cultural competence. In this way, educators take on the role of dream manager: paving a path and allowing students to meet their goals. The dream manager validates and supports the dream, no matter how lofty it may seem, identifying and removing obstacles to help make it happen. Haven’t we all set what seemed to be unrealistic goals for ourselves? Even when we don’t actually reach the goal, more often than not, the setting of the goal and striving to meet these goals causes us to push harder and go for something big. And how often have you surprised yourself in what you can achieve?

Hattie’s meta-analyses of numerous educational studies (2012) revealed that students’ expectations of their own success are among the greatest predictors of their outcomes, with an effect size of 1.44. Limiting students’ ability to dream limits their actual outcomes. Our job as educators is to support the student’s vision, hope, and dreams, and *never* get in the way or diminish the possibilities.

Throughout the IEP process, educators are wise to take advantage of families’ knowledge and treat them as a full partner at the table. Families are the constant in children’s lives and know their children best. This expertise is often overlooked and not used as a cornerstone for developing IEPs and transition plans. Over the course of their elementary and secondary years, children spend a lot of time in school. How are teachers connecting with families in identifying children’s aspirations and aligning curriculum and activities to the goals and dreams of each child? When
communication with families is strong, educators and parents can share the role of dream manager.

**Conclusion**

The drive for truly inclusive education is a critical part of the broader effort aimed at achieving equity in education. It means reimagining systems to expand every student’s access to both the general education curriculum and intervention supports and services. It also means building a culture in which this expansion is the expectation and the norm, in which everyone agrees that there is no such thing as “good teaching” that leaves some students unserved and unsupported.

Creating this new and better model of education begins with taking action to adjust the language used in schools, the services provided, and the expectations set for students with disabilities and those at risk. Doing so establishes a climate in which students can achieve outcomes that might once have been considered unrealistic.
## Changing the Culture

### THE CHALLENGES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School staff have not examined their beliefs and values related to students with disabilities and their ability to design and deliver supports to ensure that students with and without disabilities are educated together.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students with disabilities are seen as belonging primarily to special education teachers. Students without disabilities are seen as general education students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with disabilities and those at risk are explicitly or implicitly tracked and must earn their way out of the lowest track.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ struggles are seen as a problem with the individual rather than a problem with instruction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only students with IEPs receive accommodations and modifications.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students with disabilities receive homework help or alternative assignments in segregated settings for part of the day.</td>
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### THE SOLUTIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Build the belief among school teams that every student has value as an individual and is worthy of time, attention, and membership in every opportunity schools and society have to offer.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>See students with disabilities as general education students. Provide all students access to specialist-designed strategies. Ensure all students belong to all faculty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not assign any student to a “track”; deliver instruction to students with disabilities in the general education classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure every student receives quality core instruction every day. When students don’t respond to instruction, consider changes to the instruction itself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide every student with access to accommodations and modifications when these are needed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supply students who need support with evidence-based interventions that support the skill and help them achieve meaningful growth.</td>
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</tbody>
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Burke, S. (2017, March). *Why design should include everyone* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/sinead_burke_why_design_should_include_everyone


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Related ASCD Resources: Inclusive Practice

At the time of publication, the following resources were available (ASCD stock numbers in parentheses):

**PD Online® Courses**
Inclusion: The Basics, 2nd Edition (#PD11OC121M)
Inclusion: Implementing Strategies, 2nd Edition (#PD11OC122M)

**Print Products**
*Beyond Co-Teaching Basics: A Data-Driven No-Fail Model for Continuous Improvement* by Wendy W. Murawski and Wendy W. Lochner (#118007)
*Building Equity: Policies and Practices to Empower All Learners* by Dominique Smith, Nancy Frey, Ian Pumpian, and Douglas Fisher (#118031)
*Building on the Strengths of Students with Special Needs: How to Move Beyond Disability Labels in the Classroom* by Toby Karten (#117023)
*The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners* (2nd ed.) by Carol Ann Tomlinson (#108029)
*Enhancing RTI: How to Ensure Success with Effective Classroom Instruction and Intervention* by Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey (#111037)
*From Goals to Growth: Intervention and Support in Every Classroom* by Lee Ann Jung (#118032)
*Inclusion Dos, Don’ts, and Do Betters* (Quick Reference Guide) by Toby J. Karten (#QRG116082)
*Leading an Inclusive School: Access and Success for ALL Students* by Richard A. Villa and Jacqueline S. Thousand (#116022)
*Success with IEPs: Solving Five Common Implementation Challenges in the Classroom* (ASCD Arias) by Vicki Caruana (#SF117047)
*A Teacher's Guide to Special Education* by David Bateman and Jenifer L. Cline (#116019)
*Teaching in Tandem: Effective Co-Teaching in the Inclusive Classroom* by Joan Blednik and Gloria Lodata Wilson (#110029)

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