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Detect Misconceptions, Construct Competence-Aligned Pedagogical Practices, and Use Instructional Strategies that Decenter Speech as a Means to Include Autistic Students

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Cover Page Footnote

1 Across this article, the authors have intentionally decided to use both person-first (i.e. student with autism) and identity-first (i.e. autistic student) language. In many public schools across the U.S., identity-first language is utilized by professionals with negative connotations and in ways that reduce a student simply to their disability label, so many inclusion-oriented educators advocate for person-first language. Person-first language has long been dubbed a more respectful way to talk about individuals with disability labels, but autistic and other disabled advocates push back against this discourse, as their disability is a part of their identity. We advocate to use identity-first language when that is how the individual or group being mentioned prefers; in other words, always respect the preference of the person being discussed. As such, both have been used and modeled within the writing of this article.

Detect Misconcceptions, Construct Competence-Aligned Pedagogical Practices, and Use Instructional Strategies That Decenter Speech As a Means to Include Autistic Students

Chelsea P. Tracy-Bronson & Sara Scribner

Abstract

In this conceptual practice-based article, we establish the need to examine inclusive-oriented pedagogical strategies to support individuals with autism. We believe that educators who use critical reflection can detect many of the common misconceptions about autism, learn how to re-frame these understandings, and consider alternative ways to support these students within inclusive classrooms. This article provides innovative pedagogical approaches for competence-aligned instruction, cultivating a web of communication access, bolstering social interaction, and supporting changes in the environment and with sensory experiences. We also described ways to decenter speech to create a classroom that values dynamic engagement, divergent ways of thinking, and shift the hierarchical expectation toward thinking and honoring multiple methods of expression. The purpose of the article is to re-frame common misconceptions and provide pedagogical strategies that center autistic individuals within inclusive classrooms.

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Introduction

A default educational practice is to create a separate program for students with autism.[1] This was the case for Mia's school. In kindergarten, she paced around the classroom while the teacher held morning meetings, read aloud, and provided reading and math instruction. She scribbled on the endless worksheets provided, not being able to handwrite letters and numbers. Eventually Mia was provided with Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) that allowed her to express written thoughts using an electronic device, but nonetheless, early in the school year, the teacher presented a case to the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team to change her placement to the autism program, down the hall. Consistent push-back was required to keep her in the general education classroom. Her general education, special education teacher, and paraprofessional were provided with strategies and tips on how to include Mia, support her communication, help her demonstrate her competence, and engage her in active learning. By fourth-grade she developed the ability to type with the intent of communicating, but sadly finding her voice through typing has not been enough. Because of the way her body moves, the way she responds to academic tasks, the way her voice makes sounds to provide sensory input, the way she likes to select complex activist-oriented topics for the personal narrative writing unit of study, and how she uses her AAC device to respond to math questions, the school continues to question, be uncertain, and not understand how to include Mia. The reality is that Mia is physically included, because of the persistent support of her parents, but her educational team continues to perpetuate misconceptions, question her competence despite Mia repeatedly providing evidence of this, and continually trying to change her placement from the general education classroom.

Easton is a high school student in a co-taught History and Physics classroom. At the beginning of the year, he sat in the back of the classroom, at a table with a paraprofessional on one side and his special education teacher on the other. Although modifications were made to the History and Physics content, Easton had zero interactions with peers in the classroom because of this back-table inclusion; this caused a version of alternative teaching (Friend, 2021) which had a deleterious impact on peer interaction through physical segregation from the class. Upon learning how to facilitate social interactions, provide visual supports before physical supports, developing modifications that lead to independence in academic task completion, and increasing assistive technology, Easton's team learned innovative pedagogical practices that lead to constructive inclusion, authentic belonging that transcended the History and Physics classroom to his extracurricular sporting activity–swimming team, and real content learning.

Mia and Easton need inclusive educators who are willing to learn, who understand that disability is part of human diversity, and are willing to examine their own instructional practices that might unknowingly exclude certain learners.

Inclusive education needs teachers who are educational detectives (Biklen, 2020) willing to figure out, problem solve, construct innovative competence-aligned pedagogical practices (Biklen & Kliewer, 2006), and cultivate a sense of authentic belonging (Schnorr, 1990) in the classroom for students like Mia and Easton. This article is specifically for all the teachers educating Mia, Easton, other autistic students, and any student at the margins of what is considered the norms on the continuum of human diversity.

Often, when we think about special education and inclusive education, we can acknowledge that there has been progress made to include students with disabilities in general education. In fact, of all students ages 6 through 21 who are served by the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), according to the U.S. Department of Education (2022, p. 57), 64.8% are included in the general education classroom 80% or more of the school day, which is the closest measure that exists in our federal data collection to mark an inclusive learning opportunity. That data point means that almost two out of three students identified to receive special education supports and services within our public schools are in a general education setting for the vast majority of their day.

However, when we look more closely at the category of autism, as one of the federal categories that students can qualify under to receive special education services and supports, the number of students who are in the general education classroom for 80% or more of the school day drop down to 39.8% (Department of Education, 2022, p. 57). Out of the 14 federal categories, including developmental delay for students to qualify under up to age nine, it is also important to note that the category of autism has the fourth highest percentage of students who have access to general education 40% of their school day or less, behind intellectual disability, multiple disabilities and deaf-blindness. In fact, almost the same percentage of students who qualify for special education under the category of autism (33.5%) are in general education for 40% of the day or less as students who have access to 80% or more of the day (Department of Education, 2022, p. 57).

As is evident from the federal data, students with a disability label of autism have significantly less access to general education than their peers who qualify for services and supports under other IDEA categories of disability. There are other equity issues that are also important to name and consider in relation to disability and autism at large. It has been documented that when a White student and a student of color qualify for special education services under the same category, students of color receive more restrictive (i.e., less inclusive) special education placements (Fierros & Conroy, 2002). The severity of segregation is increased when disability intersects with race (Artiles et al., 2002; Artiles et al., 2011; White et al., 2019). Using autism as an example category, this means that if there was a white student and a student of color who qualified under the category, the white student would be more likely to be placed in an inclusive setting with access to general education curriculum and peers. Furthermore, White et al. (2019) found

that students with autism who live in higher-income or in areas that border higher-income areas are more likely to experience high-inclusion placements (p. 12).

Furthermore, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) mandates that students with disabilities have a free appropriate public education (FAPE). The appropriateness of the public education that students with autism should receive is often debated. Students with autism need to be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE), meaning the educational setting they would attend if they did not have disability, alongside students without disabilities. Removal from the general education setting should only occur when supplemental supports and services have been tried, their effectiveness documented, and they do not support the individual. However, when the supplemental supports and services are tried, they often provide the modifications, accommodations, environmental changes, and materials students with autism need in order to thrive in the general education classroom, constituting this as their LRE.

According to IDEA (2004), (i) Autism means a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age three, that adversely affects a child's educational performance. Other characteristics often associated with autism are engagement in repetitive activities and stereotyped movements, resistance to environmental change or change in daily routines, and unusual responses to sensory experiences. (ii) Autism does not apply if a child's educational performance is adversely affected primarily because the child has an emotional disturbance.

When a student is classified as having an educational disability under IDEA (2004), it requires special education and related services to be delivered to the student by the district. These needed services are provided by certified educational, therapy, and related service professionals and are intended to support a student to work toward their individualized goals within the Individualized Education Program (IEP), with appropriate accommodations, modifications, and supplemental supports and services. However, the definition of autism within IDEA (2004) inherently creates over-generalization and misconceptions about the autistic experience. Understanding the discourse within the definition of autism in IDEA provides a basis for analyzing the types of supports and misconceptions that run rampant in public schools. This analysis allows for re-framing the autistic experience from a reflective stance based on what we know from autistic stories and accounts and present pedagogical strategies.

Research around inclusive practices have taken place for more than 30 years. To date, the research shows that inclusive education benefits students with and without disabilities academically and socially (Baker et al., 1994; Cole et al., 2004; Fisher & Meyer, 2002; Freeman & Alkin, 2000; Fryxell & Kennedy, 1995; Hunt & Goetz, 1997; McDonnell et al., 2001; Waldron & McLeskey, 1998). More specifically, students with disabilities academically outperform, or at least perform as well as, students with disabilities placed in segregated classrooms or re-

source room classrooms in both ELA and Math (Cole et al., 2004; Freeman & Alkin, 2000; Rea et al., 2002; Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 2007; Waldron & McLeskey, 1998). Research shows that time spent in general education classrooms learning grade-level content positively correlates with increased math and reading outcomes for all students with disabilities (Cole et al., 2004; Cosier et al., 2013). Included students are less likely to have discipline referrals, experience social and emotional benefits from being part of the classroom community and social circle, are more likely to have competitive employment after leaving the public education system, and are more likely to live independently (Marder et al., 2003; Wagner et al., 1993; Wiener & Tardif, 2004). Furthermore, the breadth of research shows that students without disabilities experience neutral, at worst, or positive benefits from inclusive classrooms, both in terms of their academic skills and their social-emotional development (Hehir et al., 2016). That said, we often see a range of lived experiences labeled as "inclusion" within public schools. We are going to ask readers to consider the differences between what we are calling physical inclusion, partial inclusion, and true inclusion and belonging.

Physical inclusion (Kavale, 2002) is the type of inclusion where physical space is simply made for students with disabilities within general education classrooms. In these sorts of "inclusive" experiences, students often still receive an elevated level of separate instruction, have limited authentic interactions with peers, and are simply allowed to be in the general education classroom without truly being a part of it. We believe that simply being in the room is not enough. The next type of inclusion we often seen in schools is what we are calling partial inclusion, where students are more than just in the classroom, engaging in some components of the day with their same-aged peers. Students who experience partial inclusion often still receive separate instruction across their school day, generally at times touted to be "at their level." When we talk true inclusion and belonging, this is a classroom space where all students are truly valued as contributing members of the classroom community. Students with disabilities are seen as assets and contributors, and are an essential part of everything happening within the general education classroom. While any inclusion is better than segregated learning, true inclusion and belonging should be the real aim of inclusion done right.

Thinking about the lived experiences of students with autism and their educational placements within our public schools, the aim within this article to push-back on some of the long-held beliefs about students with autism and offer some strategies to create inclusive environments, or classrooms with true inclusion, caring community, and belonging (Sapon-Shevin, 2010), that welcome and support students with autism, in hopes that as we know better, we can do better and create more equitable learning opportunities for students who qualify for special education under this label.

Reframing Common Beliefs About Autism

With the IDEA definition in mind, reframing common beliefs about autism allows for re-thinking and reflection based on the autistic experience from what is known from first-person accounts. From listening to this autistic narrative grounded in lived experience, supportive pedagogical strategies are outlined. In this section, common misconnections are named and re-framed.

Competence

Individuals with autism do have differences in the ways that they communicate. The IDEA definition states, "Autism means a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication…that adversely affects a child's educational performance" (IDEA, 2004, Sec. 300.8 [c][1]). A surface level reading of the definition indicates that autistic individuals have a developmental disability, this impacts communication, and in turn affects performance in the classroom. Oftentimes this reference to development disability is connotated to smartness, intellect, and ability to perform grade-level classwork. In schools, this understanding is seen in the ways that individuals with autism are inadvertently deemed as incompetent, placed in segregated settings, and are required to compliantly complete behavioralist tasks numerous times to show their competence of content. Inclusive educators have to push back against these pieces of the definition and use what we know about the autistic experience to reframe how to teach and support in school settings.

Examining the normative ways in which schools are set-up allows us to name the hegemonic norms present. What are the normative ways of doing things, performing in school, being a student in a classroom? This includes using voice through talking to respond to questions, using handwriting to fill in worksheets, typing fast responses, sitting in a certain way and keeping the body still, and complying to behavioral expectations. These are the general normed ways of doing school within the public school system. However, we must examine who the school systematically leaves out when these are the normed principles that the school culture follows. For autistic individuals, as well as other students at the margins, the system unknowingly centers the portions of their being that are most difficult (e.g., speech, keeping bodies still) and asks them to show competence in these ways. The hegemonic norms are used to evaluate educational performance and become coded as competence. Autistic students' competence is questioned when performing in ways that differ from the hegemonic norms.

We call for centering a different way of sharing, knowing, doing, and performing in the school setting and need to think through how to shift pedagogical practices in the classroom. Competence is the ability to do something successfully. The problem is that this measure of capability is often assessed based on hegemonic norms. Thus, if that norm is difficult for an autistic individual, they

are deemed as incompetent. How can teachers shift focus away from re-generating the hegemonic norms to construct classrooms that presume competence? As Biklen (2020) states, "Teachers adopt a presuming-competence orientation where they define the student as someone who wants to learn and engage, thus putting themselves in the role of educational detectives, discovering ways to organize instruction that maximizes heterogeneous student-to-student interaction" (p. 1). Intentional actions stemming from a presumption of competence cultivates inclusive pedagogy.

Individuals with autism (and their peers) can hear everything said. Too often teachers, related service providers, and paraprofessionals hold conversations on the side about specific students, while students are in close proximity. Inclusive educators ensure what school professionals and other students say in the classroom communicates a respectful, disability conscious, and community-oriented context that allows the autistic individual to feel a sense of authentic belonging.

It is understandable that sometimes a conversation about implementation of an accommodation or modification needs to take place. These conversations should be done swiftly and respectfully with the goal to continue with the learning experience. The conversations about a specific student are better discussed during a private meeting, during a time when the students are not present. Professionals working with autistic students should be sure not to speak in front of students as if they are not there.

The authors of this article are educators who have a vast array of experiences in inclusive education as teachers, advocates, facilitators, and researchers. The purpose of this conceptual, practice-based article is to improve pedagogical strategies used in inclusive classrooms through the connection of theory to practice. It is through this praxis that equitable and excellent inclusive schools for all learners is possible. In the following sections, pedagogical strategies that inclusive educators can use are outlined, drawing on the inclusive experiences and expertise, along with a critical disability studies in education theoretical perspective (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012; Goodley et al., 2019) that centers the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities as full members of school communities. These explicit strategies work to bridge inclusive education theory into applicable practice. Next, Table 1 outlines competence-aligned instructional practices and provides descriptions of how these promote competence.

Verbal and Nonverbal Communication

Inclusive educators need to be sure the student has a reliable method to communicate. For many nonspeaking individuals, this might begin with a picture system that allows the student to touch multiple pictures to communicate a statement, directive, or question. Do not assume a picture system will be sufficient for an autistic student's communication needs. Also support the student to type words.

Table 1

Employ Competence-Aligned Instructional Practices to Construct Competence

Competence-Aligned Instructional Practice	*Description of Constructing Competence*
Be a grade-level content master	Design learning experiences that align to grade-level content standards
	Unpack the content standards to develop understanding of the previous grade level and next grade level in order to provide differentiated learning experiences
	Brainstorm at least 10 different ways that students can demonstrate their understanding of that standard, offering varied ways of knowing content
	Identify criteria for success for each of those different ways of knowing
	Intentionally use multiple ways of assessing the knowledge of a particular standard
Design learning experiences, not activities	Learning experiences directly connect to grade-level content standards, whereas activities might be rote skills or trials of repeating low level tasks
Provide refreshed, engaging content that evolves over time	Ensure the learning experiences evolve in content as the unit progresses, allowing the student to gain mastery over units of study that are appropriate to that grade-level
	Remember that the aim is for students to be developing skills and content knowledge.
	Avoid repeating the same activity (reading passage, worksheet, etc.) so that the student is able to continually apply the skills to new and exciting curriculum and experiences
Multiple modalities for engaging in content	Design multiple modalities for accessing content as a means to bolster student engagement that take into account diverse teaching input styles, learning styles
Constructing Space for Choice Making	Pre-plan choices in how students can engage in the content and demonstrate their learning
	This instructional decision signals that students can construct their own learning plan and an overall value of competence
Bringing in Strengths and Interest	Interest is essential for engagement
	Forefront content and materials that value and further construct interests and strengths
	This constructs an environment that the student will learn the content, simultaneously while staying attuned to their preferred interest

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Competence-Aligned Instructional Practice	*Description of Constructing Competence*
Ask questions that are grade-level content related as a formative assessment tool	Think about the purpose of your questioning and ask questions to assess deeper understanding about the content being studied
	Ensure questions are aligned with the grade-level content and within the current unit of study
	Be sure that the questions lead to further content understanding, ongoing teaching and learning to improve the student's achievement of instructional outcomes
	Based on the question responses, adapt instruction, provide feedback to individual learning needs
Treat students and talk to students at their biological age	Use the same language and actions toward autistic students that you do with students in that same general education grade-level
	Do not hold hands walking down the hallway, if that is not what you do with, for example, other eighth grade students
Allow students to fail and make their own decisions	Allow autistic students to make and execute a plan, then learn from the logical consequences of that decision
Allow for problem solving	Provide wait time that allows autistic students to think about what went wrong, figure out how to fix that issue, and implement a new action to fix the problem
Lessen intrusive adult support Use the minimal amount of adult support	Do not allow a teacher or paraprofessional to provide close physical or verbal support all the time
	Provide the support needed, then fade the physical presence and the need to verbally signal every action needed
	Use the least intrusive support needed and constantly work to lessen the amount of adult support needed to develop independence
Normalize high expectations for all, especially for those at the margins	Too often in education, the phrase "set high expectations" is translated in practice as high expectations for most of the school community while students continue to be placed in autistic programs and classrooms that are segregation-based and where access to grade-level content \ and peers is minimal
	Constructing competence must begin with the underlying dispositional belief that inclusive educators have the skills and pedagogical strategies required to establish a culture of high expectations for all, especially autistic students, right within the inclusive classroom

Overtime, the student will develop the ability to type a sentence and multiple sentences.

Honor a variety of communication types in the classroom. Nonspeaking individuals might communicate using a range of devices, support systems, or styles. Think of communication as a web of connected strings that are associated by the goal of communication. Ask the student how they would like to communicate in certain situations. Ask, "Would you like me to give you choices? Would you like to type? Would you like to use words?" Let the student know you will figure it out together. If you give choices to the student, always have the option of "Something else" since the choices are selected and determined by you. When typing with a student, ask if they would like to touch the iPad screen to indicate letters selected or use the wireless keyboard. The purpose is to see autistic students as multi-modal communicators who can decide which type of communication method works best for them in given circumstances (e.g., academic tasks, moments of frustration, when making material selections). Position yourself as a problem solver, alongside the autistic student, and construct opportunities for communication.

Present multiple opportunities for communicative responses. Integrate communication options throughout the day, for wants, needs, connection to peers, and academics. Sometimes communication involves offering options using post-it notes or index cards. Offer multiple choices. Ask who the student wants to work with or which content group they prefer. Engage the student in multiple communication cycles throughout the day. Often the focus becomes on what the student wants to eat or emotions. Based on what neurodiverse individuals have shared, there is much more to communicate, connections with classmates to initiate, and information on the content being studied to engage in. Go beyond surface level questions. Ask content rich questions that signal you value the autistic student's learning and honor their competence.

Communication for autistic students is often diametrically placed into categories of someone who speaks or someone who types. Reject this notion. Instead, re-frame this binary to view communication as a motor planning event that requires intentional thought, a plan, and execution; this coordinated sequence is needed to provide a thought. In some situations, there might be environmental stimuli that impact the sequence. Thus, honor an autistic student's ability to decide how to communicate in particular circumstances. The goal is that communication is authentic, expressive, and nuanced. Table 2 provides innovative ideas for creating a web of communication opportunities and provides a description of each.

Social Interaction

One of the common narratives about students with autism in schools is that they do not desire social connection and prefer to be alone. This belief about autism is also tied to the IDEA definition, which begins with " Autism means

Table 2
Strategies to Create a Web of Communication Opportunities

Web of Communication Opportunities	*Description*
Provide multiple methods and choices in what to communicate about Provide multiple methods and choices in how to communicate	This two-prong instructional decision means to use different communicative materials at various points in the school day with multiple conversation and subject areas. Too often teachers only ask basic questions to autistic students (e.g., snack choice or movement break choice). ◆ Talk about real stuff, meaning the conversational subjects that grade-level neurodiverse peers are interested in! ◆ Talk about the content in the grade-level classroom unit of study (e.g., types of cells, types of rocks, or the civil war). ◆ These real conversational and content questions and discussion points provide interesting topics that students will actually want to communicate about. Too often if an autistic student is beginning their communicative journey, they will only be given four PECS cards or an app on the iPad that only contain pictures/images. ◆ Sometimes use these, but do not only use these. ◆ Give students the choice about which content group they would like to work on for the energy unit of study (e.g., light, sound, or heat group). Ask the student to type the word on the iPad app. Begin by asking the student to type the first letter, then the word when given two to three choices. This develops the expectation and sends the message of competence to the student as they learn to type.
Honor the communicative intent	Whether the student makes a selection from three choices, types the first letter when given three choices, or types the entire word when given choices, honor their communication by following through on their decision. This lets students know that their communication is wanted, valued, and will be used to provide their desires.
Intentionally create communication interactions with peers	Invite an autistic student to share their typed letter, word, or sentence with a peer. Go beyond that also. Invite a classmate to ask a question and wait for the response. The classmates might also type a question to the student. Create class system for pen pals. Peer involvement and interaction is critical to belonging and creating a safe classroom space where multiple types of communication styles are welcome and valued.

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Web of Communication Opportunities	*Description*
Use varied materials	Have multiple materials for communication available and use each throughout the school day
	Use both high- and low- tech options
	Use post-it notes, index cards, pictures, letters, words, sentences to provide options and choices
	Ask the student to indicate their choice by typing the first letter. Eventually build up to typing the word, then a sentence. Move in and through asking the student to communicate in these ways, so it becomes a natural part of the student's school day.
	Use a label marker that has buttons similar to a keyboard to have the student type a letter or word. Then print it and add it to the recording sheet. This is an especially helpful support instead of handwriting.
	Affix choices on the wall and have the student walk to their choice. This gets the communication off the AAC device to the physical space. This also incorporates whole body, rather than the arm and finger to type.
	Provide choices in materials (e.g., type of art supply, type of marker, type of paper) so the student gets in the habit of making decisions.
Communication Web	The goal is that autistic students are provided this web of opportunities to communicate within the classroom. Do not simply use one of these strategies. Do not only listen to spoken words or typed words. Honor and listen to all communication and intentionally build a web of communication options for the student. The purpose is to have all these pedagogical materials and strategies in your inclusive teaching toolbox to use in different contexts, times of the day, subject areas, and conversation types. Your job is to construct a web of opportunities that allow students to communicate.

a developmental disability significantly affecting… social interaction, generally evident before age three, that adversely affects a child's educational performance" (IDEA, 2004, Sec. 300.8 [c][1]). What this really means is that students with autism are read as not meeting those societal accepted milestones that have become our normed ways of thinking about and seeing social development. For many students with autism, their perceived social deficits are linked to other differences in how they navigate their world, including their communication skills, interests, and sensory-motor experiences. For example, by age three, children are expected to be able to engage in more interactive play, demonstrate cooperation and turn-taking skills, and engage in more imaginative and fantasy based play (Malik & Marwaha, 2022). These are the hegemonic norms constructed by what society values or holds to be true within a certain age range and classroom. But when we

stop and think about how we would measure each of those milestones, we quickly see that we might gauge interaction, cooperation, and turn-taking by how much talking we see a young child having with another, or look for spoken language as evidence of imaginative or fantasy based play. If young children are not saying and explaining it, we do not know for sure that they are engaging in it.

Many individuals with autism who have been able to access reliable means of communication push-back on the idea that they do not want social connection. For example, Rubin (2013) shared in a presentation for the Autism Society of America,

> Having friends is the best part of my life. I really can't express to you how wonderful it is to have real friends who respect me in spite of my autism. I know they would be kind to me if I couldn't communicate, but they certainly wouldn't be friends.

It is essential to know that friendship is critical for connection. Students with disabilities are eager for friendship, to feel connection, and know that peers want to get to know them. Therefore, it is our job as educators to reimagine what social connection and interaction can look like and support students in making connections in new ways, that decenter hegemonic and neurotypical ways of thinking about making social connections to create a socially inclusive environment for all members of the classroom space.

As asked in the section above connected to competence, we need to be challenging how we see students as being able to demonstrate social skills and forge connection. Are we using spoken language as our evidence that students are making connections or attempting to forge friendships? Are we seeing a deficit in a child who opts out of "fun" that their peers are participating in because it is a sensory nightmare for their particular sensory system? Are we leaving space for specific, special interests to be brought into the classroom and used as a way to make connections with other peers who might also be interested, or shutting those interests down and telling students there is no room for them in school?

Are we modeling what we want our students to do? Teachers need to demonstrate interactions with the student. This includes verbal interactions, as well as using nonverbal cues and interactions. This modeling will show other students how to ask questions, invite the autistic student to be a partner or group member, include a student in a circle, and find similarities and differences with the student. How are interactions gauged and read by others? A student responding to a statement or question by handing an object to someone, moving closer to the group, glancing quickly, initiating typing, etc. are all interactions that indicate interaction. How can gauging interactions go beyond a spoken verbal statement?

In one high school classroom, a student was provided a laminated sheet with four conversation strategies. This was a resource guide that the speech and language pathologist worked on with him in previous sessions. In the science class-

room, the teacher noticed that the student's group would often get off task because the student wanted to have conversations with peers. When the student saw the laminated sheet, he said "No, not using" and proceeded to put the laminated sheet in the trash can. Later upon brainstorming other support strategies with the educational team, the most useful idea was to ask the student. Sometimes, we forget to ask the most important person, the student, what support would be most helpful. After having this conversation, it was decided the student needed to know at the beginning of the learning experience what type of conversation was permissible. During the lab, conversation about the mice and the associated lab activities were acceptable. Then at the beginning of class and end of class, the student knew any type of conversation was appropriate. This clear conversational expectation was all the support the student needed. The teacher found that this was helpful for other students in the classroom also.

Invite peers to provide natural support throughout the day. If a student is needing assistance with navigating to the correct document in Google classroom, say to the class, "Be sure that everyone at your table has the correct document on their screen. If a friend needs assistance, help them navigate to it." If a student does not transition well to the carpet area, tell the class, "Walk over, elbow to elbow, with your buddy and have a seat on the carpet." This will allow the student who needs support with transitions to connect with a peer as they are reminded to move to the carpet area. In these examples, notice how the paraprofessional does not need to provide direct assistance to the student with a disability. Notice how the teacher makes a statement to the entire class. The support mechanism might be intended for a specific student, but the teacher invites all students in the class to perform the action. Facilitating this type of classroom assistance also helps students to connect with one another. Natural supports provide a less intrusive support mechanism to assist the student's specific need. We recommend educators provide natural supports compared to unnatural supports that cause stigmatization for autistic students, as outlined in Table 3.

Repetitive Activities & Stereotyped Movements

Differences in body movements sometimes causes a misconception that continues to run rampant in the field of education that students with autism have less than average intellectual abilities (Hilton et al., 2012; Moran et al., 2013; Paton et al., 2012). Since bodies move differently, flap, jump, freeze or do not produce audible and reliable speech, that autistic students should be learning only functional skills. School districts often create separate autism programs or classrooms, sometimes citing function skill instruction and other times using behavior as the justification. For Cayden, he had learned coin values in elementary, middle, and now the beginning of his high school years. In school, he repeatedly was forced to show compliance as he demonstrates competence of money values. This was a

Table 3
Provide Natural Social Supports, as Opposed to Unnatural Supports

Natural Social Supports	*Unnatural Social Supports*
◆ Intentionally design partnerships for each lesson during the day ◆ Ensure that partnerships frequently change ◆ Ensure that the autistic student is seen as bringing strengths to the partnership	◆ Pair the autistic student with a paraprofessional ◆ Pair the autistic student with the same classmate repeatedly ◆ Call a specific classmate "the helper" for the autistic student
◆ Creating space in the classroom for students to share and connect over their interests (cultivate authentic friendship)	◆ Calling the 1:1 and other adults the student's "friend" ◆ Adults in the classroom should all be referred to in the same way ◆ Forced Peer "Buddies"
◆ Be sure that autistic students are sitting next to grade-level neurotypical peers ◆ Be sure there is not a chair for the paraprofessional at the table. Instead the aide should provide support as needed, then physically fade support continuously	◆ Back-table inclusion ◆ A separate chair at the table or spot at the table for the paraprofessional
◆ Be sure the student is in line with other students, with classmates before and after. If pacing is an issue, let classmates know they can say, "Let's speed up so we don't get too far behind" or other neutral phrasing.	◆ Holding hands with the aide ◆ Walking separately from the class, with the aide in the hallway
◆ Have all students transition to other school building spaces together ◆ If timing or lining up becomes an issue, ask the autistic student to unlock the classroom door, ring the bell to signal it is time to line up, or in some other way, take on a leadership role for the transition	◆ Having the autistic student walk in the hallway before/after the class or transition without other classmates
◆ Find ways for all classmates to check in with peers sitting next to them about materials needed, which page to begin on, etc. ◆ Create a culture of utilizing natural supports for all students	◆ Ask the one peer sitting next to the student with autism to provide support in flipping to a certain page or getting out a particular material
◆ If lining up or transitioning to one classroom space to another is a challenge, ask students to move from the carpet to their desks, for example, with a partner. This support will extend to the entire class, but particularly support an autistic student who needs support with the motor planning required for moving or transiting in the classroom.	◆ Have the paraprofessional go tell the autistic student that it is time to go back to the desk area ◆ Have a student go tell the autistic student to go to the desk area

student who carried his own wallet, deposited checks and withdrew money from his own banking account, and worked at a coffee shop interacting with customers paying for their purchases. Autistic students are asked to repeatedly show their understanding of the same skill, instead of being taught meaningful content. For Willow, she is in an autistic program where her on task behavior and responses are monitored and data is documented in five minute increments. Her body often flaps, jumps, and moves around. She also types to communicate and when her anxiety increases, it makes it hard to get her thoughts out. In this instance, there is a hyper-focus on her behavior and collecting data on this. Time would be better spent with her educators teaching her ways to self-monitor her feelings of anxiousness, and use regulation strategies to help her body feel safe and comforted. Instead the over-reliance on behavior compliance and collecting data makes Willow feel unwelcomed.

Repetitive body movements are not indicative of academic learning potential or ability to follow classroom guidelines. Accepting differences in body presence and movement in the classroom are critical for autistic students feeling safe and welcome in classroom spaces. Oftentimes the opposite causes increased anxiety. In Table 4, we provide ideas around self-regulation and ways to honor this need within the context of the inclusive classroom.

Environmental Change or Daily Routines

So often, descriptions of autistic students include commentary around their "resistance," "struggles," or "challenges" to changes in their environment or daily routines. These conversations often focus on the ways in which students pose a challenge, or stress, for others around them because of their extreme reactions to any changes in those norms. What we often fail to name, for students with autism and within schools at large, is that we rely on power structures where the adults make the plans for the day and students are expected to comply and follow along with whatever is asked of them. Part of these norms are that changes can also be made by adults at any point in time and the students will follow along and go with the flow of any routine or schedule changes. Furthermore, school has been built from the neurotypical perspective and ways of knowing and doing since its inception. Many students with autism talk about school as a place of extreme sensory experiences, which we will be reframing next below, as a place of rules and expectations that do not make sense to autistic students and their neurodiverse ways of being and engaging, and as a place where they cannot be their true selves. When so much about school is not designed with neurodiverse ways of being at the center, the routines in the environment and schedule become unpredictable sensory experiences. Sue Rubin, a woman with autism explained, "I need routine in my life. It is something I can depend and rely on in this crazy life" (Biklen, 2005, p. 102). Educators are quick to name an autistic student's resistance or

Table 4
Honor Self-regulation in the Inclusive General Education Classroom

Self-regulation Strategies	*Honoring this need within the context of the Inclusive General Education Classroom*
Be sure not to interpret these body movements as "misbehavior." Re-frame and combat this misconception by thinking about the purpose each provides.	As an inclusive educator, think about how to honor these body needs within the context of the general education classroom space and re-flect on these questions:
Autistic students engage in these repetitive activities and body movements as a means to provide sensory input, self-regulation, and proprioceptive input	◆ What might this body movement mean? ◆ How could this work? What can this look like in the classroom? Reframing prevents these from being a stigmatizing support, and creates space for these to be empowering.
Jumping up and down	Understand that this might be a way for the autistic student to feel grounded, feel where their body is in space
Rocking, stimming with fingers or hands, touching/rubbing a certain material back and forth	Understand that this might be a way for the autistic student to keep up with the neurotypical expectations of the classroom and this is their way to self-regulate
Walking around the classroom	Understand that it is difficult to keep their body still and still follow along with the lesson Allow the student to pace in the designated area of the classroom Add the option for the student to use a standing desk Add a tape track on the floor so that the student has a specific route around the classroom to walk, without deterring from classmates' learning.
Any repetitive or stereotypical body movement	Honor it by saying, "Here's the spot to go when you do that." Find and prepare a loca-tion in the classroom that allows for the stu-dent to do that movement without causing learning disturbance for classmates. Suggest timeframes to self-regulate, then invite back to the learning segment of the class-room, "Let's start with three minutes, then self-assess to see if you are feeling more regu-lated and ready to come back to the learning experience." Build that movement in for the whole class and classroom space, "How do I fit this into the classroom routine? Into the classroom space?" Is there a way that the self-regulation need can be open for others in the classroom also?

extreme reactions to changes in the environment or the routine. However, it is also important to name the lack of supports provided to help the student plan for and anticipate those changes to the very things that are predictable, and therefore, comfortable, in an otherwise often uncomfortable environment.

Recently, during a middle school classroom visit, there was an assembly in the afternoon that would take place instead of art, Drake's favorite class. At the middle school level, Drake's team provided a written schedule in his homeroom class that they reviewed each morning before students left to go about their day, so the change was mentioned there, before 8:00 in the morning. By the time the assembly, and what should have been art class, came around at 1:00 in the afternoon, no one else had mentioned the change to Drake. He packed up his belongings at the end of science and began walking excitedly down the hall to the art room. He was intercepted by the art teacher, also on her way to the assembly, who told him that class was canceled and that they could walk back to the auditorium together. Upon this news, Drake froze in the hallway. After about 30 seconds, he threw his backpack and sat down on the floor, tears visible in his eyes. The art teacher reached out a hand to try and help him up, to which he yelled, "Leave me alone." As more adults were called to come support, Drake kept asking them, "Why didn't anyone tell me about this? This is a bad surprise."

This is just one example of a student, in this case a middle school-aged student, who could be framed as having a strong negative reaction to a change in the routine, but what we see is a student who was not properly prepared for that change in routine. While there was one schedule up on the board first thing in the morning, Drake did not have a schedule with him, where he could revisit the upcoming change and prepare for it across the day, there were no supports around what he might do if he was disappointed about this change, and there were no frequent reminders from those around him across the day about him having to miss his favorite class. So often, educators need to be asking "How could I better prepare a student for this upcoming change to the physical environment (like changing of desks) or the daily routine so that they are ready to anticipate and navigate that change?" instead of seeing the deficit as being within the student. In Table 5, we offer ideas to support a student with autism during changes that commonly occur at school.

Sensory Experiences and Sensory Overload

Many individuals with autism have different sensory experiences than their neurotypical peers (Jasmin et al., 2008; Robledo et al., 2012; Tomchek & Dunn, 2007). Students with autism might be more sensitive to sensory experiences than some, or less sensitive to sensory experiences, and it can vary depending on the experiences, the sense, and so on. For example, a student with autism might be highly sensitive to light, but almost not seem to register certain sounds. They

Table 5
Supporting During Changes

Common Changes	*How might we support an autistic student in that change?*
Change in seat	◆ Ask the student first. "How are you feeling about the change?"
Change indaily or weekly schedule	◆ Create an age-appropriate social story with realistic photos and grade-level language.
Fire drill	◆ Film a video to explain the change so the student can view in advance and at home.
Change in bus routine	◆ Create cartoon conversations or stick figure conversations to help the student visualize what was supposed to happen and given the change, what will now happen.
Addition of school-wide event (musical, performance, school guest)	◆ Add steps on different colored post-it notes to sequentially depict the change. You might even have one set of post-it notes for the old routine and another for the changed routine. ◆ Use a first-then board to show and discuss a quick change that will happen. ◆ Verbally discuss the changes with the student through story telling. ◆ Act out what the student can expect with the change. ◆ Make a checklist that the student can use while going through the newly changed routine. ◆ Repeat the supports throughout the day so that the student is reminded more than once of the change prior to it occurring

might really need sensory input to feel where their body is in space, such as a weighted vest or blanket, while they simultaneously struggle with the feeling of blue jeans on their skin. What this often means is that what educators see as "behavior" is often a student with autism struggling with a sensory experience that those around them are failing to recognize from their neurotypical perspective. Take, for example, the kindergartener who is constantly taking off their clothing. While the adults around them are conducting a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) and writing a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) for the following reasons: (a) removing clothing is a very inappropriate behavior while in a school building, (b) what the student might actually be struggling with is the sensory experience of the clothing (how it feels on their body, the strong smells from the detergent

or softener used to wash them, the overwhelming feeling of heat produced from certain fabrics), (c) or, any other number of components. When we, as inclusive educators, are able to start considering the sensory experiences within any moment instead of seeing all reactions to those experiences as behavior, we are able to begin to start problem-solving, from the student's perspective, which will allow us to find solutions that work for them and support their sensory needs, as opposed to behavior interventions that force compliance and, often times, for them to continue to experience extreme sensory reactions.

When we think about high school, chemistry is one class that is a typical requirement for all graduating students to participate in. One such autistic high schooler, named Jonathan, was assigned to take a chemistry lab as he worked towards his high school diploma. He was assigned to a co-taught chemistry class, where the general education chemistry teacher co-taught each session with a special education teacher, and his success was anticipated due to the layers of support provided, including visual supports and differentiated instruction. Jonathan very quickly started running from the classroom, remaining about five to 10 minutes before making a hasty exit. The general education teacher saw this action through the lens of behavior, and Jonathan found himself receiving consequences for missed class time. Upon further investigation, when the teachers were able to step back and ask him questions, it was discovered that he was in fact running from the classroom because the smells of the chemicals was, as he put it, "lighting the hairs of his nose on fire." Jonathan found the scents associated with the chemistry classroom and labs to be so uncomfortable that he was unable to remain in the room. Once the sensory discomfort was realized, the team was able to problem solve ways for Jonathan to engage, both wearing a specific mask to reduce the smells (which they also made available to all students and others joined him in wearing) and, when it worked out, having him and other peers work in a different classroom with less of a chemistry odor to it.

Inclusive educators need to think about the sensory profile and needs of a student. Do the lights impact the student? What about the noise in the classroom, in the lunchroom, and at recess? Does the gymnasium echo? What environmental conditions are not conducive to the student's learning? Understanding the sensory impact the environment has for an autistic individual is imperative because it might disrupt thinking, cause students to become fixated or perseverate on the issue, or make them show with their body and behavior that something feels completely off in their internal system. This sensory overload for an autistic individual is caused by the environment, and any body movements or behavior can be attributed to the physical space. Instead of asking the student to change, inquire into what elements in the environment or physical space need to change. Position the need to change on the environment. Ask the student about the sensory elements in the classroom to determine what needs to change or be adjusted. Close watching and monitoring of the student can provide clues as to the sensory needs in a

particular environment. Obtain additional information about their sensory needs from their parents, or from a related service provider. In Table 6, sensory needs and associated supports are provided.

Decentering Speech Invites Students into the Academic Learning

Communication is often a barrier to access the academic conversations of a learning experience. For so many students with autism, as was previously discussed, their competence is questioned because of misconceptions about the ways they communicate, move through space, interact with those around them, and so on. For many autistic students, they are presumed incompetent until they have been able to prove otherwise in ways that the adults in schools are able to recog-

Table 6
Supporting Sensory Needs

Sensory Needs	*Strategies to Support Proactively and in the Moment*
With any new apparent sensory input	Ask the student how the sensory stimuli is impacting them. Listen to how the student describes it.
Lights	If an autistic student is hypersensitive to a certain light (e.g., LED lights, intense lights, blue light, or fluorescent lights) in a classroom, replace the problematic lighting with plug in lamps with dim or soft color lights. Use natural light in the classroom as much as possible. In an environment that already has a lot of stimuli, it might be a challenge to process. Notice keeping eyes closed, turning the lights off, or otherwise shielding eyes that can cause too much visual stimulus. For some, certain color lights are calming. Ask the student and use their suggestion to create a calming classroom environment.
Noise	If there is a buzzing or background noise present in the classroom that an autistic person can hear, it can cause difficulty in processing or focusing on academic tasks. Once you have asked the student, work with the custodial staff to limit these noises. Maybe it is the air, heating, or light system in the classroom. Sometimes background music supports calmness and centering with classrooms where you cannot change the permanent systems.
Smells	For some individuals, certain smells in perfumes, laundry detergent, or hair care products can be triggering. If this is the case, limiting perfume or other high-smelling products in the classroom is helpful.
Hyposensitivity	Some students might need more stimulation from the environment, so might jump, rock, make noises. Knowing that these movements or sounds allow them needed sensory input is critical.

nize. Even then, many must prove repeatedly and only after multiple instances of demonstration is competence and access provided, often on a conditional basis. Speech is the standard of sharing intellect in schools, as it is the method to demonstrate smartness, prove competence, and respond to an academic question and task (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011). What we mean by this is that so much of teaching and learning in schools relies on students being able to respond verbally to questions, raise their hand and share a thought, engage in a verbal retelling of a story, and so forth. Speaking, and writing, are central to how students show their intelligence and whether teachers see students as competent, or not. In this next section we are asking inclusive educators to consider: how can educators decenter speech as the primary method of showing competence?

In order to center autistic students' belonging in inclusive classrooms, we must position speech as neutral. Communicating in one specific way over another is not a priority, it just is neutral. When we shift to this mindset, we send the explicit message of acceptance through neutrality.

If we want to shift to classrooms of true inclusion and belonging, we need to start thinking broadly about how we can remove spoken language as required capital in classrooms for students to be seen as competent, capable learners and, therefore, be given access to high-quality, engaging instruction, their peers, and all of the other key components that general education offers. In speech-dominated classrooms, there are several pedagogical changes that can be made to support autistic individuals' access to the lesson. These strategies help autistic individuals move from minimal participation to intellectual contributions. We offer ideas in Table 7, although our list is surely not all-encompassing. As you consider these strategies, we also challenge you to develop other ideas for how you could take speech out of the center of your instruction and assessment to allow for more expansive ways for students to show you the knowledge and skills they hold.

Each of the pedagogical strategies in Table 7 allow autistic individuals to engage in a classroom learning environment that decenters speech, allowing contributions from typed or otherwise created messages to be valued. This instructional planning cultivates an equitable inclusive environment because it levels the classroom playing field to allow written, or otherwise created (such as in the gallery walk example) thoughts from both neurodiverse and neurotypical students. When we leave speech at the center and allow it to be the means through which students show their knowledge, we will always leave out some students, including students with autism. Next, we consider the reasons and rationale for constructing an inclusive classroom that decenters speech.

Reasons and Rationale for Decentering Speech

In the aforementioned Table 7, a variety of strategies for how to decenter speech in the classroom were discussed, but educators might find themselves

Table 7
Decentering Speech in Inclusive Classrooms

Pedagogical Strategy	*Potential Materials or Technology Ideas to Implement*	*Pedagogical Purpose*
Chat via typing messages	Google Chat Zoom Chat	Real-time chat features allow students to type messages, thoughts, responses, and questions during lessons.
Collaborative web platform that creates virtual bulletin boards	Padlet	Real-time collaborative web platform to create, upload, organize, and share content, text, images, and links on a virtual board.
Paired Pass the Brainstorm	Index Card	In partnerships, students discuss via typed or spoken communication, then record a joint idea on the index card. Once complete, the index card is passed to the next partnership. This partnership adds to, agrees, or disagrees with the previous thought.
Gallery Walk	Large Paper Collage Materials Writing Utensils	Students create, such as through a collage, to demonstrate their thinking and learning. Students then can walk through and think about their take-aways from others' creations in relation to the content.
Graffiti Brainstorm	Poster Paper/ Whiteboard/ Chalkboard/etc. Writing Utensils	Students can add words and images related to focal content in order to share their thinking and learning, without having to share aloud.
Word Cloud, Concept Map, Graphic Organizer	Popplet Coggle MindMeister Mindmup	Students create a mind map connecting main ideas, thoughts, and critical thinking points to collaboratively develop a deeper understanding of the content. Students add key words, phrases, and short statements to bubbles to create a mind map.

wondering, when spoken language is such a normed part of our learning processes, how removing spoken language across the classroom experience could add to the community and learning environment. Next, we will talk about how removing speech as core currency within the classroom creates a more equitable and inclusive learning environment for all.

Creating a Culture of Expansive Language in the Classroom: Speech is the primary mode of language expression in the classroom. When we widen the circle to encompass language as being critical and recognize language as broad and beyond speech, it allows students to participate in the learning in varied ways–both through written language, non-speaking modes like body actions or movements, and speech. It allows language to be expressed in whatever means necessary given that student's needs.

Changing the Dynamic of Engagement in the Classroom: When we decenter speech within our classrooms, we are shifting the ways that students can engage: with one another, with their teacher(s), and with the curriculum. Speech systematically leaves some students out, in particular students with autism for whom speech is not the most reliable means of communication, so moving it out of the center within classroom norms allows for varied modes of engagement, which creates a more truly inclusive learning environment for all students.

Centering Active Learning, in Multiple Modalities: So many of our classroom norms require listening, reading and speaking, which often leads to one person speaking at a time in the classroom while all other members of the community passively listen. When classrooms move away from relying on speech, educators are able to create new ways for students to simultaneously engage in ways that are authentic, bring in a variety of modalities for engagement, and create active learning opportunities for all members of the inclusive classroom.

Changes the Power Dynamic: Speech has been central to schooling. As discussed throughout this article, speech has also become a culturally normed way for students to be able to demonstrate their abilities and competence within the classroom. However, for some students spoken language will never be the way they best demonstrate what they know or otherwise express themselves. When we decenter speech from our classroom norms, we are shifting the power dynamics within a classroom, allowing for a wider range of students to be seen as competent contributors to the learning and the district community.

Altering the Communication Hierarchy: Spoken explanations are highly valued within our educational systems. When we decenter speech

across our classroom practices, we upset the traditional hierarchy of what is valued within student responses. Instead of requiring students to explain their thinking verbally, we now allow for and value multiple modes of expression. This shift removes verbal speech as required capital within a classroom and alters that traditional hierarchy of communication modes.

Valuing Writing in More Robust Ways: Within many of our public education norms, we expect students to engage in independent writing tasks, often as a component of more assessment based classroom practices, such as on their homework, during individual work in the classroom, or as a check for understanding. We are not as good at valuing writing during the learning process. In other words, we often do not have students engage in robust writing experiences while they are engaging with content, processing learning, or collaborating with others. When we work to decenter speech in our classrooms, we invite in more varied opportunities for students to write across all components of the learning process. Further, acknowledging a range of writing styles, such as typing, handwriting, filling in a blank space with a word bank, and labeling. Allowing space for varied communicative actions recognizes and values students writing an initial letter, a word, a sentence, a string of sentences, and handwriting. In other words, honoring the communicative intent of the student and creating the web of communication opportunities that allow that student to participate is vital in creating competence-aligned inclusive schools.

Valuing Divergent Ways of Thinking and Showing Knowledge: When we decenter speech as required currency within the classroom, we simply create space for (neuro)divergent ways of being, thinking, and showing knowledge. This pedagogical shift aims to remove neurotypical, long accepted and expected ways of engaging and showing knowledge as the normed center, which leaves educators and classrooms open for all of the creative and outside-the-box ways students might demonstrate these things.

Discussion

District data across the United States indicates that students with autism are far less likely to be included in general education, even at the physical inclusion level, than many of their peers who qualify for special education under other IDEA disability categories, and that students of color with autism are even less likely to be included than their white peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). This is a contemporary social justice issue that educational systems need to be collaborating around; teachers have the potential to directly combat these sys-

tematic issues by implementing pedagogical strategies that intentionally create inclusion, access to communicative opportunities, and facilitate demonstration of competence in educational environments. In order to move away from physical or partial inclusion to a place where autistic students experience authentic inclusion and belonging, it is the job of educators to challenge their own assumptions about the competence of these students and to change their teaching practices to allow for a more diverse student body to successfully engage with content and demonstrate their learning.

Across this article, we first discussed many of the common misconceptions about autism and offered suggestions about how to reframe some of our understandings, as well as new pedagogical approaches, to support educators in seeing their students with autism in a new way and to consider new ways to use their strengths within general education. Our aim is that these sections allow for readers to think back to an autistic student that they know and reconsider the meaning behind some of their actions or consider a different way they might have supported that student in the classroom. Furthermore, we have challenged educators to begin to think about how to remove speech as the central currency of a classroom and provided some ideas for other ways students could engage and participate in active learning, spoken language free.

It is important to note that we have centered the experience of autistic students across this article, but the beauty of inclusive educational practices is that they also allow us to reach a broader range of students within the classroom. When done well, with clear pedagogical commitments at its core, inclusive education benefits all. Educators who begin to implement strategies included across the sections here will also see their positive impact on other students with a range of needs within the classroom, some expected and others not. For example, as we include more visuals and provide non-spoken ways for students to demonstrate their thinking and learning, we are also supporting students who are learning English. We allow a student with an information processing disorder the time needed to develop a thought and write it on the graffiti brainstorm chart paper. Approaching the classroom through critical educational inquiry, notice which practices stigmatize certain learners and who benefits from these, with a new goal of reimagining how instructional practices can be altered to fit all learners. Inclusive education requires educators who construct learning experiences that honor divergent communication, ways of being, and demonstrating competence.

Note

[1] Across this article, the authors have intentionally decided to use both person-first (i.e., student with autism) and identity-first (i.e., autistic student) language. In many public schools across the U.S., identity-first language is utilized by professionals with negative connotations and in ways that reduce a student simply to their disability label, so many inclusion-oriented educators advocate for person-first language. Person-first language has long been argued a

more respectful way to talk about individuals with disability labels, but autistic and other disabled advocates push back against this discourse, as their disability is a part of their identity. We advocate to use identity-first language when that is how the individual or group being mentioned prefers; in other words, always respect the preference of the person being discussed. As such, both have been used and modeled within this manuscript.

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