How Can Teachers Empower Students with Learning Differences Towards an Equitable Education?

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HOW CAN TEACHERS EMPOWER STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFERENCES

TOWARDS AN EQUITABLE EDUCATION?

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Since my journey as a teacher began, I have struggled to reconcile my wish to be an effective teacher with my wish to understand the challenges faced in teaching students who break from conventional school norms. Students who do not follow school norms could be described as students with learning differences. Learning differences of diverse types may cause students to struggle in general school settings. Working as a reading intervention teacher, learning via collaboration with colleagues, and observing my students with learning differences has propelled me to ask, *How can teachers empower students with learning differences towards an equitable education?* Many stories of students I have taught provided the fuel for this question as well as some anecdotes that lead toward tentative answers. After honest and careful examination the answers to my question could have positive implications for students and teachers in our current educational system. This chapter will introduce the context and experiences that influenced my guiding question and provide a rationale for engaging in my question further.

Context and the Problem

The context that inspired my guiding question, *How can teachers empower students with learning differences towards an equitable education?* is directly inspired by working as an elementary educator. I have been a fourth grade classroom teacher, taught writing instruction from kindergarten to sixth grade, and taught reading and math interventions. In three out of the four years that I have worked as an elementary teacher, at least part of my role has included teaching interventions. My current position is a reading intervention teacher in an urban school
in the upper Midwest. It has been a fascinating and often challenging journey. Throughout this
time I have become increasingly aware of a tension within me between two streams of thought or
inclinations. On one hand, I have aspired to succeed in my professional responsibilities;
proficiency in standards, classroom management, knowledge of curriculum, current reading
pedagogy, assessment of students, and the guidance of students towards academic growth. On
the other hand, I have wrestled with nagging internal questions, and wondered if the systems,
approaches, and professional mindsets I have learned about — and many times implemented —
have truly benefited the children I have taught.

This tension has grown and become more pronounced since I have primarily become an
intervention teacher. Working as an intervention teacher involves working with students who
have struggled to make growth towards academic skills of varying types in the general classroom
setting. The past two years, I worked with struggling readers. The year before that I taught
interventions with students in both reading and math. Since reading and writing are so linked to
one another, my reading interventions have also included writing work with students. During this
process I have become aware —sometimes painfully— of how the educational systems I work as
a participant in can categorize and treat students in a confoundingly negative way. I do not
believe categorization of students is inherently negative, nor that educational systems can do
without this aspect organizationally. However, I sense that the varying types of pressure put on
students who do not, cannot or will not conform to socio-academic norms can easily become
destructive and disempowering.

Students in reading interventions have often come to class after a series of unsuccessful
attempts by their classroom teacher or others to provide the tools or interventions needed in the
classroom to allow them to grow. Students have been very aware of these unsuccessful attempts and, understandably, may have made up their minds by the time I get to work with them that they are not good readers, are not smart, or that something is wrong with the way they learn. Sometimes students have voiced thoughts or feelings of this nature to me. Other times students have not been able to articulate these thoughts, but their feelings of frustration about struggling at reading have been clear to see.

The model of reading intervention includes a series of steps, and students in interventions almost always perform far below grade level in their reading skills. Their performance is determined from standardized test data, teacher notes and observations, and other types of assessments. There is an assumption in education that all students should be performing at grade level. When students are not at grade level educators need to try to get them there. The theory behind intervention is that extra reading support and instruction in addition to classroom instruction will accelerate students’ learning. The teachers’ goal for students receiving interventions is that they will grow at a rate in reading skills much higher than that of their peers performing at or close to grade level. If a student is two years behind grade level, they need to grow two times faster than their peers to catch up to them. The problem with this theory is that it implies that hard work is the main criteria for student success. This approach assumes that simply by working harder and more intensely, students will make more progress. This has sometimes been true in my experience, but it is also true that many of my students have been working to their utmost capacity from the beginning, before I even began teaching them. If hard work was the only ingredient missing from being successful in school for students, most of my intervention students would be successful at the start. Furthermore, interventions are only one
aspect of a myriad of challenges I have seen that students who do not meet academic expectations can face.

When a student continues to show little growth towards academic expectations even when interventions are implemented, then other steps are taken. Educators, caregivers or parents, and other professionals can talk about what might be holding the student back. Other types of more intensive interventions may be proposed, factors related to being an English-language learner may be discussed, and a special education evaluation might be put on the table. Undoubtedly there are more possibilities, but these factors are the most common next steps I have observed that can be taken when a child continues to struggle academically.

Sometimes a special education evaluation is decided upon when a student has struggled in school for a longer period of time. In this case, a whole different evaluation process occurs that takes place over the course of weeks or months. Students who do not qualify for special education services will likely go back to receiving interventions of some sort, and many students may end up qualifying for and receiving special education services. Often students may get instruction that is more beneficial for them, and be placed in a setting that works better for them. However, there are lingering problems or issues I have continued to think about even after new special education placements happen.

In my observations, general education teachers can tend to take less responsibility for students who move to receiving special education services. Part of the reason for this could be that these teachers do not see the students anymore or just see them less. In my case, I usually do not work with students at all once they have been referred to special education, except if I happen to be in their general education classroom for a variety of reasons. Still, it is troubling to
me that the delineation of special education students and general education students is so prominent. Why do we highlight this particular difference so strongly? Teachers might say, in referring to a student while analyzing classroom data or in other professional contexts, “They’re SPED (special education).” I have wondered if the implicit assumption in saying this is that teachers may think the responsibility for educating these students no longer falls in their lap. This would be problematic.

Not only do students who receive special education services likely still struggle in general education settings as they did before their evaluations, now there is the added risk that they could be left out in terms of what is expected of them or how they are included in a general education setting. In this sense, would it not be extremely easy for a child in this situation to give up on seeing themselves in a positive way? At the worst, their differences would not be affirmed or welcomed in a general education setting and a student would have no choice but to develop a negative self narrative about how they ended up where they are. This would be a tragic development.

Throughout the process of evaluating, intervening, and deciding upon educational settings for students I have wondered: Where is the support for the student? I especially wonder about the need for social and emotional support for students while they are going through a series of changes in teachers, curriculum, and possibly their school-based identity. This type of support is not built-in to the system we have created to assess, evaluate, label, diagnose, or educate students who exhibit learning differences that cause them to struggle. Students who are lucky might get this type of support from an understanding teacher, a parent, or someone else who cares for them. I now believe it is essential that students get explicit tools for thinking critically
and self-affirmingly about what is happening around them and to them as they continue to struggle in school and/or navigate the intervention/special education evaluation system. The chances are too high that students will be negatively impacted by social stigma from society, peers, or teachers, by thinking or feeling poorly about themselves, or from becoming disenfranchised from school when they struggle continuously or are assigned a label for their particular learning difference. I think special education services can provide invaluable resources for students, but our educational system as a whole has not eliminated social stigma, bias, and negative attitudes surrounding students who receive special education services. Different support is needed to counteract these formidable challenges so students can believe in themselves regardless of what educational setting they are placed or how much they struggle with a specific skill.

I also want to note the pride I have felt in working with many different colleagues who are diligent in their efforts to be inclusive and caring while the intervening and evaluative processes I have described take place. In no way do I want to detract from the amazing work I have seen in my educational career. I simply want to shed light on what I have been curious about. Many of my colleagues have welcomed and engaged in conversations about the themes I am discussing here. It is in part due to their encouragement and positive responses to my questions, that I have been inspired to work with the subject of learning differences.

**Student Experiences**

My heart goes out to the many students who I have seen weather the long and difficult process of unsuccessful interventions, evaluations, and transition to special education instruction of one type or another. Several students I have worked with in reading interventions now receive
special education services. Many more who I have worked with in the past have gone through this process by now I suspect.

I remember working with a first grader whose way of processing letters and words made it so difficult to read she often shut down and refused to read altogether. She was in the process of being evaluated for special education services when I was teaching her. This student asked many insightful questions, was amazingly philosophical, creative, and she was extremely intelligent. I worried the whole time I worked with her that she did not know about her strengths because she was not given an opportunity to see them. At the time, it was difficult providing a context for my student’s strengths to emerge as I was mainly focused on delivering curriculum and efforts at making progress in reading skills.

Previously, I taught a student in a general education and an after-school setting. She was very socially bright, fearless, and a gifted conversationalist. At times, she had an ongoing problem of reacting with abrupt and extreme agitation to stressors. One time when she was very angry, I suggested we talk about what was bothering her. She said, “I don’t know, I have ADD ok?” which shut down further conversation. I thought later how sad it was that she felt getting a diagnosis of ADD (attention deficit disorder) meant she could not talk with me about what was bothering her. It seemed a shame to me that this diagnosis would disqualify her in her mind from finding a way to feel better. I wonder if she would have stopped the opportunity to open up if she’d had an alternate story about what having ADD meant?

As I mentioned earlier, many students I have worked with have voiced their belief that they are not intelligent. It has occurred so much that I now view part of my job as not only a reading interventionist, but often a self-concept interventionist as well. I will never forget the
experience of working with a student who struggled severely with low self-concept when I taught as a classroom teacher. This student had gone through the process of qualifying for special education services prior to being in my class. He had an individualized education plan where he was classified with an other health disability, and he had trouble staying motivated and paying attention. Sometimes, he came into the classroom in the morning and immediately fell asleep on the floor from what was, to the best of my knowledge, exhaustion. Often he told me about the difficulties in his personal and academic life and maintained with near certainty that there was nothing that could be done to relieve or lessen his burdens. His experience of school had been overwhelmingly negative by the time he was in fourth grade, and he did not think that would change.

It is humbling to admit that I was not able to help him overcome these challenges as much as I would have liked. However, something happened over the course of the year that still makes me smile. Part of the class’s math block included students working with an online interactive math program. In this program, students were guided through multiple problems and attempted to make progress towards various math skills. One of the skills the program modeled was how to represent decimals as pictures. I noticed that the student I described had been extremely engaged in this program for several days, which was unusual for him. When I checked in with him to see what was going on, he showed me something remarkable. He had been using the program to represent decimals with art he had made in grid boxes, and his solutions were extremely brilliant. I found that he had created ten or more pieces of art that were all mathematically correct as well as profoundly creative. The next day I showed the pictures (with my student’s permission) to the whole class and his mother, and I think he may have
smiled. To this day, I am extremely grateful that this student found an ingenious way to showcase his unique insight in the classroom. Those of us that saw the artwork were shown a possibility that we had not even considered. I am so thankful that, on that occasion, we were able to celebrate my student’s learning difference together.

It would be wonderful if this type of experience could happen with many more students more of the time. Throughout the intervention and evaluation process, the common educator discourse that surrounds a student continuing to struggle goes something along these lines: *What is keeping this child from being normal?* Of course, no one usually says this out loud, but it is implicit in how teachers talk about, assess, and decide what to do about students who struggle. What if we wondered instead: *What is unique, what is beneficial, what is diversity enhancing, and what is valuable about the many students who don’t fit social or academic definitions of normal?* Why is a student’s worth so heavily related to whether they can meet academic standards imposed on them? Why can we not help students create a more realistic picture of what constitutes worth? Can we not also focus on what students *can* do regardless of where they fall on any given academic spectrum? Why do we not provide other diverse opportunities for children to be successful, to know they are worthwhile, and to build environments that help students believe in themselves? Might traditional academic markers of progress only serve to gain if such opportunities were available?

My experience has raised many questions about how students who do not learn in a typical or normative way could be affirmed and celebrated rather than stigmatized or left out. I have posited my guiding question: *How can teachers empower students with learning differences towards an equitable education* that I may continue to delve further into how to affirm students
with learning differences. The aim of this work is to gain some greater understanding of how I can use my role as a reading intervention teacher to disrupt systemic and social consequences for students who struggle with learning differences. More specifically, I wonder about how to support students whose learning differences cause them to struggle with the way traditional reading interventions are taught. I am curious how I may learn to help students be more empowered not *in spite* of their differences but *because* of them.

**Rationale**

Recently I attended a workshop with teachers from across my school district which focused on systemic inequities in this district. At one point participants were asked to read several different quotes taped to the walls around the room and to stand by the quote that resonated with us the most. We were then asked to share why we stood by the quotes that we chose, and I was struck by the comments of a colleague of mine. She said that she chose her quote because working as an reading intervention teacher had convinced her that many kids do not learn the way their educational system expects them to. I was very happy to hear her stick up for the students she works with, and I resonated with her comments. Furthermore, I recognized that the problem of empowering learning differences is not only a problem for struggling students. This issue is a problem for everyone involved in education today: caregivers, educators, and students. Investigating the possibility of how educational norms could be harmful to students, and how educators can shift to be more flexible, understanding, and empowering of all of our students could be beneficial for many.

Thinking on a large scale, I hope that educational resources allotted through political decisions will grow in the future. Education desperately needs more resources, especially if
educating youth is to truly become more inclusive of learning differences—disabilities included. Providing more resources could meet this need. There are current voices that advocate viewing disabilities as another type of human diversity, and with support they can continue to grow and gain traction in society. In my own small way, I intend the literature review and corresponding project I am undertaking to support these voices. Overall, I want to learn more about the nature of problems for students with learning differences so that I can work to address them effectively. I would like to know what impactful measures I can contribute as a teacher to empower the learning journeys of students with learning differences.

Summary

My journey as an educator and the questions it has raised within me have inspired me to ask, *How can teachers empower students with learning differences towards an equitable education?* Observing the potential ways the learning experience for students who struggle with social and academic norms is managed has also provoked me to ask this question. Participating in and gaining an understanding of both the intervention and special education referral process has left me to question how to support the children involved in these systems to a greater degree. Colleagues and students I have taught have inspired my work on this subject.

In the next chapter, I review literature that further digs into my guiding question. First, I identified the problems research has revealed for the students that are in situations that I have described. Second, I provided potential approaches or perspectives noted by research that teachers can employ to face these problems. I situated my guiding question in the context of what other researchers have found.
In chapter three, I investigated and proposed a professional development project that aims to share and use information from chapters one and two to spark learning, conversations, and new thinking in a group of teachers. An informative presentation and a resource guide will give teachers tools to learn how they can empower students with learning differences. There are several ways teachers could interact with the project materials and these will be explained further on. In the final chapter, chapter four, I will summarize the literature review and reflect on what I have gained from completing this project. I will also reflect on implications the project has for my own teaching practice and that of others.
CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

“Children and youth—with or without disabilities—must be provided both the encouragement and the opportunity to understand disability as another aspect of human diversity...” (Ware, 2011, p. 197)

Introduction

The guiding question in this project is *How can teachers empower students with learning differences towards an equitable education?* The phrase, *students with learning differences*, is used in this literature review wherever possible, to respectfully address the wide variety of types of students who may need special accommodations, have difficulty accessing standard ways of teaching, or simply struggle in school. The range and number of students who have been assessed to require diverse types of custom instruction in schools is only growing. This phenomenon has shown that a wide range of differences in abilities and learning styles is truly the norm in a modern day classroom setting (Hall, Meyer, & Rose, 2012). Having used the phrase *students with learning differences*, the guiding research question focused on any student who has any type of non-normative learning need or accommodation. The term *difference* rather than *disability* was incorporated to err on the side of respect and empowerment for those who may live with differences of condition, diagnosis, or label. Ford and Thompson (2017) interviewed a former student diagnosed with a learning disability who stated, “Disability is not empowering. [but] Both terms [difference and disability] can be useful” (p. 91). This view was taken into consideration during the writing of this review. This project has mainly used *difference*, knowing that it is not a perfect term and some people may even prefer *disability*. The word *disability* can be used when referring to research that has been done specifically with
disabilities. The phrases learning disabilities and special education were often used when locating research sources because of the prevalence of these phrases in current discourse. Some sources cited in this review come from work done in advocacy for persons with disabilities not specific to education.

The first of two themes in this literature review outlines common systemic obstacles towards equitable education for students with learning differences. The scope of the review is wide to observe problems the modern Western educational model has either created or left unaddressed in educating students with learning differences. Problems identified in the review include social stigmas, deficits of discourse, and challenges of labelling as it relates to learning differences. Throughout the review these dilemmas are viewed as shared problems concerning all parties invested in modern day education.

Next, this literature review focuses on how a teacher’s approach—through their perspective or language—can empower students with learning differences despite the challenges uncovered in the first theme. This second theme outlines a field of scholarship called disability studies in education which has explained how learning disabilities and differences can be viewed as social constructions. Empowering methods reviewed from literature included developing person first language skills or philosophies, strength or competence-based strategies, learning from the neurodiversity movement, and re-imagining disability.

**The Dilemma of Difference: Obstacles to Equitable Education**

Equitable education is a way of including students with learning differences so that their needs are seen to be as important as other students. Challenges to an equitable education for students with learning differences have been identified (Minow, 1985; Mueller, 2019; Norwich,
2009; Paugh & Dudley Marling, 2011; Shifrer, 2013). Although some challenges could be viewed as systemic in nature, many obstacles still fall within the scope and influence of individual teachers’ perspectives and approaches to students with learning differences. For the most part, research that focused on the social and relational aspect of educating students made up this review. A recurring and problematic aspect of relating to learning differences has been referred to as the dilemma of difference (Minow, 1985; Norwich, 2009). Also, specific issues related to this dilemma; social stigmas, negative effects of labeling, and discourses of deficit are investigated.

A concept that is woven and referenced throughout literature regarding disability studies, stigma, and labeling is the dilemma of difference. This phrase originated from a paper authored by Minow (1985) who brought to light the challenge of differentiating instruction or services in a population of students without producing negative social consequences for the students receiving the differentiated support. Minow (1985) focused on two groups of students: English language learners and students who receive special education services. The metaphor of a double edged sword is useful when illustrating this dilemma. In order to function well or learn to function well in a school setting, students with differences have needed differentiated support. If differentiated support is withheld, a student won’t get what they need. So, the groups Minow (1985) discussed need to have their perceived social differences out in the open to some degree to get differentiated support in school. This has been a vulnerable and potentially precarious situation for students with learning differences, depending on how a given social climate perceives difference or disability. Hence, the double edged sword: sometimes students’ academic needs and their needs for social acceptance can conflict with one another, and they cannot thrive
without either. Difference and disability are unfortunately often negotiated in educational settings with negative social and personal implications for those students that fall in these categories.

The problem outlined so clearly by Minow (1985) persists largely to this day. Inclusion, or the movement to include children receiving special education services in the same educational settings as their mainstream peers as much as possible, does not necessarily address the challenge associated with this dilemma of difference. Relatively current research has continued to investigate the nature of this dilemma and has focused on what can potentially be done to face this problem equitably and responsibly (Mueller, 2019; Paugh & Dudley-Marling, 2011; Shifrer, 2013). One aspect of this dilemma has included the experience of social and self stigma for many students with learning differences.

**Stigma and Learning Differences**

Before delving into the problems stigma can create for students with learning differences, it is helpful to create a working definition of stigma. Erving Goffman was a sociologist whose work has had a considerable influence on the research of disability and stigma. Goffman (1963) authored an influential work about how stigma functions in society called *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. He described stigma as “the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance” for reasons such as “various physical deformities, or blemishes of individual character” (Goffman, 1963, p. 4). Stigma has linked difference or disability to deviance in a negative sense. Stigma arises based upon how individuals have conformed to norms present in society at large. Therefore, the classroom could become a microcosm for the rehashing of social stigmas that have persisted in society as a whole. Two
researchers were influenced by Goffman’s theories on stigma (Mueller, 2019; Shifrer, 2013), and there are undoubtedly many more given the influence of Goffman’s work.

It is easy to assume that students with learning differences have experienced a challenging degree of stigma in school settings surrounding their learning needs. There was research conducted that investigated whether this assumption is true (Daley & Rappolt-Schlichtmann, 2018; Shifrer, 2013). Also stigma can be differentiated when viewing the body of research on this subject into two types. These categories are social stigma and perceived or self-stigma. Social stigma is the stigma in society, or the stigma in students’ environments towards them. Perceived or self-stigma is the stigma that a person can adopt as a result of how others view them. If someone is viewed negatively by society, they in turn can easily adopt a negative view of themselves.

One study by Shifrer (2013), researched whether stigma attached to labels for learning disabilities negatively affected high schoolers with learning disabilities. The research undertaken found that the learning disability label was accompanied by lower teacher and parent expectations for academic success as well as students’ lower expectations of themselves. In essence, just the mere presence of a label (in this case learning disabilities) brought upon negative perspectives in educators about the possibilities of what some of their students with learning differences could do. Through investigating the prevalence of social and self-stigma in the learning and home environment of students, Shifrer found evidence that stigma was, in fact, present. Shifrer (2013) concluded, echoing the thinking behind the dilemma of difference (Minow, 1985), that special education may both open up opportunities for students to learn and stigmatize students who need these services at the same time.
Similarly, work done by Daley and Rappolt-Schlichtmann (2018), with a population of adolescents with learning disabilities, found that more than a third of the students reported persistent awareness of stereotyping related to their learning disability label. Two-thirds reported awareness of being stereotyped some of the time. These findings also categorized five aspects of stigmatization: labeling, stereotyping, separation, loss of status, and discrimination. Daley and Rappolt-Schlichtmann (2018) outlined how the students were subject to all these types of stigmatization. Also, their work illustrated how the experience of being stigmatized can easily create feelings of shame and humiliation, as well as peer-isolation and loneliness (Daley & Rappolt-Schlightmann, 2018).

Research that took a different perspective on a similar subject was conducted by Mueller (2019). Mueller (2019) investigated the perceptions and thinking of four high schoolers diagnosed with learning disability labels to assess how they personally dealt with this issue in their lives. In essence, Mueller (2019) wondered how the students made sense of their own learning differences and their diagnostic labels. The students mimicked the attitudes of those around them in negotiating their identity, according to Mueller (2019). Mueller (2019) wrote that the students all viewed disability in a solely negative sense. This research found that all the students attempted to distance themselves from their diagnostic labels and had even lied to friends about their involvement with special education. These actions were evidence that the students were very susceptible to self-stigma as a result of the attitudes and impressions that continually circulated around them in relation to their learning differences. Mueller (2019) said, “This [stigma] is the air that students breathe, about themselves and about others, until they leave school. In the face of this kind of institutionalized difference, all four students reacted in a way
that illuminates just how aware of these adult processes that students are” (p. 278). The students truly internalized attitudes and perceptions of those around them. Mueller (2019) framed these findings using thinking related to labeling theory which maintained that stigmatized people act influenced by whatever perceptions socially held stigmas expect of them.

The findings of research on stigma and implications for equitable education for students with learning differences can be seen as troubling. Aside from the challenges stigma has caused for students with learning differences, there have been some potential bright spots unearthed by research. A reason for hope is that the Daley & Rappolt-Schlighmann (2018) study found variance in the levels of awareness of stigma related to learning disabilities within the group of students surveyed. For some reason, some students with the learning disabled label did not experience as great a degree of stigmatization. If research could delineate why this is so, perhaps educators can learn how to destigmatize labels effectively. Shifrer’s (2013) research also led her to claim that teachers may have significant power in whether a diagnostic label is stigmatized or not, and this idea is examined further later.

**Labeling and Learning Differences**

Research on labeling closely relates to research on social or self-stigmatization of learning differences or disabilities. Shifrer’s (2013) work on the stigma associated with the learning disability label illustrated how closely labelling and social stigma interact with one another. Investigating the practice of labelling students’ learning differences to fit into diagnostic categories puts the dilemma of difference dramatically on display. Through this lens a diagnostic label is, again, a double edged sword through which a student gets access to resources that may be beneficial, but then may have to contend with negative social consequences associated with
the label. If a label is not used, the problem of difference is not solved because a student’s challenges associated with their learning differences are ignored. If a label, and differentiated services associated with that label are employed, then the student’s difference is highlighted along with the potential for negative social fallout. This conundrum, which is essentially what Minow (1985) laid out when coining the term, the dilemma of difference is potentially exacerbated by the way education has depended upon and infused educational practices with diagnostic labeling when educating children.

Hatton (2009) wrote about the social constructionist view that although a label applied to learning disabilities may give a student more resources that they need, the effects of the label will almost always be systematically oppressive. The “labelling effect” in Hatton’s (2009) work referred to the social (or classroom) consequences students may experience as a result of the application of diagnostic labels used in general learning (i.e. learning disabled, dual diagnoses, etc.). The negative effects of labeling are created by a society “which attaches a meaning to physical and mental variation based on a common perception of normality” (Hatton, 2009, p. 91). It follows that whatever is not normal (or different) could be assigned negative meanings in society. This thinking explained that labels, which highlight differences, can come with negative social connotations, and supported Goffman’s (1963) view of how stigmatization operates. In a challenge to labeling being intrinsically negative, Hatton (2009) further explained the subtleties of labelling. Subtleties include how some people with disabilities can embrace a diagnosis as part of their identity in order to help them face personal challenges. Hatton (2009) concluded that there can be a place for celebrating the difference a label suggests, still she believed that “promoting alternatives to the narrowing effects of labelling is crucial” (p. 94).
Labeling has been criticized in literature by researchers such as Hatton (2009). Several researchers have also bemoaned the prevalence of the medical model of disability for the limitations it imposes on students’ identities (Dudley-Marling, 2004; Kirby, 2017; Mueller, 2019). These researchers claimed that education has adopted the model of disability theorized by the medical field, and this model has situated disability as a problem in people to be fixed. The medical model has been problematic for students who live with the effects of being referred to indirectly as a problem through labels assigned to them. There has also been a wide range in subjectivity amongst learning disability and behavioral labels that can easily be lost sight of in the workings of special education (Shifrer, 2013). In other words, it has been easy to forget that many educational labels are subjective in nature, and this subjectivity has further compounded the issue of what disability means. Shifrer (2013) mentioned that teacher training would benefit if it included the discussion of the subjective nature of the learning disability label itself. There was at least one scholarly work written that argued for ceasing the usage of such labels (Kirby, 2017). Others concluded that our current model of working with learning differences is overly reliant on the use of labels (Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007). Educators and students are faced with a daunting challenge in effectively navigating potential minefields that arise along with the practice of diagnostic labelling. Further consideration and research is needed so that diagnostic labels are used by educators as tools that truly serve students needs.
Deficit-Based Language and Attitudes in Relation to Learning Differences

“In this respect even the most pedagogically advanced methods are likely to be ineffective in the hands of those who implicitly or explicitly subscribe to a belief system that regards some students, at best, as disadvantaged and in need of fixing, or, worse, as deficient and, therefore, beyond fixing.” (Ainscow, 2005, p. 117)

Another phenomena which surfaced in the literature on the obstacles towards equitable education for students with learning differences is the discourse of deficit (Paugh & Dudley-Marling, 2011). This phenomenon referred to a structure of understanding, perceiving, and relating to students with learning differences in a way that highlights what they cannot do, what they do not have, what they are missing, or what problems they deal with. In some ways, this thinking paralleled other research that has elaborated on how the prevailing medical framework of disability equates disability with deficit (Mueller, 2019).

First of all, awareness of discourses of deficit has existed already in elementary education today in relation to teacher communication with and about all students, not just students with learning disabilities. One example of this is the recommendation that teachers balance phone calls home about troubling or negative behavior with phone calls or acknowledgements of student performance of positive characteristics or behaviors. Practices like this are used because a discourse of deficit can easily become enmeshed with a teacher’s way of communicating about any particular student (or students).

Research has discussed how deficit based discourse is particularly a problem for struggling students or students who do not conform to socially constructed classroom norms (Paugh & Dudley-Marling, 2011). These students could be any students with learning
disabilities. Paugh and Dudley-Marling (2011) stated the problem in this way, “The unrelenting focus on ‘what students cannot do’ is embedded in the ways struggling students are talked about and continues to support the separation of curriculum and instruction struggling students receive from non-identified students” (p. 820). A discourse of deficit that is perpetuated could contribute to inequitable learning environments for students with learning differences.

These same researchers also studied whether an intervention/inquiry group for teachers could shift the way they speak about students’ abilities. The group challenged the teachers to move away from the dominant deficit-based language which focused on “what’s wrong with students” to language that stressed “what makes students smart.” (Paugh & Dudley-Marling, 2011, p. 822). Both the ingrained influence of a dominant deficit discourse in teachers’ thinking and language and also a possibility for breaking free from the constraints of such influences were concepts highlighted by this research. Additionally, placing more authority in school communities with teachers’ direct knowledge of what their students know, along with students’ knowledge of themselves was a strategy Paugh & Dudley-Marling (2011) advocated. Placing power in these places could disrupt the practices of stigmatization, labeling without consideration, and systemic bias towards kids with learning disabilities. This research provided a strong argument for teacher practices of using strength based language about all students, and for teachers’ language to show they are “seeing what they [students] know” (Paugh & Dudley-Marling, 2011, p. 823) in relationship to students with learning differences. Upon investigating the phenomenon of deficit based patterns, another question arose of how educators’ language in relation to students has reinforced or subverted a discourse of deficit. These possibilities are revisited later for further examination.
In order to learn how to empower students with learning differences towards an equitable education, this literature review asked a related question and wondered: *what is disempowering in the world of education today?* Certainly, the challenges like stigma, labeling, and deficit based thinking can be described as disempowering. If a teacher can develop an awareness of these challenges they will be more equipped to grapple with them. Truly confronting and examining the problems students with learning differences face could provoke a shift in the perspective of an educator to become more empathetic and knowledgeable in benefiting students. In another sense, the research showed the need to balance any prevailing social narrative (unintended or intended) that ascribes negative attributes to students with learning differences or disabilities, equates negative qualities with diagnostic labels, or equates difference with dysfunction with powerful narratives coming directly from teacher/student experience. These narratives could potentially supplant the discourse of deficit, lessen stigmas, and minimize the power of a label to damage students.

**Summary**

Challenges facing students with learning differences are vast and profound in our education system. This review has narrowed the scope of these problems to have mainly focused on challenging social aspects rather than curricular or structural challenges. In a social sense, these challenges have revolved around education’s relationship to *difference* which sometimes has meant *disability*. Social and self-stigma related to learning differences have been documented to be a real barrier in the lives of many students, and labeling students has been a practice which could further compound problems of stigmatization for students with learning differences. Lastly, relating to students with learning differences in a way that has drawn more
attention to their deficits than their strengths is another facet of the dilemma students and their teachers have faced.

**Empowering Ways Forward**

“Despite the lack of attention towards the identity experiences of disabled people in critical and educational literature, disabled scholars and activists have pushed back on the idea that disability can only ever be a negative, stigmatized identity” (Mueller, 2019, p. 266).

**Introduction**

If the problem with incorporating learning differences equitably is viewed as socially and structurally constructed, then it is maintained in many contexts, through many different scopes, and it is truly a complex issue. There has been no simple answer to how to fix this problem. There have been many possibilities suggested by research. The scope of research reviewed focused mainly on promising strategies or approaches that teachers can implement in their practice. Specifically, this research showed that educators can empower students through their own classroom language and through shifts in their own personal and professional perspective. First, this review addresses overall how a social constructionist lens can offer a beneficial shift in an educator’s perspective of learning difference before delving into more specific methods. The review categorized methods to empower students with learning differences in four categories: teacher use of person-first and person-centered approaches, competence or strength based language, listening to neurodiversity, and ways of re-seeing disability.
Disability Studies in Education and the Social Construction of Disability

“Put differently, it is not the way in which people vary or the differences they have in comparison to others but what we make of those differences that matters.” (Baglieri, Connor, Gallagher, & Valle, 2011, p. 270)

The problems of stigma, discourses of deficit, and negative effects of labeling all could be described as social creations. In this sense these problems are created during the interaction of society at large with students with learning differences in the context of educational settings (or schools). Many researchers have argued that it is our socially constructed and maintained educational system that is failing students with learning differences (Brantlinger, 2004; Cremin & Thomas, 2005; Dudley-Marling, 2004; Kirby, 2017). In fact, a whole field of study called disability studies in education (DSE) has maintained the social construction of disability as a core influential idea (Baglieri et al., 2011). DSE was a term coined in 1999 to describe a group of advocates, scholars, and educators who worked for inclusion of students with disabilities, examined how disabilities were contextualized, and exchanged a diversity of perspectives on the meanings of disability (Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, & Morton, 2008). This field of scholarship grew since then, and its tenets include: the belief that disability is a political and social construction, privileging the voices of people labelled with disabilities, advocating social justice for those labelled with disabilities, and assuming competence while discarding deficit models of disability (Connor et al., 2008).

DSE scholars have also acknowledged misunderstandings of the concept of the social construction of disabilities (Baglieri et al., 2011). Some disabilities are obviously not only socially constructed, such as the inability to walk. The point DSE scholars have made is that it is
vital that educators pay heed to the significance and meaning of disability in their work (Baglieri et al., 2011). In other words, the significance and the meaning assigned to disabilities is a social construction. Furthermore, as Mueller (2019) stated, there is a tension delineated between the differences students may embody that could be a source of real struggle, personal pain, or limitation and “the much shakier ground of difference that has been labeled and judged by others to be this way” (p. 264). From this perspective, a teacher would not advocate ceasing to perceive diversity in students’ limitations or struggles, but rather a teacher could question to what extent social interactions compound existing problems for students who already have great personal, relational, and learning struggles associated with difference.

Arguments like these have challenged a commonly held notion that the problem in the way of supporting students with learning differences lies solely within the students themselves (Dudley-Marling, 2004). Many interventions or strategies designed for students who do not respond successfully to what a learning environment considers normative instruction are implemented from the view of: How can we fix this student? This idea, that Dudley-Marling thoroughly investigated, puts the failure to achieve a socially normative academic performance “within the heads of individual students” (2004, p. 482). Connections can easily be made between this practice, and participation in a discourse of deficit discussed earlier. It could be that the problems, or deficits, students with learning differences may have, could be highlighted so strongly because the students themselves are looked upon as problems. Instead of seeing this way, educators could understand disability, like Mueller (2019) described, “as a social phenomenon, not an individual pathology” (p. 278).
An alternative question that could be extrapolated from researchers’ thinking on how learning differences are socially constructed could be: *What can we do differently in this situation?* In this question, the problem is framed using the word *we*, changing the scope of the problem and potentially what might be done to address it. Some scholarly work advocated for this shift as part of a systematic change in how we deliver and conceptualize education (particularly special education) (Brantlinger, 2004; Cremlin & Thomas, 2005; Mueller, 2019).

Before other researchers, Minow (1985) proposed a shift in perspective for educators to confront the dilemma of difference, and proposed viewing the dilemma as a shared problem. Minow’s (1985) proposal contrasted the construction of learning differences as a problem within an individual student, a viewpoint that Dudley-Marling (2004) also disagreed with.

Dudley-Marling (2004) also seemed to speak to a radical departure from current practice, which is conducted from a problematic individualist lens, to something more truly inclusive of all students. Other researchers advocated for shifting pedagogical and instructional decisions to include more power and influence from students with disabilities and their families (Baglieri et al., 2011). This approach also viewed the road to inclusion as a journey that is shared.

Dudley-Marling (2004) said, “even a small change in the patterns of interaction—effected through changes in the shared activity or teachers’ actions—can have a significant effect on students’ learning identities” (p. 289). It is with this in mind (that small changes, actions, or shifts in interactions could be significant) that this review will move on to discuss possible ways forward to empower students with learning differences in the face of the obstacles the previous theme reviewed.
**Person-First and Person-Centered Approaches**

A strong understanding of the two related philosophies behind person-first language and person-centered approaches could benefit teachers to model respect, thoughtfulness, and inclusion in their own classrooms. Person first language is language that intentionally emphasizes the person when speaking about a person with disabilities (Blaski, 1993). It was developed out of the people-first movement, a self advocacy group of people with disabilities in Oregon in the 1970’s and 80’s (Wehmeyer, Bersani, & Gagne, 2000). Person-centered approaches focus mainly on understanding a person’s (or student’s) wants to guide their engagement with systems (Wells & Sheehy, 2012).

Person first language is an example of an approach teachers can adopt in working with students with learning differences that has come directly from a community of people with disabilities. Teachers are in an advantageous position of influence related to how people see disabilities in their classroom. Adopting person-first language for its potential to positively affect perceptions of disability has been advocated in some of the literature pertaining to disability studies (West, Perner, Laz, Murdick, & Gartin, 2015). An example of using this language would be to say *a person with dyslexia* instead of *a dyslexic person*. This shift puts an emphasis on the word *person* rather than an emphasis on *dyslexia*.

Often, people with disabilities can experience that social attention is overly drawn to their disability or difference rather than their common human characteristics (Blaska, 1993). Also, biases and stigma attached to a disability label have more opportunity to be a problematic issue when a label is applied to a person first. Person first language provided a potential way through this dilemma by talking about the person first and the disability or difference second. When
listed in this order, language frames a difference or disability a person may have as a
characteristic they possess along with many others (Blaska, 1993).

Along with person-first language, a teacher could borrow cues from person-first
philosophy. This philosophy extends speaking about a person with disabilities as a person first to
thinking in a similar way. Blaska (1993) outlined this philosophy in her work which advised
teachers to only refer to a disability a student may have when it is absolutely necessary. A
teacher can develop a sensitivity to conveying respect to students with learning differences or
disabilities.

Several governmental organizations and the American Psychological Association have
adopted person first language as a standard (West, Perner, Laz, Murdick, & Gartin, 2015). There
is, however, a lack of research on whether the use of person-first language has an impact on
empowering students with learning differences although scholars have advocated for its use
(Blaska, 1993; West et al., 2015). It is notable to address the fact that there are few studies or
papers that advocate for person-first language, and those that do exist are decades removed from
one another. It is unfortunate that, although person-first language has been in use since the
1990’s, it does not yet have mainstream acceptance within schools (West et al., 2015).

Although person-first language has the support from many areas, there has been some
current discourse that shows it is not the preferred language for all communities with disabilities.
In general, the autistic community and the blind community prefer to be called autistic or blind
first rather than the other way around (Dunn & Andrews, 2015; West et al., 2015). These groups
argue that being autistic or blind is a characteristic that is inseparable or core to the identities of
people in these groups. They advocate for the use of identity first language when speaking about
them. Identity first language stresses the diagnosis or label first (i.e. blind or autistic) rather than
the word person. Advocates of this use of language see a disability as something a person can
claim and take pride in. Given these two conflicting preferences in the disability community,
some literature advised asking people with disabilities which type of language they prefer when
there is doubt (West et al., 2015).

Along with the use of person-first philosophy and language, person-centered approaches
could benefit educators to empower students with learning differences. Person centered
approaches include using person-centered planning or person-centered thinking (Roehl, 2012).
Person centered thinking focuses on empowering individuals with disabilities to become
successful (Swan, 2017). Person-centered thinking also eschews the tendency of educational
systems to focus on deficits related to how individuals with learning disabilities function in the
educational world. Instead strengths, goals, and dreams of students direct their learning process
(Keyes & Owens-Johnson, 2003). Person-centered thinking has assisted people with
special-needs who are transitioning from school environments to the workplace (Swan, 2017),
however, this approach has also influenced elementary practice (Roehl, 2012).

Person-centered planning is designing a learning plan for a student with learning
differences that is “driven by the individual’s desires, strengths, needs, and dislikes (Renzaglia,
Karvonen, Drasgow, Stoxen, 2003, p. 143). There are a family of different approaches taken
when using person-centered planning including the Making Action Plans (MAPS) process which
can be used for school-age children (Keys & Owens-Johnson, 2003; Roehl, 2012). These
approaches heavily rely on students’ and families’ input when creating any kind of educational
plan. Research has also focused on how person-centered planning can influence the creation of
individual education plans (IEP’s) (Keys & Owens-Johnson, 2003). Keys and Owens-Johnson (2003) suggest beginning the IEP process by “describing the strengths, gifts, and talents of the student” (p. 151). This is also an example of strength-based teaching.

**Competence Oriented or Strength Based Language**

“Perhaps the most important tool we can use to help build a positive niche for the neurodiverse brain is our own rich understanding of each student’s strengths” (Armstrong, 2012, p. 14).

In a previous section of this literature review, an understanding of discourses of deficit surrounding the education of students with learning differences was developed, and the problems with this practice were also discussed. The opposite of a discourse of deficit would be a discourse of competence. Two different pieces of literature have referred to this type of language as competence-oriented language (Smith, Salend, & Ryan, 2001; West et al., 2015). Elements of this language would be to describe how students are doing in terms of their academic and social strengths. Armstrong (2017) added strengths of an emotional and creative nature to this list. In this way students can build a shared understanding of what their personal strengths are. Armstrong (2017) also emphasized that high-expectations are part of the strength (or competence) based model, as sometimes strengths that students possess become apparent when they are challenged and pushed. This is important given the research that finds that expectations can be lower for students with labeled learning differences. Also, competence-based language encourages speaking about specific strengths or positive attributes of students openly in learning communities. Another competence based strategy would be to provide equitable opportunities for all students to hold leadership roles in learning environments (Armstrong, 2017).
Paugh and Dudley-Marling’s study (2011), which was reviewed when discussing deficit-based discourse, provided further considerations on implementing competence-based approaches for teachers. To review, this study examined whether teachers could move from a perspective of seeing deficit to one of seeing competence in struggling students during a year. These teachers met regularly in an inquiry group formed with the intention of challenging a discourse of deficit. Teachers’ original intention to speak about and perceive competence in students was challenged on the whole in their practice (Paugh & Dudley-Marling, 2011). The study highlighted moments where competence-based seeing disrupted the practice of seeing through a deficit lens. However, on the whole the study concluded the teachers weren’t able to fully make the transition. The authors recommended providing tools through teacher education or professional development to help challenge the prevalence of deficit-based practices, and move to competence based teaching.

**Neurodiversity and Learning Differences**

“When we limit the inclusion of some of our students, we limit the potential of our entire society.” (Dunn, 2019, p. 25).

Strength or competence-based advocacy in working with learning differences is also championed by supporters of the neurodiversity movement (Armstrong, 2017). Neurodiversity refers to a relatively recent advocacy movement that promotes awareness of differing neurologies within the human population (Armstrong, 2017). Advocates of this movement assert that the diversity of human brain-wiring or neurology is analogous to differences in gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, etc (Armstrong, 2017). This movement celebrates the necessity of non-normal neurology in human development, and the achievements people with different
neurologies have made in human history. Inspiration for this movement began in the autistic community and has spread to gain footholds among people with learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, ADHD diagnoses, and emotional disorders (Armstrong, 2012). The movement does not ignore that neurological differences often come with social challenges, disabilities, or pain related to how a person functions. Rather, neurodiversity suggests that people can affirm and even celebrate how different minds can be. Baron Chohen (2019) wrote that neurodiversity “recognizes that genetic or other kinds of biological variation are intrinsic to people’s identity, their sense of self and personhood” (para. 21). Educators can acknowledge and celebrate that people who function differently neurologically, learn and live differently from more neurotypical people because of how they are.

Incorporating an appreciation of neurodiversity in the classroom could include presenting examples of neurodiverse people in classroom learning. Influential persons who have benefited our society in some way who also lived with diverse types of neurologies, differences, or disabilities provide rich material in which to educate children. By using examples of such people in teaching, students with learning differences can potentially see someone like them in a respected, dignified, and positive light. Students who are more neurotypical can learn an appreciation of neurodiversity from such examples. In much the same way that many educators have pushed for more representation of people of color in curriculum and literature, a strong case could be made to do the same with people on the disability and neurodiverse spectrum (Andrews, 1998; Dunn, 2010).

Dunn (2010) wrote about how teachers can re-see disability with students using literature depicting characters with disability. Dunn (2010) stated that a lot of literature with disabled
characters or people unfortunately reinforces stereotypes of people with disabilities. Teaching this way could end up strengthening a normative/non-normative model rather than one of true inclusion. Dunn (2010) advocated for modeling critical skills in unpacking how people with disabilities are represented in books, when positive representation isn’t available. Other DSE scholars believed that providing and integrating self narrated stories from people with disabilities into the life of classrooms could depict disability in a way that is true to life (Baglieri et al., 2011). Baglieri et al. (2011) claimed that stories or narratives from people with disabilities can lessen “divisions between special and general education and perceptions (judgments) about groups of children as not-able” (p. 273).

Ways to Re-imagine Disability

Another approach that came out of thinking around neurodiversity is how teachers can help students adopt new ways of thinking about difference or disability. One fascinating idea came from an article by Armstrong (2017) in which he examined common metaphors used to help children understand their disabilities. He described how special education literature often uses machine metaphors for talking about the workings of disability, and he uses the example of a child with ADHD whose brain was likened to a car engine that moved too quickly. Armstrong (2017) contended that the problem with metaphors that describe brains as machines is that machines are either broken or working. Here it is critical to review earlier criticism of current views of disabilities (influenced by medical models) which frame disabilities as deficits and problems to fix. It is easy to see how this metaphorical language could only disempower students with learning differences. An alternative metaphor could be what Armstrong (2017) called a brain forest. This metaphor allows for a diversity in brains or neurology while allowing that this
In an essay entitled, “When Art Informs: Inviting Ways to See the Unexpected,” Ware (2011) examined how the arts can assist students in developing positive disability identities. This work advocated using art to create learning environments where disability is challenged to no longer be a source of liability or shame. Ware (2011) gave examples of people with disabilities who have used art to reclaim disability as a positive identity. She gave an example of a teenager who used rap poetry to subvert and challenge negative views of Tourette’s syndrome. Ware (2011) declined to advise teachers with a specific skill set in using art to disrupt oppressive notions of difference or disability. However, reclaiming positive disability identities could involve encouraging students to creatively develop their voices and the ways they see to affirm the strengths associated with their differences. While acknowledging that the ideas she presents may be unfamiliar to educators not versed in disability studies, Ware (2011) stated that her work is intended to start a conversation of what could be possible when art informs identities of disability. Perhaps, as Ware (2011) stated, this work could open up, “ways of seeing and knowing [difference] that which was previously unknown and unseen (p. 201).”

There are numerous methods and perspectives teachers can research or implement in creating their own solutions to the question: How can teachers empower students with learning differences towards an equitable education? Most of the work reviewed suggested adopting new ways of framing, speaking about, and working with learning differences. Much of the literature
reviewed did not contend that current or recent educational practices are entirely benefiting students with learning differences. It is hopeful that work is being done to push the boundary of how educators deal with the extraordinarily complex issue of empowering students with learning differences. After discussing systemic problems in the way of this goal, one might ask how such a shift could be possible on a large scale. In short, some of the methods outlined could provide inspiration for even slight shifts in perspective or approach, because even these could have great benefit. There are doubtlessly countless other practices that may prove effective in engaging learning differences that were not included in this review, and it has been a goal of this literature review to open up and engage in the conversation.

**Summary**

Research and scholarship in the fields of disability studies in education, disability advocacy, special education, and education in general has presented possible avenues for teachers to follow in order to answer the question: *How can teachers empower students with learning differences towards an equitable education?* Shifts in approach, language, and perspectives could prove beneficial in this endeavor. These shifts include thinking critically to see how learning disabilities can be socially constructed, using competence or strength based approaches and language, becoming familiar with person-first language and philosophy, using person-centered approaches, learning from the neurodiversity movement, and imagining new ways to understand disability. If scholarship continues to be fruitful in these areas, more positive shifts in relating to difference could be identified. In the next chapter, a project is reviewed that uses this research as a jumping off point for professional development for educators that includes a presentation, self assessment, a resource guide, and reflection tools.
CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

The guiding question driving my capstone project has been, *How can teachers empower students with learning differences towards an equitable education?* Keeping this question in mind, I will present a description of a project that aims to ease the burden of the dilemma of difference. The project will include a presentation of topics brought to light in the literature review, a self assessment that teachers can use during professional development, an accompanying resource guide, and self-reflective questions for use with this guide. The aim of these tools is to provide teachers with information, a means of self reflection, and the support of resources so their teaching can empower students with learning differences.

Engaging in scholarship and critical issues in education through the lens of disability studies in education brought a radical leap in perspective from the lens I typically look through in my day-to-day teaching journey. Experiencing this perspective leap; from my current practice to what might be or what could be has been an invaluable opportunity. It has empowered me as a teacher, and therefore, I am better equipped to empower my students from what I have learned. This shift I have made as a result of study has propelled me to create a project which may encourage a shift in the thinking of the fellow educators at my school. It may also provide them with language, terms, discourse, and a critical environment to develop beliefs and approaches about difference and disability that may have been simmering under the surface without a catalyst. My intention is that an informative professional development session along with the
tools of a self-assessment, resource guide, and reflections for self-directed learning will be a
catalyst for my colleagues to empower students.

The learning sessions take place during professional development held during weekly
staff meetings. The number of learning sessions will depend on how educators interact with the
project’s resources. These meetings include all licensed staff at an elementary school, including
all teachers and administrators. I chose this setting because my guiding question is related to
what teachers can do to empower a specific population of students. It follows that further
thinking on how to empower students with learning differences could be enriched by a group of
focused teachers meeting together with a shared intention. The project allows for several points
of access and depth of involvement. Educators can benefit solely from the learning provided by
the presentation. They can also choose which resource guide will be most beneficial for them,
and use it to enhance their practice. After this stage, the resource guide and reflection questions
could further be used for a professional learning community, individual professional
development plan, or an educator book group. Any of these possibilities would use weekly staff
meetings to reflect on progress or new learning.

Current research in adult learning theory, particularly relating to teacher professional
development, was used to guide this project’s design and structure. Also, theories regarding
teacher reflection, and self-guided learning grounded the theoretical framework of this project.

Setting and Implementation

I will develop a presentation, resource guide, and reflective questions to be used in
professional development sessions at a public elementary school in the upper-Midwest to support
teachers to identify and understand ways they can empower students with learning differences
towards an equitable education. The school is a smaller urban school with a population of about 280 students. The demographics of the school are mixed mainly between African-American, Hispanic-American, and white students. There is a large population of students who could be categorized as exhibiting learning differences, including a program for students on the autism spectrum. The educators at this site will investigate how they can empower students with learning differences towards an equitable education. Staff meetings provide a place where this professional learning will take place. School wide staff meetings happen weekly and are held to check in and initiate ongoing school wide teacher progress initiatives, review student data, and to conduct any applicable professional development deemed a priority for the school. This is an appropriate setting to conduct professional development training as the teachers and staff present at these meetings are familiar with this time being used in such a fashion. The process of checking in with the progress of a group learning objective is also a common practice in the school. This group process could potentially be done with the support of the resource guides and reflective questions embedded in the project. I plan to facilitate the presentation on empowering students with learning differences in the fall of 2021 during a professional development day. At this time I can also provide the self-assessment and corresponding resource guides to participants in the professional development. After this initial presentation I plan to use one of the resource guides and reflective question sets to provide the foundation for my professional learning plan for the year. I will reach out to any colleagues who want to form a group to pursue this plan together.
Rationale

“This recognition of the intersectionality of disability opens the door for collaboration with teacher educators who are focused on social justice issues related to race, language, and gender." (Cosier & Pearson, 2016, p. 7)

Equity has been a common theme intertwined into professional development throughout the last several years of my teaching experience. Ensuring equity for all students in terms of a positive learning experience has been a priority of both the school and district I work in. Racial equity work, in particular, has been the focus of several professional development sessions I have attended, and a framework for building and ensuring equity is also embedded in leadership and curriculum meetings at my school. I have heard the subject of equity broached in reference to issues of learning for students with disabilities at my workplace. However, I have not heard of or been part of any professional development that engages with disability or difference from an equity perspective. My experience echoes Baglieri, Connor, Gallagher, and Valle’s (2011) work which claimed that discrimination of the disabled has been analogous to oppression based on race, gender, and sexual orientation but it has “received considerably less public attention” (p. 268). It has been my experience that the issue of empowering learning difference or disability has not gotten much attention in my learning community. By giving this issue public attention in a setting of educators, this project will seek to fill a hole in terms of an equity lens, and also share resources to support teachers in providing more equitable, empowering learning experiences for students with learning differences.

Many of the ideas I encountered in my review were completely new to me. I had not encountered them as a teacher. Based on conversations with colleagues and the observations I
have listed, I inferred that at least some of the subject matter this project will present could be unfamiliar. The subject is also very sensitive. When teachers engage with disability studies, they will be encouraged to honestly reflect on their practices and their beliefs. Community norms of honoring all voices, allowing for discomfort, and active listening are embedded in my school’s meeting practices. These norms have been embedded in other professional development surrounding equity. These reasons show that there is an existing framework at my school for professional development on empowering students with learning differences despite its potential unfamiliarity or sensitivity.

**Detailed Description and Timeline**

> “Issues of equity for students and teachers are connected; the more teachers know about their students’ needs and possibilities for growth, the more responsive they can be to these needs and possibilities and to providing powerful learning opportunities” (Carter Andrews & Richmond, 2019, p. 408)

There are four steps to this project that seeks to encourage teachers to find their own answers to the question, *How can teachers empower students with learning differences towards an equitable education?* The first step in the project will be to present consolidated information from chapters one and two in a slide show during a professional development session. The presentation will list and describe obstacles to empowering students with learning differences. Also, the presentation will provide ways to empower students that will be divided into four themes: strength based teaching, theories of disability studies in education, incorporating an appreciation of neurodiversity in the classroom, and person-centered or person-first approaches. Periodically, points for discussion and staff interaction will be included to engage educators in
Secondly, educators will be provided a self-assessment where they will self-select on one of the four themes from the presentation that they would like to learn more about. Following their selection, educators will be provided a resource guide organized by the four themes. Educators will engage with the resources according to the theme they have selected. The aim of the resource guide is to facilitate self-directed professional learning that can support educators to empower students with learning differences or disabilities. Finally, after a period of engaging in new self-directed learning, teachers can then evaluate how this learning has affected their practice and share specific observations where their learning has helped them empower their students. Reflective questions will provide a means for groups or individuals to share and evaluate their learning in this way. These questions could be used during professional development in several different ways that I will explain further.

**Presentation**

The purpose of the presentation will be to establish a baseline of knowledge for teachers to enter into self-directed learning. The information given in the presentation will assume little to no knowledge of disability studies and related topics, but it will also be an outlet to engage colleagues who do have some awareness or knowledge of these issues. As in chapters one and two, an understanding of the terms learning differences and disabilities, as well as the limitations and strengths of each term, will be established with staff. Prior to the actual presentation, teachers will reflect on their initial understanding of the question, *How can teachers empower students with learning differences towards an equitable education?* This will provide educators an opportunity to recognize their current thinking on this issue.
The presentation will have an introductory learning objective: *during this presentation, learners will identify ways in which to empower students with learning differences.* Next, I will provide a brief overview of learnings from chapters one and two using a google slides presentation. I will share with the staff problems identified through research as well as potential ways forward. To review, the problems or obstacles identified in the review were stigma, labeling, and deficit-based teaching in relation to learning difference. The overarching obstacle that all of these problems are related to was referred to as the dilemma of difference. The presentation will also categorize potential best practices for working through these obstacles as educators who aim to empower students with learning differences. There are four of these best practices and they are categorized as strength based teaching, lessons from disability studies in education, neurodiversity in the classroom, and person-first or person-centered approaches. These themes will form the basis of the next step in this professional development project: teacher self-assessment.

**Teacher Self-Assessment**

The self assessment step in the teacher learning process is meant to transition educators from absorbing potentially new information to embarking on a course of self-directed action based on that new knowledge. The self assessment will take the four categories with which to empower students with learning differences and ask teachers to pick the approach they are interested in the most. Each category or theme could be viewed from the lens of cultivating a mindset or through the lens of classroom incorporation. For instance, a teacher may be interested in learning more about the mindset of neurodiversity, and in this case they would want resources that engaged this interest. Conversely, a teacher may want to delve into resources to incorporate
an appreciation of neurodiversity in their classroom. The resource guide will provide resources that accommodate both of these types of learning.

**Resource Guide**

The resource guide will form the heart of the project. It’s main aim is to provide support and direction for teacher self-directed learning on empowering learning differences. The resource guide is divided into four sections that correspond to the four choices in the self-assessment. Again, these four themes are: neurodiversity, disability studies in education, strength-based teaching, and person-centered or person-first approaches. Each resource guide will have an accompanying learning objective, *as a result of using this resource guide, learners will identify and understand ways to empower students with learning differences.* Teachers can pick one of the themes to direct their learning. This choice was made because in narrowing the potentially vast topic of empowering learning differences, educators can focus on one distinct aspect of this topic that can influence their teaching practice. This focused learning approach is influenced by a theory quoted in chapter two where Dudley-Marling (2004) asserted that even small shifts in teachers’ understanding of learning differences can be powerful.

**Reflective Questions**

The reflective questions will be useful after teachers have had at least a month to familiarize themselves with the resource guide and the materials in them. The reflective questions can be used in flexible formats but their purpose is to support and enhance teacher growth towards empowering students with learning differences. The reflective questions ask what teachers have learned from the resource guide and how have they implemented this learning in their work. There are two sets of questions. The first set is to be used for an initial
meeting after a month has passed since teachers first saw the presentation and received their resource guide. The second set can be used for meetings that take place consequently. In my school I have identified three ways the questions and resource guide could support ongoing professional learning. They could support a professional learning community that meets monthly to share progress. In addition, the questions could help a teacher in developing and following a professional development plan. Lastly, the questions could be used when a group of teachers decided to read a book from the resource guide to assist them in empowering students with learning differences.

**Research Paradigm and Theories**

In order to situate this project in a focused context of research, I examined research on adult learning theory. The field of adult learning theory encompasses research that studies the specific and unique ways that adults learn. This context is useful to support the construction and goals of the project I designed because it is geared towards adults. The goal of the project is to eventually benefit students with learning differences by engaging their educators in adult learning. The project will take place during staff professional development which is an opportune environment for educators to be positioned as adult learners. Zepeda, Parylo, and Bengtson (2014) presented how professional development is a type of adult learning that can be analyzed through the lens of adult learning theory. These researchers asserted that “adult learning is self directed, motivational for the learner, problem centered, relevancy oriented and goal oriented” (Zepeda, Parylo & Bengston, 2014, p. 301). This list of descriptors provided guidelines in developing the structure of the project.
Additionally, theories on self-directed learning influenced the development of my project. Self-directed learning occurs when a learner takes ownership over what they will learn and how they will learn it. Scholars have written about how the idea of teacher self directed learning originates from adult learning theory and holds that teachers are able to decide upon their own learning needs and direct their own learning (Louws, Meirink, Van Veen, & Van Driel, 2017). This thinking supported the decision to provide teacher choice in learning in the developed project model. Teachers will choose what they would like to learn about from four separate categories and consequently, direct their own learning with the support of a resource guide tailored to their particular interest. This practice acknowledges that teachers are powerful forces in their own professional development (Louws, et al., 2017).

Lastly, theory on the ways in which self-reflection can be important for teachers helped me frame the reflective questions in this project. Mccombs (1997) studied how reflection tools could help move teachers towards learner-centered practices. According to this research, teachers need a “process of reflection” to implement positive changes in their practice (Mccombs, 1997, p. 12). The two sets of reflection questions in this project were formulated to guide teachers along this reflective path.

Adult learning theory examines the unique ways that adults learn. This field of scholarship assisted me in formulating a plan for teachers to meet as learners in order to benefit a specific group of students at their school. Additionally, work on the benefit of self-assessment and reflection in teacher professional development influenced the content and scope of this project.
Timeline

In order to have a finished product of my capstone project I will need several months of time dedicated to creating the presentation, self assessment, resource guide, reflective questions, and final surveys of the project’s effectiveness. The bulk of this period of time will be spent locating resources that will effectively support elementary educators to empower students with learning differences towards an equitable education. At least one month will be needed to find, collect, and organize resources which will include videos, websites, research, and blogs. I will also need time to determine which sources will be most accessible and user-friendly to busy teachers. These are the resources I will showcase. The next piece of time used for the resource guide will include building google docs that present the resources in an organized way. Finally, I will need one to two weeks to create a presentation, self-assessment form, reflective questions, and surveys gauging teachers’ opinions on the effectiveness of the project as they interact with the material it provides.

Effectiveness

The potential ways that educators can interact with the resource guide are varied. Still, there are ways to determine how well the pieces of the capstone project demonstrate how teachers can empower students with learning differences. A survey will be used to assess the effectiveness of the presentation in meeting its objective of learning how to empower students with learning differences. Also, another survey will be used after teachers have spent time with the resource guide to assess its effectiveness in meeting a similar objective. Both of these survey tools will use a five point Likert scale. Teachers will also be able to reflect on how their own
abilities to empower students with learning differences have grown should they use the reflection question sets.

Summary

The components of this project provide information to be used in an interactive professional setting that answers the question, *How can teachers empower students with learning differences towards an equitable education?* The project has been designed to accommodate flexible uses including self-directed teacher learning, group study and reflection, or to simply act as an informative guide. There are four parts that comprise the project: a presentation, a self-assessment, a resource guide, and reflective question sets. Since each piece of the project gives tools to teachers to empower students with learning differences, the project can also be seen as addressing the needs of a population of students through an equity lens. This situates the project to be a possible tool for promoting equity for students with learning differences. In the fourth and final chapter of this capstone project I will reflect on what I have learned from the creation of this project. I will summarize the literature I drew from to create the project and continue to discuss how my capstone work has influenced my own teaching practice.
CHAPTER FOUR

Critical Reflection

Introduction

In this chapter I reflect on what my capstone project has taught me and what it may teach others. I recall the students I wrote about in chapter one who influenced my rationale for developing the guiding question, How can teachers empower students with learning differences towards an equitable education? My dream is that learning that happens as a result of this project will grow in me and others so we can better support the students who provided my inspiration to start this work in the first place.

I begin this chapter by reflecting on what I have gained personally from the long process of researching, the many hours of writing, and the challenging learning that went into this project. I also state the themes of my research from chapter two again, and I note several researchers that profoundly influenced my thinking and the content of my capstone project. Additionally, I share my impressions of what my project could mean for educators in general. I also speculate on what other supports besides my project could help teachers empower students with learning differences. There are two limitations that could impact the delivery and impact of my project that I address. I also investigate possible avenues for further research, share how I will communicate with other educators about my project, and reflect on the overall promise my work has in benefiting educators.

Researching, Writing, and Learning

Reflecting on the work sessions, processes, conversations, and thinking I have undertaken while creating this capstone project is both mind-boggling and rewarding. It has taken all the
skills I have acquired as a researcher, writer, and student to develop my project—as well as the
development of some skills that were new for me. Research on this project began with a general
notion that I had that students with learning differences or disabilities have really struggled in the
educational systems in which I have worked. I also had some prior assumptions about why
students with learning disabilities struggled because of how educational systems view disability.
I went from not knowing if I could find enough research for my project to realizing there was a
wealth of literature in existence that is only continuing to grow. The most difficult aspects of
researching were organizational. It was necessary for me to rephrase the wording of my question
several times. Once I settled on a solid question, it became easier to understand, organize, and
synthesize what I found in scholarly literature. Common themes began to appear that I could
weave together when presenting arguments and findings. In the research phase of the project
patience was also essential. Much of the literature I read was heavily philosophical as well as
written in an academic style. This took time to comprehend and synthesize into my own learning.
Patience also helped in locating sources and ideas. For example, the terms person-centered
planning and disability studies in education did not appear in my research until I had completed
several drafts of chapter two already and I was well into working on my project.

The writing of this capstone project took many stages. First I drafted my literature review
followed by chapter one, chapter three, and this chapter. Chapter one came easily to me, as I
knew that my topic was important to me personally, could draw on my experiences, and had
thought considerably about empowering students with learning differences before writing about
it. Chapter two was difficult to write because I translated difficult ideas into more understandable
language. This was no easy task. The biggest challenge in relation to writing was drafting and
revising. I had not written anything before this project where I had reached the stage of a fourth or fifth draft. Also, since my understanding of my topic and what I would do for a project has been fluid, the writing process has required me to rewrite as my learning has evolved. I have edited my writing after looking at it through various lenses: grammar, tone, organization, content, etc. This has deepened my appreciation for what it takes to produce good writing.

The biggest skill I have developed as a learner during the span of this capstone project has been focusing on small manageable pieces. Often in the capstone project, I faced times of uncertainty when I lost clarity on what I was doing, when I was not sure how to resolve or address a particular aspect of my work, or when I doubted if threads I followed could be incorporated into my project at all. Focusing on small tasks has been essential to keep moving forward during uncertainty. For instance, instead of jumping into a section of a chapter I did not have any clarity about yet, I made sure all my sentences had the right amount of spaces. It is amazing to me when I look at the entirety of my capstone work, that it all came about one little bit at a time.

Research Reflection

I have not only learned about myself throughout the process of creating a capstone project. I have also gained more understanding of empowering students with learning differences from conducting a review of literature which I outlined in chapter two of this project. In the first section of this review, I collected and described research that illustrated contemporary problems that students with learning differences face in schools. In the second part of the review I listed and explained research that articulated ways to empower students with learning differences. Both
of these parts of the review contained work that inspired my understanding of how learning
difference is negotiated in schools and the scope of my project.

The first section of the literature review is divided into four parts. These parts are: the
dilemma of difference, stigma, labelling, and deficit-based approaches. Minow’s (1985) work
with the dilemma of difference, and Paugh & Dudley-Marling’s (2011) contribution to
understanding deficit-based teacher discourses particularly struck me. Initially, before I read
these works, I had faint concerns about how teachers approach learning differences that I had
wondered about. Both of these works succinctly and clearly articulated thinking about learning
differences that truly expanded what I understood. I had no idea that the issues I had raised
within myself about teaching students with learning differences had been engaged with in such a
critical and explicit manner. Minow (1985) validated my concern surrounding differentiated
support and unaddressed social stigma. Paugh & Dudley-Marling’s (2011) work on deficit based
approaches in teaching students with learning differences convinced me of the problematic
nature of this phenomenon. I was also encouraged that Paugh & Dudley Marling (2011) had
investigated how a teacher might move towards strength based teaching. Since I was so
impressed by the way these researchers (Minow, 1985; Paugh & Dudley-Marling, 2011)
illuminated difficult—and sometimes hard to digest—concepts, I referenced both of their work
in my resource guide. I also presented ideas from these scholars in the informative slideshow
piece of my project. Minow (1985) and Paugh & Dudley-Marling’s (2011) work inspired me to
create a resource guide that built off the difficult issues they raised and collected resources to
help face these challenges in the classroom.
The second section of my literature review discussed approaches, mindsets, and ways that could support teachers to empower students in the classroom. These methods were: seeing how learning disabilities can be socially constructed, using competence or strength based approaches and language, becoming familiar with person-first language and philosophy, using person-centered approaches, learning from the neurodiversity movement, and imagining new ways to understand disability. In working on my project I consolidated these approaches further into four categories: disability studies in education, person-first and person-centered approaches, appreciating neurodiversity, and strength based approaches. From early on in my research I was influenced heavily by Dudley-Marling's (2004) description of learning disabilities as a social construction. Dudley-Marling (2004) also spoke about the limitations of medical models of disability. Dudley-Marling (2004) argued that education is heavily reliant on this limited model which need not be the case. I noticed other researchers came to similar conclusions (Brantlinger, 2004; Mueller, 2019). It was not until I was in the thick of developing my project that I found a name for scholarship that disagreed with deficit based discourse surrounding disability, rejected the medical model of disability, advocated for inclusion as an equity issue, and saw how disability is socially and politically constructed. These are all tenets of disability studies in education (DSE) (Connor et al., 2008). This development was surprising, and it allowed me to focus and organize my resource guide in a stronger way. I could incorporate the different threads common to DSE in one topic.

Another unexpected development occurred in the way I learned about person-centered planning. I was reading a work by Cosier & Ashby (2016) which referenced the use of person-centered planning. Cosier & Ashby (2016) edited a book about incorporating the work of
disability studies in education into mainstream educational settings. I was excited to learn about person-centered planning which had gone underneath my research radar previously. I was influenced by the caring approach that person-centered planning emphasizes in goal setting or planning with students with learning differences. I found Keyes & Owens-Johnson (2003) work in which they suggest a template for developing person-centered individual education plans (IEPs) groundbreaking. I thought this way of planning could potentially positively influence teachers’ assessments and other goal setting objectives for use with students with learning differences. Resources related to person-centered planning are showcased in the resource guide that I created for teachers including Keyes & Owens-Johnson’s work on person-centered IEPs.

**Implications for education**

The work of reviewing, understanding, and synthesizing literature related to supporting students with learning differences was no small task. I also constructed a project which provides tools for incorporating learning about ways to empower students with learning differences into teacher professional development. I have reflected on what my project revealed about the work of supporting students with learning differences and the resources this type of work would need to be effective. First, the work I have done has pointed to the prevalence of inequitable learning situations for many students with learning differences. It is with sadness that I agree with Baglieri et al. (2011), who wrote that discrimination of people with disabilities hasn’t received the amount of attention that other types of discrimination that have received. I am happy that the work I have done in researching and developing a project for teachers’ professional use takes a small step in shining a spotlight on inequitable issues facing students with learning differences. I think the spotlight that is currently shining on inequities for students with learning differences or
disabilities in education will need to become stronger and grow wider for change to occur. This would take time, attention from educators and the general public, hard work, and funding. The current situation for students and educators in general is so very uncertain that it is hard to even guess if such factors will come together. Currently, students are mostly engaged in a digital learning environment due to a pandemic, and concerns related to the inequity of this situation for students with learning differences have been in the forefront of the media. Unfortunately, the current pandemic has been a step backward for everyone—particularly for students with learning differences—and time will tell how educators can progress forward. My hope is that greater awareness for supporting learning differences continues to grow in the teaching profession.

Limitations

In addition to considering the implications for education that my project led me to discover, I have also reflected on what variables may limit the effectiveness of my project. There were two limitations that may impact the effectiveness of my capstone project. One limitation is that much of the scholarship and ideas surrounding themes of empowering learning differences in education may be unfamiliar to an audience of educators. Disability studies in education (DSE) was coined as a term in 1999 (Balgieri et.al, 2011), the term neurodiversity was created in the 1990’s (Armstrong, 2017), and Wells & Sheehy (2012) talk of person-centered planning coming into existence in the 1990’s. These ideas have been around for several decades, but may not have reached a large general audience. If my own experience is an indicator, I first learned of DSE and person-centered planning only after a considerable search through literature. Because of the potential unfamiliarity of these topics, the time it takes to present a thorough examination of how to empower students with learning differences could be longer than anticipated. In short,
different degrees of familiarity with this capstone’s subject matter would create variability in how long the presentation piece of my project would take to be effective.

Another limitation is that teachers will need to bring their own creativity, efforts, and thinking in order to implement the mindsets, processes, or approaches that make up this project into their classroom. The resource guide and presentation do contain some specifics on how a teacher could do this in the form of lesson plans, book recommendations, and examples of positive speech, etc., but these will not work in every situation. Also, DSE in particular is an academic field that does not necessarily translate easily to an elementary educator’s practice. Cosier and Ashby (2016) acknowledged the difficulty teachers have had in trying to do so.

Cosier & Ashby’s (2016) work was written in part to ease the difficulty of incorporating DSE into educational settings. Fortunately, this work is included in the resource guide as well as other approaches in the area of DSE that could benefit teachers in empowering learning differences.

**Future Research**

I am most intrigued to continue research on person-centered planning to empower students with learning differences. I see possibilities for adapting assessments and academic goal setting tools that I use as an intervention teacher so they affirm students and reflect their own desires and needs. Already, I have started a practice of making extra space for noting the reading strengths of my students on a reading assessment tool that I often use. My school actively encourages building academic or social emotional goals with students already. I think learning more about person-centered planning could allow me to develop this process to be even more empowering for students. I would like to examine the person-centered planning process—particularly Making Action Plans (MAPS)—in detail to familiarize myself with it.
Lastly, I would like to learn more about creating a strength-based culture in a particular classroom or even a school.

**Using the project**

In chapter three, I outlined my plans for implementing my project in the current elementary school setting where I work. I also intend to raise awareness of the subject matter of empowering learning differences, and use my project to network with like-minded teachers in the school district I work in. Equipped with new knowledge and tools from creating this capstone project, I am more confident about speaking about this type of work with colleagues. I plan to connect with other educators in my district so I can begin to share the resources I’ve created beyond my school setting. The resource guides in my project in particular can be easily shared in person or via computer. Also, I have created self-reflection questions to use with the resource guide so that educators can communicate the results of their journey towards empowering learning differences.

**Benefits to educators**

My stated intention in chapter three was that exposure to the ideas and practices within my project would be a catalyst for growth in teachers as it has been for me. Throughout my work on this capstone, a conviction that teaching all students equitably is of the utmost importance has only grown in me. The importance of empowering students with learning differences and the ways this might be done have come into much clearer and sharper focus for me as the result of working on this project. It is my belief that the project I have created could assist other teachers to make similar growth.
My project seeks to create equitable learning situations for students through sharing helpful mindsets, information, approaches, lessons, language, and processes for teachers. I think the resource guide shares these elements in an effective way. My presentation also presents helpful information that can act as an entryway for teachers to see why it is essential to learn how to empower students with learning differences. Teachers will also be introduced to methods for supporting students with learning differences equitably. The resource guide and accompanying reflective questions can benefit teachers as long as they are motivated to engage with the material presented in these tools.

Summary

This chapter allowed me the opportunity to reflect on my capstone learning journey which began even before I developed my guiding question: How can teachers empower students with learning differences towards an equitable education? I was challenged to my core throughout the capstone process, and I learned about myself as a researcher, writer, and learner in general. Researchers paved the way for me to envision a project that could help provide perspectives and tools for teachers to support students with learning differences. I can now see future research that I might conduct and the potential benefits my work may have for other educators. My main hope is that this capstone will assist teachers to engage, work with, and care for their students, and that students will ultimately experience any benefits that have come from the production of this capstone project. Students inspired my initial question, and—although the work of this project has focused on working with teachers—it is in a more equitable present and future for students that my hopes reside.
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