



Walking in Two Different Shoes: Bridging the Chasm Between Inclusive Policy and Lived Reality

[Handout](#)[Blog](#)

Walking in Two Different Shoes

Handouts and Overview

Educator

In one pair of shoes, I'm a high school teacher. I understand the system from the inside: the budget constraints, the staffing shortages, the pressure of standardized tests.

Mother

But when the bell rings, I step into my other shoes. As a mother, I am an advocate, fighting to ensure my son's needs are met and his own methods of communication are respected. I live in what often feels like a 'constant war zone' fighting for the services, dignity, and safety that the law promises.



My Son, A Mind Full of Words

"I have a little boy who absolutely delights in the alphabet. At barely over a year old, he could recite a list of words that started with every letter... Then he would do it backwards."

"I have a little boy who hasn't done that for years... but I know it's still in there."

This story is crucial because it shatters the assumption that non-speaking means non-thinking. The potential is there. The question is whether our systems are designed to see it and nurture it.

 Google Docs

Letters.MP4



The Core of the Struggle: Ableism

Ableism Defined

The societal belief that certain types of bodies and minds are more valuable than others.



Personal Impact

In the early days of my son's diagnosis, I felt the crushing weight of how our society measures a life: How soon can they walk? How much can they read? Are they 'bright'?



Google Docs



Dance.MP4



The Ultimate Consequence of Devaluation

"I recently learned that if someone with cognitive disabilities has a failing organ... they aren't eligible to receive a donated organ."

⊗ A system can decide a life is not worth saving based on a disability.

This is why people ask, "What's his special talent?" They are searching for a way to assign value to him. His life is valuable without a special talent that makes others comfortable.

Front 1: The War of Attrition (Fighting the System)

The Bureaucratic Nightmare

Generic resource lists with dead ends, endless urgent paperwork, and fighting for services that are repeatedly and wrongly terminated.

⚠ My son's Medicaid has been canceled every year since 2021, despite his disability being lifelong. This requires formal appeals, hearings, and hours spent waiting in lines, only to have it happen all over again.



Front 2: The Fear for Safety (When School Isn't Safe)

2x

Higher Risk

Disabled children are more than twice as likely to experience violence.

17%

Student Population

Disabled students represent 17% of the total student population.

81%

Physical Restraint

Disabled students represent 81% of those physically restrained.

75%

Seclusion

Disabled students represent 75% of those placed in seclusion.

Non-speaking children are at an even higher risk of abuse because they often cannot report it.

This fear is compounded by vague school reports: *'escalated at breakfast, really agitated at lunch, hard afternoon.'* This tells me nothing about *why*.

Front 3: The Competence Gap (The Fight to Be Seen)

"When I speak about my son's intelligence... I am often met with looks of pity, as if I am a mother in denial."

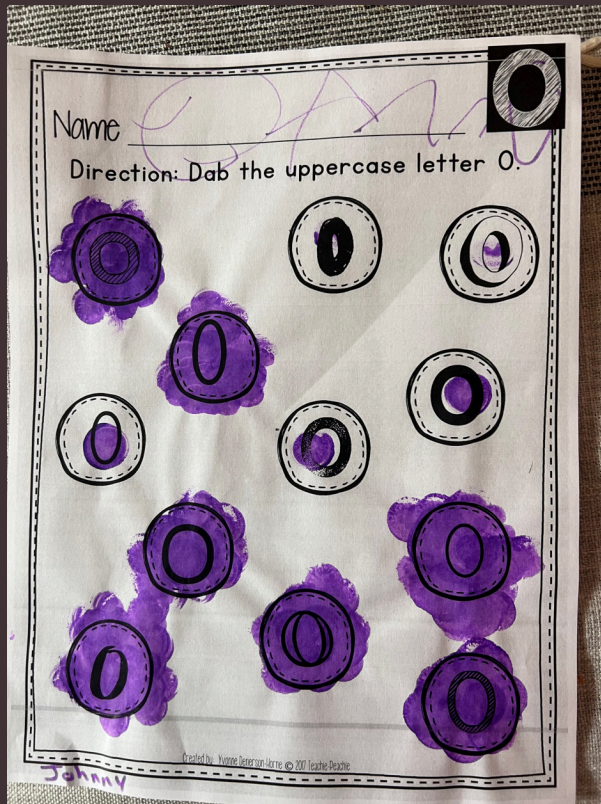
The system is so
focused on his
deficits, it is blind to
his strengths.



The Devastating Contrast

The School's View

My son is 9. For most of last year, his school day consisted of learning one color and circling it on a worksheet.



My Reality

Last night, he called me an 'uncultured swine'—a line from *Toy Story*—to express his frustration. He uses echolalia as a sophisticated tool to communicate complex emotions.



The Consequence of Not Being Heard



Zero Patience

My son has almost zero patience because he has spent a lifetime learning that people don't listen to him.



Ignored Communication

When your most nuanced attempts at communication are ignored, what tool do you have left?



Reliable Response

For him, aggression has become the only form of communication that gets a reliable response. The system created this behavior, and now it punishes him for it.





The Culture of Ableism in Schools

"I've heard staff say they 'couldn't even bear to look at' an autistic student on the morning news because it was 'disgusting.'"

"I've heard 'autism' used as a slur by students day after day with no correction from staff."

Not educating yourself on ableism is like teaching biology without knowing anything about it, just making it up as you go because you've decided the student doesn't really matter.

Activity: The Compounded Challenge

Goal

To experience the combined difficulty of sensory overload and using a new communication method.

Instructions are on your handout.





Your Role as an Inclusive Leader

The principal sets the culture. You decide if your school is a place of true belonging or simply a place of legal compliance.

Here are five commitments I ask you to make as you step into leadership.

Commitment 1: Champion Neurodiversity & Presume Competence

See the difference, not the disorder.

Assume they are capable; they will usually surprise you.

Ask "How is this child smart?" not "What are this child's deficits?"



Commitment 2: Believe Parents

We hold a unique and essential expertise on our children's needs.
We are not your enemies.

When a parent tells you their child is struggling, believe them, even if you 'don't see it at school.' That is often a sign of masking.





Commitment 3: Mandate Meaningful Training

Beyond Basic PD

A one-hour PD is not enough.

Continuous Learning

Your staff needs deep, continuous training in practical strategies: Universal Design for Learning, sensory-friendly classrooms, and de-escalation.

Authentic Voices

Bring in autistic adults to lead some of these sessions.

Commitment 4: Support Your Staff

No Excuses

Stress is not an excuse for harmful practices.

Resource Advocacy

Fight for the resources your school needs: more aides, smaller classes, and planning time.

Safe Culture

Foster a culture where it's safe for teachers to admit they are struggling and ask for help.



Commitment 5: Be the Moral Compass

Your silence is complicity. Your action sets the standard.

When you hear derogatory language, when you see a child being excluded, when you witness an IEP team trying to deny services—you must intervene.




Final Thoughts: Build the Bridge

The gap between the promise of inclusion and the reality our children live is vast, but it is not insurmountable.

It is bridged with empathy, with resources, with training, and most of all, with leadership that refuses to accept the status quo.

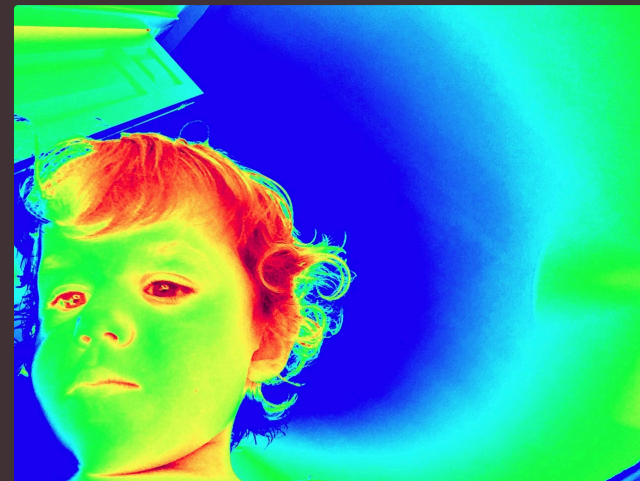
Presume competence. Lead with empathy. Build the bridge.



 Google Docs



Johnny Shapes Short (1).wmv



Q&A

Sarah Wenger