

PANEL FIVE: The Neurodiversity Movement (2010-present)

EDUCATOR DISCUSSION GUIDE

For K-12 Teachers

Overview: This panel explores the neurodiversity movement, self-advocacy, evolving language around disability, and shifting philosophies about the goals of services. Students will grapple with complex questions about identity, acceptance, and what it means to value diversity.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL (Grades K-5)

Key Concepts for Young Learners:

- Everyone's brain works differently—that's called neurodiversity
- People with disabilities are the experts on their own experiences
- Words matter when we talk about differences
- We should respect how people want to be described

Discussion Questions:

1. The panel says "neurodiversity" means everyone's brain works differently. How is your brain different from your friends' brains? How do you each learn best?
2. Why do you think it's important to ask people how they want to be described instead of just deciding for them?
3. The panel talks about "acceptance" being more than "awareness." What's the difference? (Awareness = knowing something exists; Acceptance = respecting and including)
4. What does it mean to be a "self-advocate"? How can you speak up for yourself when you need something?

Activity: "Celebrating Differences"

- Have each student share something about how they learn, think, or experience the world that's unique to them
- Create a class "Neurodiversity Celebration" poster showing all the different ways brains can work
- Discuss: How does having different kinds of brains make our classroom better?

Simple Concepts:

Neurodiversity: "Just like flowers come in many colors and types, brains come in many types too. All kinds of brains are valuable."

Self-Advocacy: "Speaking up for yourself and telling people what you need."

Acceptance: "Not just knowing about differences, but celebrating them and making sure everyone belongs."

Book Connections:

- "All My Stripes: A Story for Children with Autism" by Shaina Rudolph
- "A Friend Like Simon" by Kate Gaynor
- "Different Like Me" by Jennifer Elder
- "I Talk Like a River" by Jordan Scott

MIDDLE SCHOOL (Grades 6-8)

Key Concepts:

- Neurodiversity framework vs. medical model of disability
- Self-advocacy movements and the role of social media
- Person-first vs. identity-first language debate
- Shift from deficit-focused to strengths-based approaches
- "Nothing about us without us" principle

Discussion Questions:

1. The panel explains "neurodiversity" as recognizing that neurological differences are natural variations, not defects. How does this framework change how we think about autism, ADHD, or dyslexia?
2. Why did autistic self-advocates reject the puzzle piece symbol and "light it up blue" campaigns? What do symbols communicate beyond their literal meaning?
3. The panel describes a shift from "autism awareness" to "autism acceptance." What's the difference? Why does that distinction matter?
4. The panel explains that some people prefer "person with a disability" while others prefer "disabled person." Why might this choice be important to someone? What does it reveal about how we think about disability?
5. The phrase "nothing about us without us" means people with disabilities should be involved in decisions that affect them. Where else does this principle apply? (Think about other groups fighting for representation)
6. How did social media change the disability rights movement? What made it different from previous eras?

Activity: "Language and Identity"

Have students explore the person-first vs. identity-first debate:

- Research the arguments on both sides
- Read perspectives from disabled people explaining their preferences
- Discuss: When have you wanted control over how you're described?
- Create a guide: "How to Ask Someone Their Preferred Language"

Research Project:

Investigate one of these topics:

- The Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN): history, goals, impact
- Disability representation in media 2010-present
- Social media hashtags in disability activism (#DisabilityTooWhite, #CripTheVote, #ActuallyAutistic)
- Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in schools

- The neurodiversity movement: origins and key figures

Writing Prompt:

"The panel asks: 'What if the goal isn't to make everyone normal, but to build a society that works for everyone?' What would a school look like if it was designed for everyone from the beginning? Describe your vision."

Critical Thinking:

The panel presents shifting approaches to therapy goals:

- **Old goal:** Eliminate hand-flapping
- **New question:** Does hand-flapping harm anyone? Should we respect self-regulation needs?

Discuss: How do we balance supporting children with respecting how they naturally are? Where's the line between helpful intervention and trying to change someone unnecessarily?

Connection to Today:

- Research disability representation in current TV shows, movies, or books
- Explore: Are disabled people playing disabled characters? Are disabled people creating content?
- Find examples of neurodiversity-affirming practices in your community

HIGH SCHOOL (Grades 9-12)

Key Concepts:

- Medical model vs. social model vs. neurodiversity paradigm of disability
- Intersectionality in disability rights (race, class, gender, disability)
- Power dynamics in who defines "normal" and who benefits from conformity
- Self-determination and disability justice frameworks
- Ethical questions about therapy goals, compliance, and autonomy
- Ableism as systemic discrimination

Discussion Questions:

1. **Paradigm Shifts:** The panel describes evolution from medical model (disability as individual deficit) to social model (disability created by barriers) to neurodiversity paradigm (neurological differences as natural variation). Compare these frameworks. What are the implications of each for education, employment, relationships?
2. **Identity Politics:** Many autistic people prefer identity-first language ("autistic person") while many organizations use person-first language ("person with autism"). Research the political and philosophical arguments behind each. How does language construct identity? Who has power to define how groups are named?
3. **Whose Goals Matter?** The panel contrasts traditional therapy goals (appear less disabled) with neurodiversity-informed goals (support well-being and meaningful participation). Analyze this shift through the lens of autonomy and power. Who has historically decided what counts as "appropriate" behavior? Who benefits from compliance-based approaches?

4. **Intersectionality:** The panel mentions that "most therapists and service providers are white" and asks about cultural responsiveness. Research disability justice frameworks that address intersections of race, class, gender, and disability. How do multiple marginalized identities compound barriers?
5. **Social Media and Activism:** Compare the disability rights movement before and after social media. How did digital platforms democratize who could speak about disability? What are limitations or dangers of online activism?
6. **Autism Acceptance vs. Awareness:** Research the controversy around Autism Speaks and why autistic self-advocates criticize it. What does this reveal about conflicts between parent-led and self-advocate-led organizations? How do we navigate when parents and disabled adults disagree?

Research Project Options:

Option 1: Neurodiversity Movement Analysis

Deep research into the neurodiversity movement:

- Historical origins (Judy Singer, Jim Sinclair's "Don't Mourn For Us" speech)
- Key organizations (ASAN, NeuroClastic, Thinking Person's Guide to Autism)
- Philosophical underpinnings
- Critiques and limitations
- Impact on policy and practice

Create a comprehensive analysis with multiple perspectives.

Option 2: Disability Representation Study

Analyze disability representation in media:

- Survey TV shows, films, or books from 2010-present
- Percentage of disabled characters vs. disabled population
- Who plays disabled characters? (disabled actors or non-disabled?)
- How are disabled characters portrayed? (victims, inspirations, complex people?)
- Who creates content? (disabled writers, directors, producers?)

Present findings with recommendations for improvement.

Option 3: Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) Controversy

Research the debates around ABA therapy for autism:

- History of ABA and its founder Ivar Lovaas
- Current ABA practices
- Why many autistic adults describe ABA as harmful or traumatic
- How providers respond to criticisms
- Alternative approaches

Write a balanced analysis examining multiple perspectives and ethical implications.

Option 4: Disability Justice Framework

Research disability justice (not just disability rights):

- How does disability justice differ from disability rights?

- Intersectionality and cross-movement solidarity
- Leadership by most impacted communities
- Connections to other social justice movements

Create an educational presentation explaining disability justice principles.

Philosophical Discussion:

1. **Normalcy and Power:** The panel asks "Who decides what 'appropriate' behavior is?" Discuss: Is there such thing as objective normalcy, or is it always culturally constructed? Who has power to define norms? Who benefits when people conform?
2. **Accommodation vs. Assimilation:** Is the goal to accommodate differences so disabled people can participate as they are? Or to help disabled people assimilate into non-disabled society? Can we do both? Where's the tension?
3. **Medical Necessity vs. Social Preference:** How do we distinguish between interventions that address genuine suffering or barriers (medical necessity) vs. interventions aimed at conformity (social preference)? Who decides?
4. **Parental Rights vs. Children's Rights:** Parents legally make decisions for minor children, including therapy decisions. But autistic adults say some therapies they experienced as children were harmful. How do we navigate this? What voice should children have?

Connection to Current Issues:

- Research current debates about autism and other neurodevelopmental diagnoses
- Explore universal design in college campuses and workplaces
- Investigate employment rates for people with disabilities
- Analyze COVID-19's impact on disability community
- Research current legislation affecting disability rights

Writing Assignments:

1. **Argumentative Essay:** "The neurodiversity movement challenges fundamental assumptions about the goals of early intervention. Should services focus on helping children 'appear normal' or on supporting well-being regardless of whether children seem disabled? Defend your position."
2. **Policy Analysis:** "Evaluate early intervention services through a neurodiversity lens. What practices align with neurodiversity principles? What practices need reevaluation?"
3. **Personal Narrative:** "Research and interview someone with a disability (if possible). Write about their experiences with education, healthcare, or services. How do their perspectives align with or challenge what you learned in this exhibit?"
4. **Comparative Analysis:** "Compare disability rights activism across the five panels of this exhibit. How have goals, strategies, and leadership changed from 1960s to present?"

INTERACTIVE QUIZ

10 Questions for Google Forms or similar

Question 1: What does "neurodiversity" mean?

- A) Everyone should think the same way
- B) Neurological differences are natural variations in how brains work, not defects
- C) Only neurotypical people matter
- D) Disability is a medical problem to fix

Correct Answer: B

Explanation: Neurodiversity recognizes that human brains naturally develop in many different ways, creating diverse ways of thinking and learning. It views differences as natural variation rather than defects.

Question 2: What's the difference between "autism awareness" and "autism acceptance"?

- A) There is no difference
- B) Awareness means knowing autism exists; acceptance means valuing autistic people as they are
- C) Acceptance came before awareness
- D) Awareness is better than acceptance

Correct Answer: B

Explanation: Awareness means knowing autism exists. Acceptance goes further—it means valuing autistic people as they are, accommodating differences, and listening to autistic voices.

Question 3: Why did autistic self-advocates object to the puzzle piece symbol?

- A) They don't like puzzles
- B) It was the wrong color
- C) It implies autistic people are puzzles to be solved or incomplete
- D) It's too complicated

Correct Answer: C

Explanation: Many autistic self-advocates found the puzzle piece dehumanizing because it implied they were puzzles to be solved, incomplete, or missing something. They prefer symbols like the infinity symbol.

Question 4: What does "person-first language" mean?

- A) Always putting yourself first
- B) Saying "person with a disability" to emphasize the person before the disability
- C) Only disabled people can use it
- D) It's the only correct way to talk

Correct Answer: B

Explanation: Person-first language emphasizes the person before the disability (e.g., "person with autism"). Some people prefer this, though others prefer identity-first language ("autistic person").

Question 5: What does "identity-first language" mean?

- A) Using someone's name first
- B) Saying "disabled person" or "autistic person" to recognize disability as part of identity
- C) Ignoring disability completely
- D) Only for people with ID cards

Correct Answer: B

Explanation: Identity-first language treats disability as an integral part of identity (e.g., "autistic person" rather than "person with autism"). Many disabled people prefer this because disability isn't something separate to overcome.

Question 6: What does "nothing about us without us" mean?

- A) Disabled people should be isolated
- B) Professionals should make all decisions
- C) People with disabilities must be meaningfully involved in decisions that affect them
- D) Parents should speak for their children forever

Correct Answer: C

Explanation: "Nothing about us without us" is a disability rights principle asserting that people with disabilities must be meaningfully included in any policy, research, or service decisions that affect them.

Question 7: How did social media change the disability rights movement?

- A) It didn't change anything
- B) It allowed disabled people to speak directly to audiences without professional filters
- C) It made advocacy unnecessary
- D) Only professionals could use it

Correct Answer: B

Explanation: Social media allowed disabled activists to share their experiences, challenge stereotypes, and organize movements directly, without needing parents, professionals, or media as intermediaries.

Question 8: According to the neurodiversity framework, what should therapy goals focus on?

- A) Making children appear as "normal" as possible
- B) Supporting well-being and meaningful participation while respecting who children are
- C) Eliminating all disabled traits
- D) Forcing compliance with arbitrary norms

Correct Answer: B

Explanation: Neurodiversity-informed approaches focus on functional skills and quality of life rather than just appearing "normal," respecting each child's way of experiencing the world while addressing genuine challenges.

Question 9: What is an example of shifting from deficit-focused to strengths-based goals?

- A) Forcing eye contact when it's painful
- B) Eliminating harmless stimming behaviors
- C) Asking whether a behavior causes harm before trying to eliminate it
- D) Making all children exactly the same

Correct Answer: C

Explanation: Rather than automatically trying to eliminate behaviors that look different (like stimming), neurodiversity-informed approaches ask whether the behavior causes harm and whether it serves a purpose for the child.

Question 10: How has United Services for Children evolved in response to the neurodiversity movement?

- A) The organization hasn't changed at all
- B) The organization stopped providing services
- C) The organization integrated neurodiversity-informed practices, staff training, and consultation with autistic adults
- D) The organization only serves neurotypical children now

Correct Answer: C

Explanation: United Services has evolved to include neurodiversity-informed practices, trains staff in these principles, and emphasizes respect for differences while providing support.

BONUS REFLECTION QUESTION (Open-ended):

"The panel concludes by saying people with disabilities 'don't need to be fixed—they need to be valued.' What does this mean to you? How might this perspective change how we think about disability and support?"
