

# Connect-Ability



A newsletter on disabilities awareness prepared by and for students



Febryn Williams

## An interview with Maria Neira, NYSUT vice president

With Lauren Ha

**Q Lauren:** What made you choose teaching and did you like teaching?

**A Maria:** It was an exciting experience for me to teach. I first taught in the community that I grew up in. My

father earned a teaching degree but never taught, so he really wanted one of his children to become a teacher. I was the oldest and my sister always said it was destined to be me since as a child I never wanted to play anything but school. I knew a lot of the parents of my students because many of them were neighbors and children of my father's friends. Knowing my students' families helped me to create a learning environment that was responsive to their needs. My father was surprised to learn, while playing baseball with his friends, that his daughter, as a brand new teacher, was viewed as "pretty tough."

**Q Lauren:** Did you have different experiences when teaching outside of your community?

**A Maria:** Yes. After fifteen years of being in the classroom, I went to the Bronx and became a professional staff developer. It was a new experience to coach my colleagues but I continued to spend time in the classroom to help me keep focused on students.

**Q Lauren:** There was one question on our interview protocol that we asked all 80 people we interviewed and I'd like to ask you. You've been hired to teach elementary students about disabilities. What is one idea/point/concept you would include in your teaching?

**A Maria:** I would want to help teachers create classrooms that were affirming for each student and gave each student an opportunity for success. I would want teachers to help

students focus on strengths and not on their classmates' disabilities. We need to make sure that students with disabilities feel that they belong and are not just tolerated but truly accepted. I would want teachers and students to work together to make that happen. It's a challenging job but an important one. We must remember that every student can learn, and teachers can ask students to work with them to create the best environment for learning.

**Q Lauren:** Valoree Lisi and I, as co-editors of *Connect-Ability*, want to thank you for your support. Working on *Connect-Ability* has been a great experience for us but we are wondering why you think it is so important.

**A Maria:** When I first heard about *Connect Ability* it was through a local news article on how it was losing its funding and needed a new sponsor. I remember thinking "How could they let that happen?" NYSUT officers were all classroom teachers and committed to supporting students so we could not let this program go away. *Connect-Ability* is unique because it comes totally from the perspective of the student. It gives students a voice. They are the consumers of education, after all, and many times they have been silenced in the process. *Connect-Ability* is not just a newsletter for students with disabilities. It is for all students working together to instill positive attitudes and improve life in our schools. We are all in a better place when we listen to what students have to say.



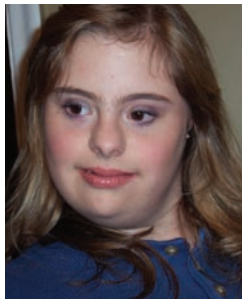
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## Editorials

### Valoree Lisi

I think all teachers need a toolkit on disability awareness. This will help them to teach all kids about disabilities. Everyone needs to know that there are many ways to learn. The way I learn is visually with the help of graphic organizers. This is my unique learning style. A highlighter and a check list also help me learn. When I was younger I would go with my mom to work. She worked with kids with disabilities. I learned a lot about other disabilities through helping my mom. Teachers didn't talk much about disabilities in school.



I was included in a regular education classroom from when I was in pre-school up until 12th grade. I think that teachers need to explain about disabilities and teach kids how to include everyone. Teachers can invite students with disabilities to add their own experiences in a classroom presentation. They can talk about the similarities they share with other students. I say, "Be proud of your disability." You're an expert and you should know the importance of advocating for yourself. Speak up and teach others about your strengths and abilities.

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### Lauren Ha, Albany High School

This issue includes a lot of numbers. Yes, for those of you reading this issue of *Connect-Ability* and thinking that you are in a statistics class, let me be the one to tell you that it's not as bad as it first appears. These particular numbers were collected to help us help you understand more about disabilities. We *Connect-Ability* editorial board members have to give thanks to Catharine McHugh, Terry McSweeney, Thomas Corrado, Jackie St. John and all the other NYSUT staff for teaching us how to collect data, report them in tables, analyze them and make some sense out of them. The eighty people we interviewed as part of our data collection deserve a big "Thank you!" as well. And, of course, another thanks to our number one supporter, Maria Neira, NYSUT's VP, who agreed to take time from her busy schedule to be interviewed by me for the front cover So, on the count of three... 1,2,3 THANK YOU SO MUCH! Together, we have made a great beginning using these numbers to design a disabilities awareness toolkit for



teachers that will be a work in progress for 2011. As for my other experiences working as an editor on *Connect-Ability* it's been amazing. Of course, that word is clearly an understatement. Listing all the positive words to describe *Connect-Ability* would surely exceed the amount of pages that we have. I probably could pick from the word list we came up with for our interview protocol (see page 6) and choose words like "gift," "opportunity," "inspiration" or, on those particular days we all tend to encounter, "challenge." But like I said, that doesn't do it justice. If anyone of you can find and/or invent a better word to describe *Connect-Ability*, I would give you my eternal thanks. I would also like to hint at all of the stories behind the scenes of making new friends and sharing occasional mishaps. So look, read, analyze, and whatever else you can do with this issue. If you like what you see or even if you don't, I invite you to contact us. Help us make these numbers lead to something important.

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*Fahiyim Williams, a senior at Uniondale High School, has served as Connect-Ability's art editor since middle school. His illustrations of previous issues have been remarkable. He is the creator of the holding hands logo on the final page of every issue that speaks to Connect-Ability's spirit of inclusion. His art work has helped us communicate a unique disabilities awareness message that springs from both his own experience and his tremendous talent. To participate in the editorial board's work this year, Fahiyim drew portraits of NYSUT's VP, Maria Neira, and co-editor, Lauren Ha, to illustrate their front page interview.*

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## Got Attitude?

A disability awareness toolkit for teachers is something we had talked about doing for a long time. In 2010, we decided to take action. At our spring writing workshop, we developed a survey instrument to capture attitudes toward people with disabilities and give us some direction in developing our toolkit. During the summer workshop, we used the data collected to begin creating the toolkit for teachers. It has been a more challenging job than we first imagined but we wanted to report on our progress and let you know that we will continue to work on this in 2011. We welcome your comments.

All of the editorial board members felt strongly that the data should not be collected through impersonal, anonymous surveys but rather in “face-to-face” interviews that would take place in our own schools and communities. Direct contact with the interviewees would enable us to better understand the attitudes of our own family members, neighbors, and classmates toward people with disabilities. Many of us have been advocating for students with disabilities since middle school through our work with *Connect-Ability*. It was important for us to figure out how we can improve our own efforts to raise awareness as well as to help teachers reach out to more students.

To get a better idea of the interview process, we met with a panel of experienced interviewers during the March workshop. The panel included local college admissions staff, employment center directors, and professionals with disabilities. The panel members identified the elements of good interviews, stressing the importance of doing research to get ready for an interview, of being on time for the interview, of engaging with interviewees by asking as well as answering questions, and of remembering to relax and be ourselves. Panel members advised us to treat the interview like a conversation. Looking at interviewing from the perspective of being interviewed helped us see how to be better interviewers.

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**Interview (n.) 1514, “face-to-face meeting, formal conference,” from Fr. *entrevue*, verbal noun from *s’entrevoir* “to see each other, visit each other briefly, have a glimpse of.”**

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We then engaged in a lengthy conversation with the Capital District’s “premier interviewer,” Joe Donahue, host of a daily radio program, who interviews dozens of people each week. Mr. Donahue urged us to rely on our natural curiosity when conducting interviews. Illustrating a number of interview strategies with stories of his own experiences, he encouraged

us to ask questions that require more than a yes or no answer, never to interrupt a good story, and to ask one question at a time. It is better, he advised, for an interviewer to be a good listener than to recite pre-determined questions one after the other. There are many surprises along the way in interviewing, and he mentioned that he found his experiences of the last 20+ years to be both rewarding and educational. He told us he never tires of asking people questions and he wished us a similarly rewarding experience as we began our interviews.

### Tips for interviewers

- Introduce yourself and the survey
- Use small talk to break the ice
- Ask one question at a time
- Accept periods of silence
- Do not interrupt
- Do not challenge or criticize
- Take good notes/recording (permission)
- Close with a thank you

Listening to experienced interviewers helped us come up with the kinds of questions we thought would provide valuable information to include in a disabilities awareness toolkit for teachers. Working in small groups, we identified demographics that we considered important to our data collection. We agreed that it would be helpful to know the gender, age, ethnic group, and experience with disability or people with disabilities of each of the interviewees.

### Demographics

- Gender
- Age
- Race
- Experience with disability

We eventually drafted five questions which we believed would capture the information we were after. These five questions were edited and included in the interview protocol.

1. Tell me about your first experience with a person with a disability.
2. What is it about people with disabilities that causes others to make fun of them?
3. Why is it easy for people to feel sad about people with disabilities?



- From this list of words (see page 6) pick one GOOD word to describe DISABILITY and one POOR word to describe DISABILITY, and explain why you picked them.
- You've been hired to teach elementary school students about disabilities and people with disabilities. What is one idea/point/concept you would include in your teaching?

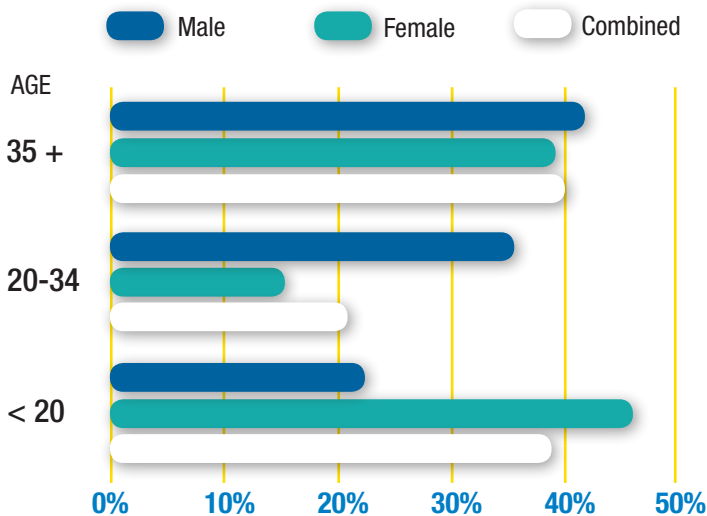
At the end of the two-day workshop, we came together to agree on the final protocol which we would use to conduct at least two interviews each in our schools or communities during the remainder of the school year.

Returning for the August workshop, we began analyzing the data we had collected. A total of 80 surveys were submitted by 26 students, far more than the assignment called for. We practiced reading the preliminary tables of data which had been prepared for us by our writing coach and answering each other's questions by referencing the appropriate data. Re-structuring the data by age and gender led to the design of additional tables. More analyses took place in small group discussions. Some of the results of our interviews are highlighted below in a variety of tables accompanied by a narrative including some comments by interviewees that seemed especially relevant to the development of the teacher toolkit.

## Who did we interview?

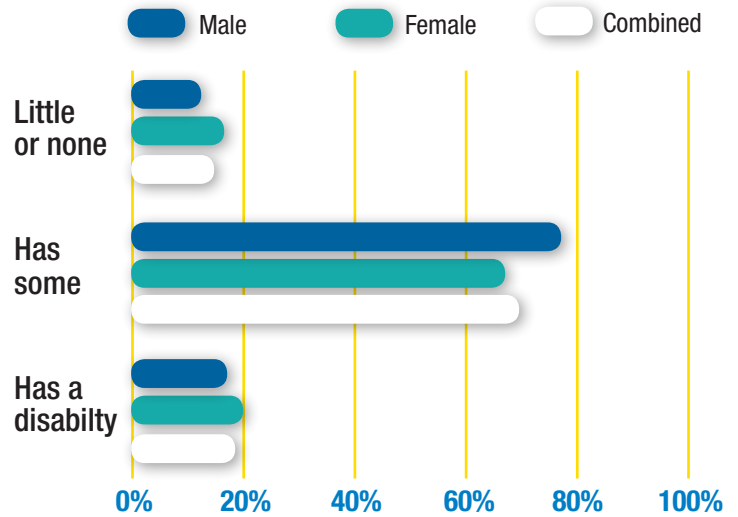
We interviewed 80 people, 54 females (68%) and 26 males (32%). The 80 interviewees were fairly evenly split between those who were 35 years of age or older (40%) and those under 20 (39%). Most males (42%) were 35 or older; most females (46%) were under 20 (Table 1).

**Table 1: Age of interviewees**



The majority of interviewees (70%) reported having had some experience with disability. Twenty percent of our interviewees had a disability, while 10% reported having had little or no contact with a person with a disability (Table 2).

**Table 2: Experience with disability**

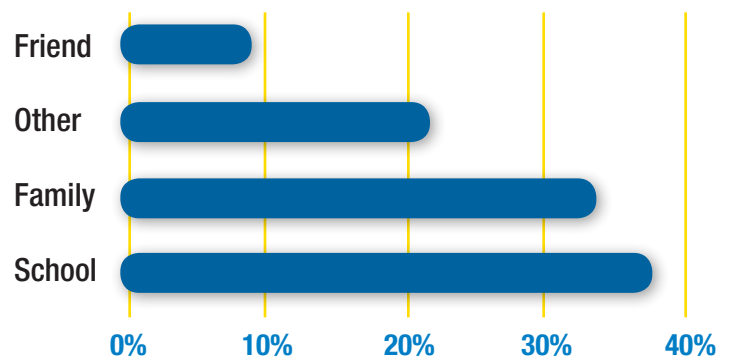


## What did our interviewees tell us?

**Question #1: Tell me about your first experience with a person with a disability.**

As we expected, the majority of interviewees (70%) told us that their first encounter with a person with a disability was either in school (36%) or at home (34%) (Table 3). Interestingly, however, when we asked them if they had received any information about disabilities either in school or at home, most said that they had not. This is important when considering how and where to introduce information about disabilities to students. In addition to providing information on disabilities in the classroom, school-based disabilities awareness programs may want to include materials for students to take home to use in family discussions.

**Table 3: First experience with a person with a disability**



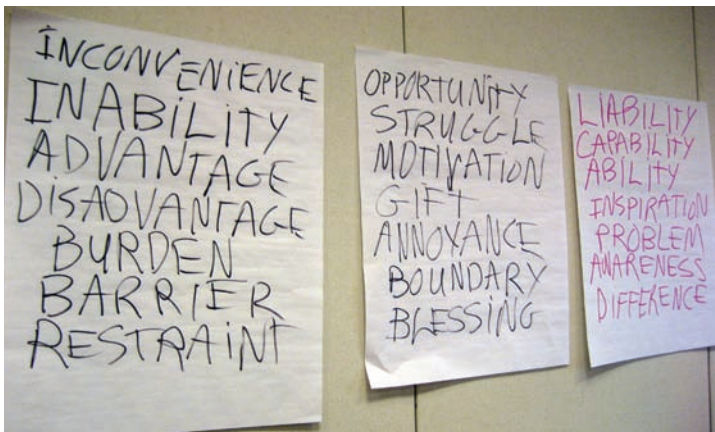
" I first noticed a classmate [with a disability] on the playground at recess. No one said anything."

My first experience was when I worked as an aide in an elementary school and they assigned me a kid with Downs syndrome.

" I saw my cousin on holidays who was obsessed by trains but I don't recall anyone explaining why."

" When I was a child my great aunt had a stroke and couldn't move her arm which she held motionless at her side. No one talked about it."

**Question #2: What is it about people with disabilities that**



Editorial board members make a word list

**causes other people to make fun of them?**

When asked to explain why people make fun of those with disabilities, interviewees gave answers that fell into two general categories – lack of information and intolerance (Table 4). When we broke out these two general categories by age and experience with disability, we found that the reason cited by most subgroups was intolerance with lack of information (“uninformed”) being cited primarily by interviewees with disabilities who were younger than 35. This suggests that incorporating an educational intervention into the classroom aimed at providing students with information about disabilities may increase their tolerance and acceptance thereby reducing the teasing, joking, and mocking directed at students with disabilities by those who are uninformed.

**Table 4: Most frequent response by age and**

**experience with disabilities**

**Age**

Experience with disability	<20	20-34	35+
Has a Disability	Uninformed	Uninformed	Intolerant
Some experience	Intolerant	Intolerant	Intolerant
Little to no experience	Intolerant	Intolerant	Intolerant

" People make fun of people because they don't understand the disability - maybe they don't know anyone with a disability - maybe they're really scared of us and making fun makes them less scared."

" People act without thinking. We laughed at my cousin with a disability because he was always the last one picked when we chose baseball teams. We thought he was different and we didn't like kids who were different."

" People who make fun of me don't really know me or anything about my disability. They think I'm different and that is all they care about."

**Question #3: Why is it easy for people to feel sad about people with disabilities?**

Most interviewees (66%) told us that they thought it was easy for people to feel sad about people with disabilities because of the many challenges people with disabilities have to deal with on a daily basis. Their opinion was that being in a wheelchair, using a Braille reader, learning sign language, or reading at the first grade level in junior high school were challenges that meant that people with disabilities had to work harder. The remaining 34 percent of the interviewees said that it is easy for people to feel sad about people with disabilities because some people believe that disability reduces the value of a life. They felt that expectations for students with disabilities were lower than for other students, and that emphasis was always placed on what they couldn't do rather than on what they could do.

*" People feel sad because they think people with disabilities are incapable."*

*" They're sad when they think of how a person with a disability struggles."*

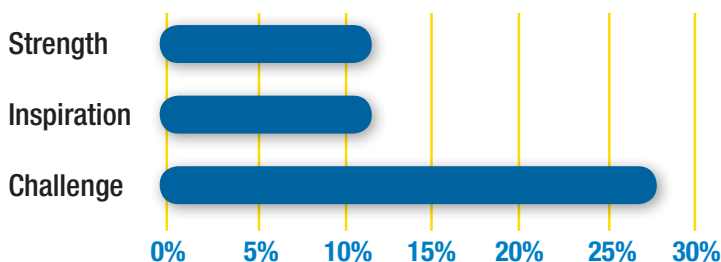
*" They think of how they suffer."*

**Question #4: From this list of words pick one GOOD word and one POOR word to describe disability and explain why you picked them.**

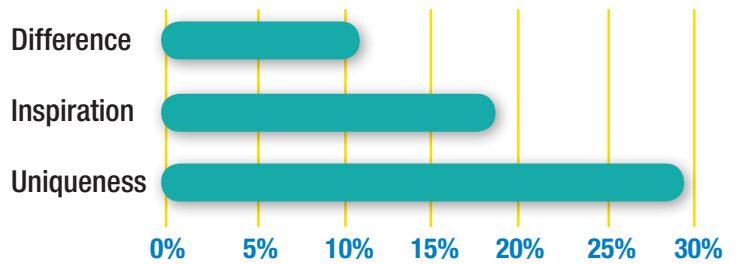
Researchers who study language have shown that words are gender-charged, i.e., when asked to describe an event, men tend to use different words than women. When we reviewed the good words and poor words that interviewees chose from a list of 30 words (see list below), we found differences, as expected, between males and females (Tables 5, 6, 7, 8).

Word List	
advantage	gift
annoyance	impairment
asset	inability
barrier	inconvenience
benefit	inspiration
blessing	liability
boundary	limitation
burden	opportunity
capability	problem
challenge	shortcoming
constraint	sickness
difference	strength
disadvantage	struggle
disorder	uniqueness
equality	weakness

**Table 5: Good Word: Male Interviewees**



**Table 6: Good Word: Female Interviewees**



When asked for a good word, most males (27%) chose "Challenge;" most females (29%) chose "Uniqueness." Both males and females, however, selected "Inspiration" as one of their top three words. Anecdotally, interviewees with disabilities told us the word "Inspiration" bothered them because it implied that people with disabilities are – or should be – inspiring super heroes instead of just being allowed to lead ordinary lives like everyone else. Viewing them as super heroes put pressure on them, making them feel uncomfortable and misunderstood. Others mentioned that learning about famous people with disabilities who accomplished great things helped them focus on what people with disabilities can do not on what they can't do.

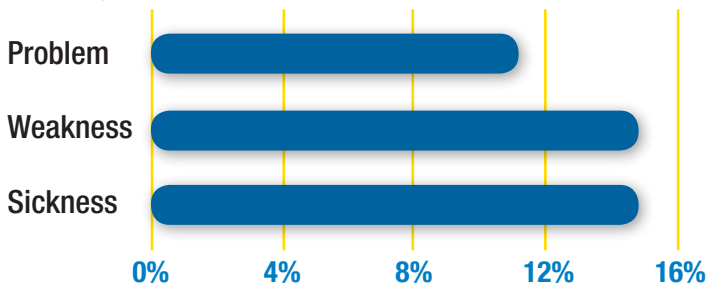
*" I am unique because of my disability. It makes me stand out in a good way. I find different ways to do things."*

*" People with disability inspire me because they have to overcome barriers to succeed."*

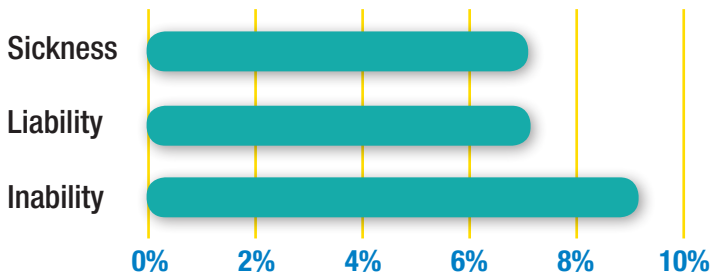
*" We are challenged! Challenges give us a reason to get out of bed every day. Challenges motivate us to do good things."*

When asked for a poor word, male interviewees were split between "weakness" and "sickness" as their top choice. The most popular selection for females was "inability," though "sickness" was one of their top three poor words as well. This finding debunks the myth that disability is a sickness, and suggests that disabilities awareness programs would do well to reinforce this notion for more widespread acceptance.

**Table 7: Poor Word: Male Interviewees**



**Table 8: Poor Word: Female Interviewees**



*"Weakness is a poor word because it implies that a disability is a negative thing when in reality it can be a positive experience even with the struggles. A disability makes you stronger not weaker."*

*"Inability is a poor word because a disability doesn't make someone unable. It may set them back a little but it doesn't take away their ability to do most things."*

*"Someone with a disability isn't sick. Sickness is just the wrong kind of label."*

**Question #5: You've been hired to teach elementary students about disabilities. What is one idea/point/concept you would include in your teaching?**

The most popular concept selected by almost one-third of the interviewees was "Awareness," which translates into providing students with factual information about disabilities and the culture of disability. Other concepts cited by the interviewees as essential in an educational module for students were "Similarity," "Acceptance," "Uniqueness," and "Inclusion" (Table 9).

**Table 9: Key disabilities awareness ideas, points, concepts**

<b>Awareness</b>	<b>30%</b>
<b>Similarity</b>	<b>25%</b>
<b>Acceptance</b>	<b>21%</b>
<b>Uniqueness</b>	<b>15%</b>
<b>Inclusion</b>	<b>9%</b>

Anecdotally, interviewees suggested that these five concepts are critical to the success of an educational intervention on disabilities. Q&A sessions and group discussions should be provided to enable students to exchange information and clarify their thoughts on disabilities and people with disabilities.

*"If I were a teacher I would have my students with and without disabilities work together to show how similar they really are."*

*"The teacher should find someone with a disability to talk to her students about differences. Everyone is different and people with disabilities embrace their differences. We don't want to be made fun of because we're different."*

*"Interaction and discussion are needed. Let kids ask questions in a classroom. It's appropriate to ask questions in a place where you can get the facts."*

*"If there's a student with a disability in the classroom, ask the student to talk about his experience with a disability, and ask his classmates to talk about their experiences with having a student with a disability in their classroom."*



# Disability Awareness Teacher Toolkit

The overriding finding of our survey activities was that people lack accurate information about disabilities. This information deficit hampers their understanding not only of disabilities but also of people with disabilities. We agreed with the 80 interviewees that the first step in addressing this information gap is to do something to promote discussion of disabilities and people with disabilities in school and at home. Our interviewees identified five important concepts to include in a disabilities awareness teacher toolkit:

- Awareness
- Similarity
- Acceptance
- Uniqueness
- Inclusion

The following is an outline of the Disabilities Awareness Teacher Toolkit with some ideas for how each of the concepts can be introduced to students. *Connect-Ability* editors will be working with student volunteers this coming year to come up with additional ideas for teachers.

## Preparing students to talk about disabilities

- Ask students to define “disability.” Someone in the class may use the definition “A disability is someone who can’t do something.” Discuss what this definition emphasizes (can’t do instead of can do). Does this definition describe everyone not just people with disabilities? Is a “disability” a “someone” or is it something a person has? Point out that defining disability is difficult because there are so many different disabilities and so many different people with disabilities.
- Ask students if they know someone with a disability. Ask them to describe the person and tell something that they have learned about that person or disability.
- Introduce “people first” language. Start with what you know when you speak about people with disabilities. Use “student with mental retardation” instead of “retarded student” or “kid with a hearing impairment” rather than “deaf kid.” How can “people first” language change the way we treat people with disabilities?

- Ask students to discuss with their family members what they are learning about people with disabilities.

## Concept #1: Awareness

**Younger interviewees with disabilities believed that people make fun of people with disabilities because they are “uninformed.” Many of our interviewees told us they didn’t have enough information about disabilities. When they first met someone with a disability, few of them were encouraged to ask questions or talk about it.**

- Choose a “Disability of the Week” and spend a few minutes talking about it. Post facts sheets (use [www.nichcy.org](http://www.nichcy.org) for fact sheets) and ask the students to learn one fact a day to share with the class.
- Invite people with disability into the classroom for Q&A.
- Read the *Connect-Ability* newsletter. Discuss.
- Identify famous people with disability and discuss why they are inspiring and why people with disability might feel uncomfortable at the notion that they may be considered super heroes.
- Ask students to conduct an interview using the protocol on page 11. Discuss the findings.
- Browse [www.educationworld.com/a\\_lesson/lesson115.shtml](http://www.educationworld.com/a_lesson/lesson115.shtml) and [www.museumofdisability.org/teacher\\_resources\\_ELP.asp](http://www.museumofdisability.org/teacher_resources_ELP.asp) for information on disabilities awareness.

## Concept #2: Similarity

**A quarter of our interviewees told us that a disabilities awareness program should emphasize similarities among all students and help students focus on how much we all have in common.**

- Ask students how they are the same as the student sitting to their left.
- Introduce the notion that everyone not just students with disabilities needs help or assistance at some point. Talk about what it does to people with disability if we think they always need help. Ask how they felt when they were helped and wanted to do it themselves.
- Identify ways that a student with a disability could be a helper (e.g., a student using a wheelchair tutoring another student in math or a student with a learning disability teaching a friend how to play soccer).
- Ask about the difference between “good help” (ask first if help is needed) and poor help (I’ll do it for you).
- Make a list of characteristics kids with disabilities and kids without disabilities have in common.



- Discuss the idea that if we became disabled we probably wouldn't feel much different from how we feel now. (We would still want to live with our families, go to school, play sports, enjoy our hobbies and have friends).

### Concept #3: Acceptance

More than 20 percent of our interviewees told us that a disabilities awareness program should focus on increasing student acceptance and fostering more positive attitudes toward one another.

- Ask students to define attitude, and give examples of positive and negative attitudes. How do we feel when we encounter a negative attitude? A positive attitude?
- Introduce the notion of attitude as related to disability, and ask students to provide examples of both good and poor attitudes toward people with disabilities.
- Ask students to define acceptance.



*Katie listens to Neil's perspective*

- Ask students to define tolerance.
- Discuss the similarities and differences between acceptance and tolerance. Which comes first?
- Try this activity with students. Give some of the students a small candy or sticker and thank them for their cooperation. Continue class as usual telling the students that you will have a discussion with them later. In the discussion ask them to identify their feelings when they were excluded.
- Show how aging often causes people to develop a disability, and how the aging person would want to be accepted. Ask students to talk about older people they know.

- Use the word list (page 6) and ask students to choose one good and one poor word to describe disability, and explain why. Talk about how language affects our attitudes.
- Talk about using disability words as insults (retard, insane, cripple). What's wrong with it? How do we correct it?
- Ask for examples of how everyone can be included in some way, and how everyone has something to bring to the table.
- Talk about accommodations which enable students with disabilities to participate in general education classrooms and buildings (assistive technology, accessibility, Braille, hearing aides, wheelchairs, scribes, etc.).

### Concept #4: Uniqueness

Our interviewees suggested students should take a look at how disability makes us unique. Students with disabilities are members of a diverse school community.

- Ask students to give examples of how they are unique.
- Introduce idea of "salad bowl" to highlight benefits of diversity and the richness of a nation with many cultures.
- Use "orchestra" analogy – each instrument is different but together they play beautiful music. Students with disabilities are doubly unique – each one has a unique personality and a disability that is unique to them. We can't say all students with learning disabilities are the same anymore than we can say all fifth graders are the same.
- Discuss the value of being different.
- Ask students to list ways in which students with disabilities may be different.
- Discuss how being different can be a strength.
- Discuss uniqueness v. sameness. Is there a contradiction in placing value on both of these? Why are both important? How are we the same and different? Which is more important?

### Concept #5: Inclusion

Interviewees reported that emphasizing the concepts of similarity, acceptance and uniqueness would lead to more opportunities for students with disability to be included. Nearly 10 percent of them suggested an emphasis on the concept of inclusion. A discussion of what inclusion means to the education of all students would be an effective way to conclude a disabilities awareness program.

- Use group activities, games, simulations to convey idea of inclusion.

- Without introduction, begin by calling only on students who have dark hair; continue to ignore all other students even if they raise their hands. End the class by asking all students about the experience (what was the discriminating feature, how did those who were discriminated against feel, etc.)?
- What does inclusion mean? Is it important to all students? How is inclusion (the practice of educating students with special needs in regular classes for all or nearly all of the day in special education classes or special schools) different from mainstreaming (the practice of educating students with special needs in regular classes during specific time periods based on their skills) and how is it different from integration (the process of becoming an accepted member of a group or community)? Discuss.
- Introduce notion of competition and how it may lead to exclusion. (Emphasis on grades and test scores can put students with disabilities in a difficult place).
- Discuss ways in which students can compete for their “personal best” instead of trying to “beat out” other students for the highest grades.
- Ask students to identify strategies they can use to include students with disabilities in different aspects of school and home life.

- Choose a setting (e.g., playground at recess, on the bus, at a Girl Scout outing, on a field trip, at a birthday party etc.) and role play some possible inclusive strategies.
- Talk about little acts of inclusion (saying “hi”, giving eye contact, holding a door open etc.).

## Next Steps

We will continue to work on our Disabilities Awareness Program and this teacher toolkit during the next year. We have already begun to write a Disabilities Awareness Quiz to help students expose some of the myths and misinformation about disabilities. Look for it on line at [www.nysut.org/connect](http://www.nysut.org/connect). We are committed to taking time during each of our writing workshops to completing the work we began with this issue. Students and teachers who have ideas about how we can help raise awareness through *Connect-Ability* should contact us at [cmchugh@nysutmail.org](mailto:cmchugh@nysutmail.org) or [tmcsween@nysutmail.org](mailto:tmcsween@nysutmail.org).



*Marissa interviews Cassie*



*Chester listens to Neil's report*

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# Connect-Ability 2010 Interview Protocol

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Name of Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee (Please ask the interviewee to fill in the demographic information):

Gender:  Female  Male    Age:  <14  14-19  20-24  25-34  35-54  55+

Race:  African American     Hispanic  
 Asian     Native American  
 Caucasian     Other

Interviewee's experience with disability:

- Has a disability
- Has a family member or relative with a disability
- Has a friend or classmate with a disability
- Has worked with people with disabilities
- Has little or no experience with people with disabilities

*Listen to your interviewee's answers then write down key points; use abbreviations; don't worry about spelling or grammar; review your notes to make sure you have everything; if you're using a tape recorder, ask permission first.*

1. Tell me about your first experience with a person with a disability.

\_\_\_\_\_

*If your interviewee has a disability, he/she may answer this question by talking about his/her own disability. You are asking your interviewee about his/her first experience with another person with a disability, NOT your interviewee's experience with disability if he/she has one.*

2. What is it about people with disabilities that causes others to make fun of them?

\_\_\_\_\_

*You are NOT asking your interviewee whether it's right or wrong to make fun of people with disabilities or whether he/she makes fun of disabilities. You are asking what it is about people with disabilities that causes others to make fun of them.*

3. Why is it easy for people to feel sad about people with disabilities?

\_\_\_\_\_

*You are asking your interviewee why it's easy for people to feel sad about people with disabilities, NOT whether your interviewee feels sad about people with disabilities.*

4. From this list of words (hand list on page 6 to interviewee) pick one GOOD word to describe DISABILITY and one POOR word to describe DISABILITY, and explain why you picked them.

\_\_\_\_\_

*Give your interviewee time to look at the list. Then, ask for a GOOD word to use for DISABILITY, and ask why he/she thinks it's a GOOD word. Then, ask for a POOR word to use for DISABILITY, and ask why he/she thinks it's a POOR word.*

Good word \_\_\_\_\_ Why?  
Poor word \_\_\_\_\_ Why?

5. You've been hired to teach elementary school students about disabilities and people with disabilities. What is one idea/point/concept you would include in your teaching?

\_\_\_\_\_

*You are asking your interviewee to give you ONE idea/point/concept about disabilities that he/she thinks would be important to include in teaching fourth or fifth graders about people with disabilities.*



## Putting my Xbox Away

Louis Rose

I, like Holden Caulfield, withdrew from society to deal with a personal struggle. I dropped out to play video games as a means to cope with not being able to read very well. My withdrawal was temporary and lasted for about half a year. School work was getting on my nerves and I could not find any other distraction until I started to play Xbox 360. I was sick and tired of having a hard time reading and writing. See when I was reading, everything seemed to get smaller and smaller so it felt hard to read. Also, when I tried to write things I had a difficult time spelling correctly and I felt I was not a good writer. I hoped I could get away with not doing homework or any school related things by withdrawing to my Xbox.

I decided to remove myself from society by attempting to play my Xbox during all of my “free” time. I would also avoid schoolwork by sleeping and lying. I would be very silent at night when everyone was sleeping when I was playing Xbox so I would not wake my family. On top of that I was lying to my mom, dad and myself about not having any homework

so I could play Xbox. The funny thing is that my withdrawal was in plain view for everyone to see.

I have definitely changed from this experience with Xbox 360. I have given it up for almost half a year now and I do not regret it. No one ever knew about this withdrawal and my skipping my homework except my friends. My parents thought I played too long, but did not know I was skipping my homework. I decided to stop playing because my eyes got tired and it started getting lame. I realized I would get bad grades and it was unhealthy. I knew I had to change and focus on my reading and writing issues. It was up to me to change.

I put my Xbox away. I do my homework and outside activities instead such as going to the YMCA during my free time. I have come very far with my reading and writing now that I have strategies to use to help. I understand more now and I do not try to walk away from my reading and writing problems.



*Mitchell interviews Sarah*

# The ARISE Coalition: The Fist of Disability Activism in New York City

Fabio Botarelli

Fighting to give students with disabilities the quality education they deserve is not a task for the faint of heart. The ARISE (Action for Reform in Special Education) Coalition knows this better than most. Gathering the voices of teachers, lawyers, principals, parents and others involved in shaping New York City education, the Coalition is a force of progress for New York City's students identified in need of special education. No one could put that in better words than its proud coordinator Maggie Moroff. I interviewed her last June.

## What are some proposals ARISE has in mind to reform special education?

We focus on New York City and we have come up with some major proposals to address the dismal fact that only 19% of students with special needs in the city graduate in four years. Through our proposals we seek to improve instruction in the classroom, change minds of accountability, increase professional development opportunities and requirements to foster meaningful planning for students with disabilities and increase transparency between teachers, students and parents.

## How has the ARISE Coalition made progress in improving the education for special needs students?

We have succeeded in including more students with disabilities in general education systems but so far these students represent pockets. The idea is to push for all students to have opportunities for inclusion. In addition we have promoted "speak outs" around the city. From these "speak outs" we are able to locate specific problems plaguing students with disabilities. Some of these problems include having classrooms in basements and students with disabilities being unable to spend time on stage for graduation to get an IEP (Individualized Education Program) diploma.

## What are some stories of students with disabilities having difficult educational experiences?

We hear stories like this all the time. A student in a wheelchair got accepted into a high school. Unfortunately for this hard working student, she could not attend her dream school because the building lacked wheelchair access. In other instances, there are teachers in the school systems that are unaware of a student's IEP, the document that guarantees students with disabilities the right to have specific classroom or testing accommodations.

## How can we help children with learning disabilities enjoy the learning process?

We must help identify at least one thing that catches that student's interest because every child has something he is interested in based on my teaching experience. In one of my classes one student was interested in race cars, so we encouraged that student to read books on race cars. But for real progress to be made every school must make accurate evaluations of each child.

## How can students with disabilities get a proper education?

To a large degree a systematic push must take place. You can't have one school better than another without giving students and their parents a choice. Students with disabilities should not feel trapped in a school that doesn't support their needs. Teachers must be given the right tools and training and each school needs to make sure the teacher is teaching the curriculum without being distracted by an overemphasis on student behavior.

Students and their parents can find links to resources and learn more about ARISE at [www.arisecoalition.org](http://www.arisecoalition.org).

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*Your support allows us to continue  
this Newsletter and thereby promote  
awareness and understanding among the  
young people of New York.*





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## Stay With Your Dream

### Erin Reardon

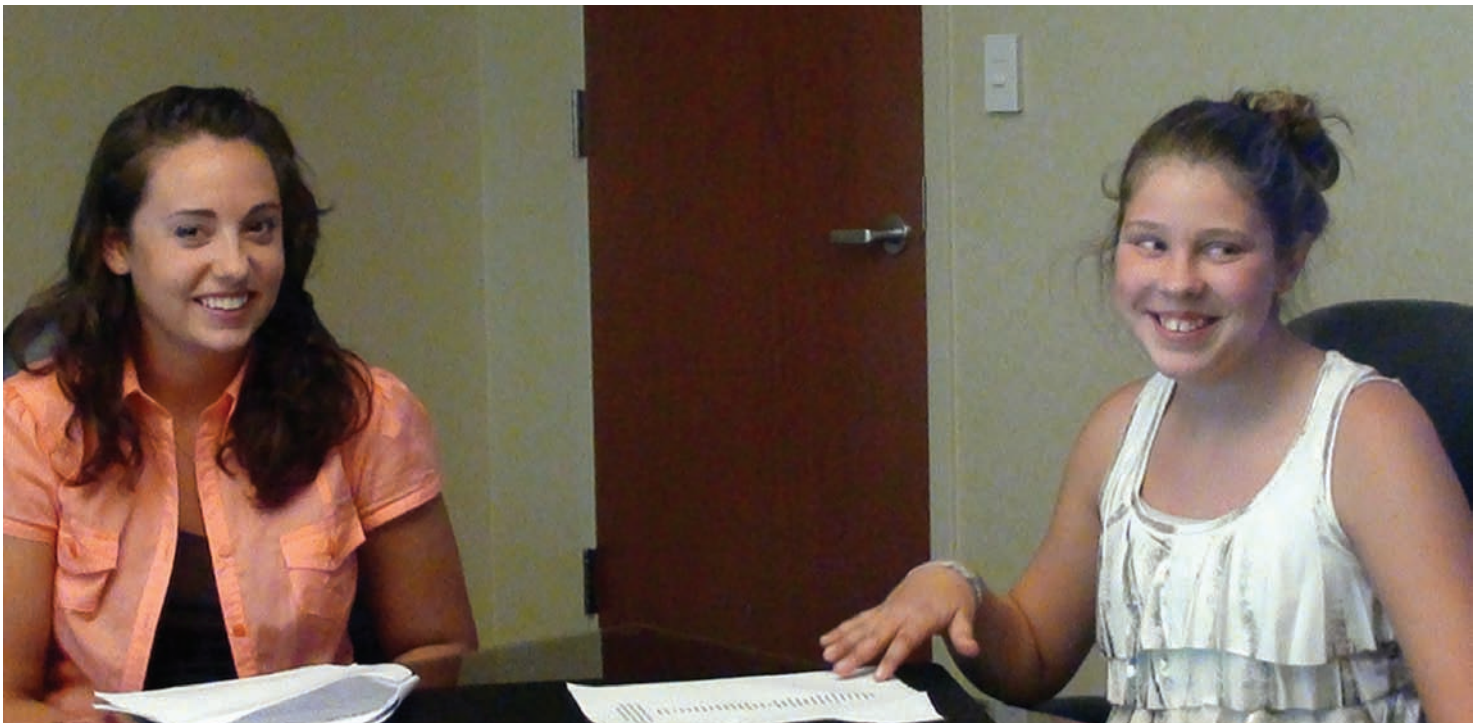
I have a dream to graduate from high school with a diploma even though I have dyslexia. As a freshman, I took a reading course and a basic math class for which I did not earn credits. Now, this is catching up to me and I am unable to graduate with my class. My dream is to keep going to graduate from high school. Even though I have major difficulties in school, I still follow this dream to graduate with a high school diploma. I realize that my dyslexia will not go away; it will always be a part of my life. I need to deal with it and use strategies to get through the hard times because my dream is important to me. To overcome my reading and math issues, I rely on the support of others, knowing that they will be there for me when things are difficult. This dream of graduation is always in my head, pushing me to keep going in school and not drop out. Even though I sometimes feel like I cannot do it anymore and want to drop out, the dream is always whispering, "Keep going! You will graduate someday!"

My reading disability has had a big impact on my life. I often wish I was just like everyone else. My emotions sway as I try to meet the demands of school. Even though school is just a little part of my life, it sometimes feels like forever and that is tiring physically and emotionally. My parents share this burden of my work load in classes as they try to help me manage school. I often notice my mother is tired after work but she continues to help me make my dream come true. My

parents have also spent a lot of money on outside testing to see why school is so difficult for me. My dyslexia affects the whole family but we all have a positive outlook about it. My family also believes that "people should always follow their dreams."

My experiences with my learning disability have taught me to push through the hard times and when there are good times, stop and celebrate. In life, school is not everything and there is so much more to me than my reading issues. I have learned to overcome these difficulties with working hard and going to other schools that are meant to help kids who have reading disabilities. These experiences have taught me that there are people out there who can help kids who have learning issues. My experiences have also taught me that friends are there when you need them and you are not judged even though you have a different learning style than other kids in the school.

I am hopeful that these experiences will be similar to those I face in the future. No one is perfect and people should not let their dreams just crash when things are not going as you hoped. As I look to the future, I hold this dream of graduation close because it is coming soon and I have worked so hard to get where I am today. This experience helped make me who I am. I can teach other kids to stay with their dreams and to work to make it happen.



*Samantha successfully completes an interview with Maggie*



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# Ignited: A Promise to People with Disabilities Around the World

**Kathleen Downes**

I dream of the day when true justice finds my people.  
I seek a world shaped on abilities, ideas, and thoughts beyond the cookie cutter.  
I envision a society free of shallow judgments.  
I speak for those who cannot speak for themselves.

In more ways than one, we have ridden the same bus and we are together.

I owe it to them to speak out because I can... my voice is not just mine, but ours.

I believe I can change things because I must.

I carry the desires of a rich culture, desires that every human being possesses.

We have come a long way, with a long way to go  
And a responsibility to guide a bright IDEA into a bright reality

All the ones before me  
Who crawled up the stairs in pursuit of their own liberty  
Live in my skin  
It is my choice  
To finish their noble work

I am no longer afraid to fight  
For what I know we deserve  
It is not easy, but it is right  
And what is right  
Requires but one person  
To make it come alive

I promise the child who rides that bus with me  
That I will go forward for him  
I will fight the battle  
For the mother and father  
Who loved me enough  
To call the battle worthy

Your voices will not be silenced  
As long as this heart beats  
Because this spark for justice  
Is my gift to you

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## Just Fine Over Time

**Bryan Jones**

People go through many hard times throughout their lives and everyone copes with them differently. Some people chose to withdraw from society by the means of drugs, alcohol, sleeping, or even lying to themselves or others. Sometimes the withdrawal is permanent and other times it is temporary. When a person withdraws from society it does not just affect the person withdrawing. It also affects the people around him.

I have experienced withdrawal my whole life. Ever since I could remember, I was always a quiet, stay-away-from-everyone, kind of person. As everyone made friends and had their own groups, I got farther and farther away. I used to go to school and not say a word all day.

I guess what made me withdraw is because I could never connect with people. I think people thought that I was weird because I left the classroom for tests and things due to my dyslexia. I did not want to achieve anything by withdrawing. I just wanted to live my life my way with no one there. Looking back that was a bad idea.

How I withdrew was I just did not talk to people. To this day, I dislike talking on the phone. I also stayed away from group work and school events. The only thing I do around others is race, and when you think about it, I am still alone when I do that. I think my parents were aware of my withdrawal because I never did anything with friends or had many friends. I don't think it was noticeable to people at school and I don't think it still is because I put on a good act at school. I think I am getting better. I have more friends. I talk to people more and I work better in groups. I don't let what people think of me bother me and I can thank racing for that. I don't think I ever will be socially "normal" because that is the kind of person I am.

People go through many hard times and this has been a hard time for me. The way I withdrew was not physically destructive, but socially destructive. I think it has made me a better person and a person who is ok with me. I think over time I will be just fine.

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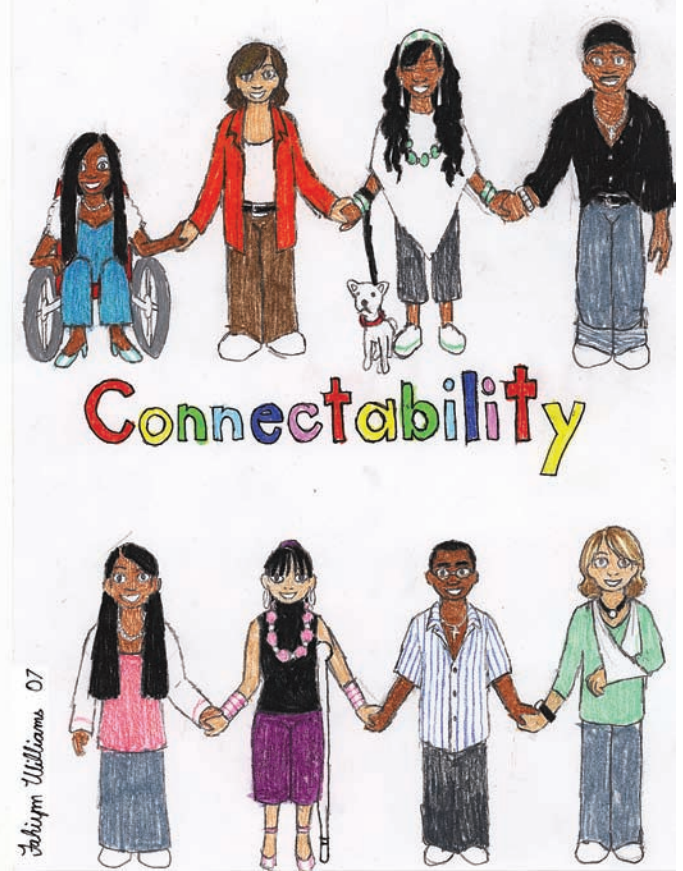
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## WE NEED YOUR HELP

We are looking for students in grades 7-12 who are interested in writing essays, articles, personal stories or poetry related to disability. We need student artists, as well.

We want this newsletter to connect students with and without disabilities so that we can learn from one another, make friendships and participate in an inclusive environment.

An annual issue of *Connect-Ability* goes out to schools across New York State. High school students who serve on its editorial board edit it. Add your voice to ours and send us something you have written or created.

If you or a student you know would like to learn more about how to participate in this exciting project, contact Catharine McHugh at (800) 342-9810 or 518-213-6000 X6522 or at [cmchugh@nysutmail.org](mailto:cmchugh@nysutmail.org). We look forward to hearing from you.



Isabel, Maggie, Sarah And Olivia At The Awards Ceremony

[www.nysut.org/connect](http://www.nysut.org/connect)