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Establishing a Presumption of Competence in the ELA Classroom: One Teacher's Story of Creating Space for Autistic Culture

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Cover Page Footnote

1. All names of the people and places associated with this research are pseudonyms

Establishing a Presumption of Competence in the ELA Classroom: One Teacher's Story of Creating Space for Autistic Culture

Chris Bass, *Ought* Co-Editor

I have been an English Language Arts teacher at Des Plaines High School (DPHS) for more than a decade. DPHS is located in a wealthy suburban community outside Chicago. The community's wealth can be felt each morning as I cross Lincoln Avenue and enter the district boundaries. The historic, grand homes sit on large lots filled with extensive landscaping. Over the years, I have enjoyed watching the seasons shift across the well-maintained yards. The large, old oak trees that hang over the homes always buzz with cicadas in the late summer and shift to a brilliant range of oranges and reds in the fall. Each year, winter is on beautiful display in these yards as the white snow piles against the evergreen garlands that drape over the windows and doors of each home. Then, as the snow begins to melt, the yards pop with the light blues and yellows of blooming spring bulbs, which mark the much-anticipated shift towards warmth and longer days in the Midwest.

Along with the weather changes, I have noticed another seasonal shift in front of these homes—yard signs. This community proudly boasts of their children's athletic endeavors through brightly colored placards, which are sold by the DPHS athletic boosters, and often posted in the middle of the yards. In the fall, I pass multiple homes with signs for DPHS boys' soccer, football, and girls swimming teams. In the winter, wrestling, basketball, boys swimming, and cheerleading homes emerge. Then, along with the sprouting tulips, the girls' soccer, baseball, softball, lacrosse, and water polo signs pop up. For me, these signs revealed a strong connection between the community and the school.

At first, I felt encouraged by the signs: in a strange way, each sign seemed to cheer me on as I drove in the early morning and prepared for a long day of teaching. However, my thoughts about these signs changed a few years ago when our district administered a social emotional survey

during each student's homeroom period. The survey results caught the DPHS community off guard. It revealed that 79% of students believed that academic stress was a significant problem in DPHS. It also found that a majority of students felt that mental health was a growing concern, which the students claimed had gone unaddressed by the school.

These concerns around mental health were felt across all DPHS student groups irrespective of student diagnosis, family wealth, or academic level. Following that survey, *The Chicago Tribune* (2017) investigated social emotional concerns in the Chicago suburbs and cited a larger study around mental health in high performing suburban schools that included DPHS. The study found that these schools were filled with an atmosphere of "intense, sometimes disabling, pressure connected with test scores, college admissions and AP course loads." The article found that the hyper-competitive, high-performing schools created a "disabling pressure" to succeed. The students noted a pervasive fear of failure: fear of not making it into the honors courses, doing poorly on advanced placement exams, not having a competitive college application, or not doing enough extra curricular activities. A majority of students did not feel that their high school community properly addressed these fears, which led to higher rates of mental health concerns. This lack of support was felt across all student backgrounds and abilities.

After the semester in which both the survey and article were published, I felt unsettled as I drove past the yard signs each morning: how could so many students feel unsupported while the many yard signs conveyed support? I didn't understand the apparent contradiction between the students feeling unsupported and the many yards signs proclaiming support for the high school.

After several weeks of thinking about the contradiction, it occurred to me that the signs only showed support for the mainstream activities at DPHS, which were hyper-competitive and often cut more students than were accepted; however, these activities were only a quarter of the activities in which students participated. DPHS had many popular activities that were more inclusive of gender, sexuality, and ability than the mainstream activities: games club, archery, television program, art clubs. Yet, the signs displayed in front of these homes only supported

the most normative, most competitive, and most selective activities. Beyond displaying booster signs, these homes, with their manicured lawns, conveyed an implicit message that celebrated and supported competition, fighting as a team, and winning. These competitive ambitions were similar to the academic ambitions that the students reported as “disabling” earlier in the semester at DPHS. There were no signs of support for the more inclusive, less competitive DPHS activities. The lack of placards paralleled the lack of support students had expressed regarding their desires for a more inclusive, less hyper-competitive learning environment.

In recognizing the “disabling pressure” in both the yard signs and DPHS, I began to question my own teaching. As a teacher who had felt supported by these yard signs for many years, I had to accept that I shared the values conveyed in these signs. I was proud to work at a high performing, competitive school. I considered myself a strong teacher. In particular, I thought I excelled at teaching inclusion classrooms. In DPHS, an inclusion classroom is any classroom in which a student has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). In most cases, my inclusion classrooms had autistic students, so I had learned how to meet accommodations while also maintaining the pace of my other general education class, those courses without IEPs. Yet, I found myself wondering if my instruction provoked a “disabling pressure” amongst my students? How did I extend the bias of the yard signs into my classroom? In a hyper competitive community like DPHS, the inclusion classrooms had an enhanced pressure to keep up with the general education classrooms while also ensuring all student accommodations were met.

For many years, I felt proud when all of my classes maintained the same pace no matter designation of inclusion or not. There was an implied message from administration that it was best to “keep up” with the rigor of traditional courses even if the pace limited opportunities to create the space for more inclusive teaching; however, in seeing the pervasive pressures via the yard signs and in the student surveys, I was embarrassed to acknowledge that my need to keep the inclusion classroom on pace with the general education curriculum likely enhanced pressures on students with IEPs. The students were expected to not only keep up with, but also compete along side their general education peers.

Rewriting Yard Signs in the ELA Classroom

In the three years since that uncomfortable experience in which I recognized my complicity in the community's ableist culture, I have been exploring disability studies (DS) theories to find ways I can push against these normative district pressures. DS theories note the failures of inclusion classrooms and encourage a more inclusive pedagogy (Allan 2015; Owen & Gabriel, 2010; Smith 2010; Ware, 2004). Inclusive pedagogy extends beyond IEP accommodations and seeks to make the curriculum more inclusive for all learners. Most of my inclusion classrooms had autistic students, so it was important for me to create a curriculum that valued neuro-atypicality amongst all students no matter their diagnosed ability.

Therefore, I reworked my curriculum to foster a presumption of competence. Bilken (2005), a DS scholar and leading advocate of facilitated communication (FC) in the United States, describes a presumption of competence as a belief that "People classified as autistic, even those who cannot speak, are thinking people with ideas about their lives and their relationship to the world" (p.1). Teaching with a presumption of competence demands that teachers create a learning environment that allows all students to be experts of their lived experiences. This means that teachers must do more than meet requirements of IEPs. They must adjust instructional planning to create space for the multiple subjectivities of students to be expressed. Biklen and Burke (2018) assert that presuming competence "is a stance, an outlook, a framework for educational engagement" (p. 273) that avoids ableist assumptions and seeks to find differing modes through which autistic students may demonstrate individual agency.

However, teaching with a presumption of competence in a district that has such entrenched normative pressures can be daunting. Often, both students and teachers are unsure how to respond to and engage with divergent perspectives. After much trial and error, I learned that a presumption of competence demands that teachers first acknowledge the barriers present in many inclusion classrooms. As teachers, we may have been complicit in ableist assumptions about what autistic students can and cannot do. Taking the time to accept our role in enforcing

exclusionary bias presents the opportunity to find new instructional methods divergent from our exclusionary approaches. This process requires flexibility—something that can be quite challenging in established institutions. Ware (2003) notes that “Institutional structures have long served to authorize particular narratives of disability, histories of deficiency, and the very language used to name disability experiences will not be easily disentangled” (p. 135). However, once I embraced a more flexible, malleable concept of ability, disentanglement began to occur, and I could make room for a presumption of competence.

Appreciating flexibility around ability reveals the limitations of the rhetoric used to describe autistic students. Often descriptions and definitions of ability are rooted in binaries: either disabled or abled; special education student or general education student; normal or abnormal. These terms are rooted in a rhetorical binary that perpetuates the deficit based, medical model of ability. The rigidity of these binary terms does not account for the fluidity of autism or the abilities of our students. Therefore, establishing a presumption of competence demands that teachers employ a rhetorical flexibility that pushes against binaries and promotes an asset-based language.

Asset-based language is a rhetorical move away from binary definitions and deficit logic around ability. Using asset-based language pushes classroom discourse to make rhetorical choices that enable us to capture the fluidity of ability. Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson (2001) assert that inclusive environments must understand how language shapes the social world and implement “strategies for using language to further the inclusion and self-empowerment of the disabled” (p.12). They encourage teachers to be flexible and inclusive towards the classroom’s rhetorical situation: “All classrooms participate in subject formation and reproduce a social order that, as human agents, we may change” (2008, p. 156). Changing the social environments of the classroom begins with shifting the classroom rhetoric away from binary notions of ability. Asset-based language helps create language that re-imagines the social order of the classroom as a space that avoids binary thinking around ability.

In order to change the social environment of the classroom, I could not wait to integrate asset-based rhetoric. If I wanted to push classroom conversations away from the hypercompetitive, ableist culture so pervasive in the community, I could not let it take root in the first day of class. I knew I had to integrate asset-based language on the first day of class. Typically, during the first few days of each semester, I reviewed the syllabus, participated in icebreakers, and began with reviewing classroom goals. These had to become moments that emphasized and modeled an asset-based rhetoric around ability.

I restructured the course's first assignment, which I assigned the first day of the semester, to integrate and model asset-based rhetoric. In previous semesters, I assigned a "window frame" activity in which students were asked to answer typical icebreaker questions: what activities do you participate in? What is your favorite movie? What object best represents you? The students would sketch an answer to each question in a corner of a piece of paper. These became the "window to the student," which they shared with the class. While this assignment worked to help get the students talking amongst themselves, I noticed the inherent ableism of the task. In many ways this first assignment reinforced the "pressures" about which students had expressed concerns. I relied on binaries to get students to define themselves: each student was expected to be either good or bad at certain tasks, or have favorites and least favorites. I always referenced the mainstream activities as examples. Often, when asked to present the windows, the students who had filled the most into each windowpane (those who did more activities) spoke longer in front of the classroom while those with less spoke little. As a result, there was no impetus for students to break the binaries and share themselves as anything other than a normal, typical teenager that fit into a typical, four-pane window.

I wanted to replace this activity with an assignment that modeled asset-based language and allowed students to feel comfortable exploring their atypicality. I eventually settled on a tattoo assignment. While I do not have a tattoo, I have many friends and family members with inked images that express an aspect of themselves that goes typically unnoticed. Rather than quickly assign the task, this lesson was designed to take around four days. I wanted to give students time to quietly work out

their thoughts before introducing themselves to the class. I also wanted to students to be introduced to and feel comfortable using asset-based language. The tattoo allows each student to visually convey significant elements of their identity. In addition to the visual image, I would ask the students to write a brief analysis of the tattoo and informally share the image with the class.

The Tattoo Project

I first assigned the tattoo to my second period class on the second day of the school year. In preparing to introduce the assignment to the 24 Junior composition students, I knew that there are two students with IEPs in the classroom and five with 504 plans. Both of the IEPs are for autistic students. I wanted to assure that the assignment set up all the students for success and created the opportunity to apply asset-based rhetoric around ability.

During the passing period prior to second period, Nick and Amelia, the first students to enter, quietly shuffle to their desks with a quick hello in my direction. Nick has an IEP for autism while Amelia does not. Though it seemed that they walked in together, neither acknowledges the other. Once they sit down, they connects their ear buds and wait for the bell to ring. Other students enter the room with more energy. As usual, I stand at the classroom door greeting students as they enter. Most walk in with a friend or two, recapping funny events from the summer or talking about their plans for homecoming, still two months away. I make sure to welcome Jill, an autistic student whose IEP requires her to sit near the classroom door in case she needs to use her “anytime” hall pass to leave the room. When I point out her desk, she replies, “Yup! I remember from yesterday.”

All students arrive to class before the bell rings and the room is filled with the nervous energy typical of juniors at the start of the school year. Most students laugh and talk among themselves. Amelia chats quietly with a peer sitting next to her, Nick still has his ear buds in, and Jill gets herself situated. I pull up the opening day’s slide and project it onto the screen, which the students take as a sign that class is about to begin. The room quiets. When the bell rings, most students sit waiting for me to

start class. Nick has taken out his ear buds. I relish this moment of quiet, as I know in two weeks, once the students feel more comfortable with the class, it won't be quite as calm at the start of each period.

“Good morning! Hopefully everyone successfully made their way through their schedule yesterday.” After the greeting, I shift to review the day's lesson plan, which appears behind me on the screen. “Rather than do the typical icebreakers that I have done before, we are going to try something different this year. Let's just jump into it. Does anyone here have a tattoo?” I look around and see a bunch of surprised faces. Stacy responds, “don't you have to be 18?”

Marco adds from across the room, “Not if you go with your parents. I do have a tattoo. I went with my mom and got one.” Sure enough Marco shows us the small ink on his forearm in the shape of a rose.

I respond, “Can I ask—why a rose?”

“It's for my grandma. I got it last year when she died. We lived together. So, we were pretty close.” He puffed his chest as the tone of his voice hinted at a lingering sadness for his recent loss.

“Thank you for sharing, Marco. Anyone here want to get a tattoo at some point in their lives? About half of students raise their hands.

“Wait! Do you have any tattoos?” Marco adds before I can move on. I admit that I don't, but I see the value of having them.

“Tattoos can convey individuality. And, that is what we want to discuss today—what makes you unique? We are all going to create our own tattoos. Those of you who are not artists—don't worry we can trace these from images we find online.” I pause because I don't want to get ahead of myself. I need to clearly model asset-based language. “Before I talk more about the tattoos, let's do a journal. Please take out your journals. I have paper for anyone who doesn't have theirs yet.” Once everyone has something on which to write, I turn the slide to the journal prompt. The prompt encourages the students to think about their divergence. I read the first slide:

Tattoos are a kind of text that allow individuals to express themselves. There can be a lot of symbolism in the colors and ink styles that are used. Often, tattoos celebrate one's divergence. Divergence means to be boldly different than the majority. Being divergent is often tied to being atypical. Atypical is the aspect of ourselves that makes us an individual or makes us stand out from the "norm." Sometimes we hide our divergent or atypical traits. Other times, people may judge us for these traits. BUT, tattoos are the perfect place to express those. Be proud of them.

As I read the slide, I can see heads nod in response. I continue, "Okay, the next slide has a bunch of prompts. Use these to get your mind thinking. These entries are personal, so you won't have to share these with the class. You have five minutes, so it's low stakes—just get your thoughts out." I switch to the next slide, which contains a series of questions:

Do you have any traits that make you stand out from others? Do you have any traits that some people assume to be negative, but you think are positive? Is there something about you that most people don't know? Have you ever been "diagnosed" by a doctor? What was that like? How does that impact you today? What are you proud of that most people may not know about you? Is there an aspect of yourself that your peers or teachers don't always understand?

The students begin to read quietly through the questions. Stacy asks, "wait we have to answers all of these?"

"No. Just the questions that stand out to you. You can answer as many or as few as you want." Stacy sighs and looks back at the board. The students work quietly as eyes dart from their journals to the screens and back to the journals. After around five minutes, I ask the students to pause their writing, and I formally introduce the tattoo assignment.

"So, you don't have to share your answers to the prompts. However, I hope you all understand that this is an environment that wants to value divergence and atypical traits. Our classroom is a stronger place when we all let our divergent selves be free. Okay. So, like I said earlier. We

are making tattoos. Here is an example of mine. I will explain it in a minute, but I want to focus on the images first.” I walk around to show the students. As I walk around, student heads squirm to see the image. I assert, “remember! You are tracing these images. I traced them, too! So you don’t have to draw them by hand. Let’s look at screen again and see the assignment.”

The assignment prompt is projected on the screen and asks the students to locate three different symbols that convey their atypicality. In piecing together the three images, they are asked to be intentional about their choices: color, image arrangement, thickness of lines, size of images. In addition to the tattoo itself, the students are expected to write an informal narrative analysis of two of the three images. I create different questions they can consider in their analysis: Does this symbol make you atypical? Have you ever been judged for this symbol? Would people be surprised to learn this about you? How many people know about this symbol? How does this symbol strengthen your perspective? How comfortable you about this sharing this symbol?

“Okay, before I let you all look for your symbols. First, I want to share mine.” I again hold up the tattoo that I traced, which contains a red tulip, rough outline of a lake, and three solid bars (Figure 1). “How many people were surprised by the red tulip on my tattoo?” Most of the students raise their hands. “I have to admit that I felt a little embarrassed to share this at first because I knew no one would understand the value of this symbol. The red tulip is the international symbol for Parkinson’s. It is something that my grandmother had and my mom was recently diagnosed with. Does anyone know about Parkinson’s?”

A handful of students raise their hands. Sam adds, “My grandfather has Parkinson’s. He has had it for a while.”

“Isn’t that when your body shakes a lot?” the student next to him asked.

“Yes, but my grandpa actually doesn’t shake much. Now, he has a hard time walking well. He has had it for a while”

“Right.” I added. “There can be a lot of variation. Everyone is different. I included the tulip because for me, Parkinson’s is part of my divergence. For me, the tulip symbolizes the compassion, understanding, and love that I have gained from better understanding Parkinson’s. Though challenging, it has made me stronger.” I then refocused the conversation to the student’s journal prompts and encouraged them to consider using their own thoughts to look for their own symbols. I reiterated that not every symbol needed to be analyzed. The students spent the remaining period looking for symbols and sharing them with each other.



Figure 1. Tattoos by Amelia, Chris (the author), and Annie.

Over the next two days, the students worked on finding symbols, piecing them into a larger tattoo, tracing that tattoo, and analyzing two of the symbols. The original goal of my typical ice-breaker activities is to offer opportunities for students to socialize and get to know each other. While I wanted the tattoo project to offer quiet time for working, I was worried that there would be no social interaction amongst students. However, I was surprised to hear students quietly talk with their peers seated next to them. As she found images, Jill shared them with her neighbor. I noticed that Nick, who listened to music for most of the periods, helped a student with tracing the images. There were a few additional students who needed help with tracing, and I encouraged them to ask Nick—who became the tracing expert, a role he seemed to appreciate.

Finally, after the two days, the students came to class with their completed tattoos. I greeted the students as they walked in. Nick and Amelia were once again the first to enter the room—both with ear buds buzzing in their ears. Once again, the students arrive before the bell. As I walk from the classroom door to my desk, I overhear several students already talking about their tattoos.

“I might actually get this tattoo on my ankle” Stacy says to her neighbor. The bell rings, and I decide to build on the conversations already started.

“Good morning! Okay, today we are going to share our tattoos. It looks like many of you have them done and are ready to go! First, let’s remember that this is an informal presentation. You do not need to share the significance of all the symbols. The goal is to share two symbols that best convey your divergence or atypicality. We want to recognize how each of us is different than the other. To help guide your talk, I have a slide that reminds you what to say when it’s your turn.” I pull up the slide that outlines the expectations: introduce yourself, hold up the tattoo, and explain two symbols. Does the symbol link to atypicality? Why is this significant to you? Is there significance to the design of the symbol itself?

Tattoos of Competence

After a few students, Nick volunteered to read. His tattoo contains an image of a K-pop band, astrological sign, and his favorite TV show. He proudly says that “each image is a representation of who I am and I happen to be proud of all of them.” He looks down at his paper; I sense his anxiety and remind him that he can read directly from his analysis. He looks at his paper and reads with little inflection: “Umm. I also have this symbol, EXO, which is for my favorite K-pop band.” He then looks at his paper and reads directly from the page:

Often times people see me walking down the hallways or the street with my headphones in, listening to music. In any situation without my headphones blasting EXO or another band who’s music I happen to be listening to, I am constantly aware of everything around me, causing nerves to build up and create constant anxiety, which, after time, can deteriorate your health. The EXO symbol represents

not only a band, but also an escape from reality which is something I desperately need once in awhile.

He then looks up with a smile, takes a breath, and goes to his seat. The classroom claps respectfully. I hear two students add that they also love K-pop.

I add, "Thanks for sharing your tattoo, Nick. Does anyone else have images tied to music?" Several students raise their hands. Amelia volunteers to go next. She walks confidently in front of the room.

"I wanted to go next because it is similar to Nick's. Though not the K-pop part... The music part." She holds up her tattoo, which is filled with brightly colored, detailed images. She takes a breath and points to an image of a lock, which is the largest image on the page (Figure 1). She reads:

The lock is significant because it represents my struggle with anxiety and the ability to free myself from the tendency to close up and lock myself into my own mind. I allow anxiety and distress to rule my life, and find myself holding my emotions in.

She pauses to take another breath. The class listens attentively. It seems they did not expect to hear such honest comments from their peers. Then she continues reading:

I seldom let others know how I really feel. In the past, I felt self-conscious and unworthy for feeling this way. I thought that others would judge me for being more quiet and reserved. With time I have learned to accept this, and be content with needing time to open up to others. However when I do open up, the person who I allowed myself to trust and get to know on a level that is no longer superficial will always possess the key to my heart, I will always feel comfortable and trusting with them. When I open up to someone, I put all of my trust in them.

Amelia notes that the bright colors represent her scattered personality, which highlights how challenging it is for her to focus in school.

“Thanks for sharing. Amelia. Beautiful image, and again your honesty helps us better understand where you are coming from. But, just like with Nick’s piece, I wonder how many of us connect to feeling atypical about our anxiety and depression.” Annie raises her hand and volunteers to go next. Her tattoo contains an image of a semi-colon, which I learn connects to the semi-colon project/organization. She explains that the organization “is for people who struggle with mental health issues like depression, anxiety, or suicidal things.” She spoke quietly as she explained her trials with mental health, but she ended saying,

I think these challenges have made me a stronger, and I actually want to get this tattoo because a lot of people can relate to it and if they saw that I had the tattoo and that they had also been through the kind of stuff as well, then they wouldn’t be afraid to open up to me.

Annie looks up with a smile and walks back to her seat. I notice that her neighbor whispers something to her as she places her hand on Annie’s shoulder.

I responded, “Wow. I really appreciate the honesty that we have shared with these tattoos. We’ll keep sharing and hopefully continue to learn about ourselves. As the students continued to present, it becomes apparent that not every student applies the asset based language like the first few. There were many students presenting information about their favorite sports team, school activity, or the cities where they were born; however, mixed amongst these tattoos were two more pieces that contained the semi-colon, which built on the semi-colon project.

Interestingly, while neither of the autistic students shared images linked directly to autism, the multi-colored puzzle piece, the international symbol for autism awareness, appeared in two different tattoos. Each of these tattoos was designed by students who had autistic siblings. At first, I was a bit concerned because the puzzle piece is linked to the controversial organization Autism Speaks, which activists claim is too focused

on curing autism rather than celebrating it; however, as I read over their analysis, each student noted that autism positively impacts their lives everyday, and it has helped them see the world differently.

Stacy wrote, “my sister reacts to sudden loud noises and really bright lights. As a result, I also get anxious around bright places. She has helped me find calm and always seek out quiet spaces, which most people avoid.” While Matt, a starting player on the Varsity Baseball team, had a small puzzle piece in the corner of his tattoo. He explained, “I always try to make my brother proud, and I have the best memories of reviewing sports statistics with him—he loves baseball. Actually, he has given me great advice that has made my game better. This is probably something most people don’t know about me.”

Ultimately, out of the 24 students in the class, nine students applied asset-based language in their reflections. Two student tattoos had images linked specifically to autism and seven others had images tied to neuro-atypicalities. Twelve other student pieces did not seem to engage with the asset-based language. Three students did not have the tattoos completed.

The following Monday, I posted all of the student tattoos above the chalkboard in front of the classroom. As I greeted the students at the classroom door, I encouraged them to checkout the tattoos and find theirs. Once the bell rang, our journal asked for a reflection—thoughts about the tattoo. In the reflections, ten students used asset-based language to describe their connections to atypicality. Five additional students claimed to have enjoyed learning asset based language and appreciated hearing their peers share their atypical traits. Nick noted, “I kinda thought I was alone, but I see other people who think like me, which I think will make this class more interesting. I don’t think we will have only one answer for stuff...” Stacy reflected that “we need to read more stories about these kinds of things. I feel like this stuff is stereotyped at our school.”

The tattoos remained above the board the rest of the year, and for me, they became the yard signs of our class. Each morning, as I entered the classroom, I noted the multi colored designs and symbols all of which revealed the varied competence of inclusive classrooms. The creative

diversity of these tattoos countered the generic yards signs that I continue to confront each morning. I now understand that hyper-competitive, ableist spaces like DPHS need teachers who make space for countering the pervasive message of those yard signs. While there were many more activities I assigned throughout the semester in an effort to establish a presumption of competence, it all begins with shifting the rhetorical moves of the classroom. As the tattoos, student narratives, and reflections suggest, our students want the language and space to hear and talk about atypicality and the differing cultures of our peers.

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