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## **Student-Centered Professional Learning: Opportunities for Action**

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**Transformative Professional Learning for Equitable and Student-Centered Education:  
Empowering Neurodivergent and Emotionally/Behaviorally Disabled Learners**

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Capstone Project: A School Improvement Plan

Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa

**Abstract**

Neurodivergent (ND) and Emotionally and Behaviorally Disabled (EBD) learners struggle to succeed in traditional school environments. These students are prime examples of the immediate systemic need to continue improving schools to make them more student-centered, i.e., equitable, culturally responsive, inclusive, and differentiated. The researcher is an educator with the Department of Defense Education Activity. The project places the challenges of ND/EBD learners squarely within DODEA's "Focus Area 1: Strategic Initiative 1.1: Equitable Learning Experiences for All Students" (DODEA 2022b, p. 6). Developing adult capacities to meet the needs of ND/EBD learners will inform more student-centered learning for all. To prompt individuals and the larger educational system to become more student-centered, the researcher posits DODEA must provide affordable, accessible, and transformative professional learning (PL) to administrators, educators, and staff. The PL should focus on culturally relevant education (CRE), social-emotional learning (SEL), and neurodiversity. Addressing big-picture values and yearly focus initiatives in a multi-level way (DODEA-wide and down to individual educators) will result in more authentic student-centered learning, increase teacher efficacy, and benefit all community members. Opportunities for increasing engagement with and access to professional learning and suggested resources are shared. Two local examples of PL plans are broken down in the implementation section.

*Keywords:* Neurodiversity, neurodivergence, emotionally and behaviorally disabled, DODEA, diversity, equity, inclusion, differentiation, professional learning, social-emotional learning, student-centered learning

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**Transformative Professional Learning for Equitable and Student-Centered Education:  
Empowering Neurodivergent and Emotionally/Behaviorally Disabled Learners**

Neurodivergent students, especially those with emotional and behavioral disabilities, are the proverbial canaries in the metaphorical coal mine of public education. These children have almost stopped singing. They are suffering. Their struggles to access education when pressured to fit in and comply highlight the toxic missteps of a public education built for the early 1900s instead of our twenty-first-century global community. Post-covid, the daily battles of these diverse learners are even more apparent, as educators observe increasing numbers of seemingly neurotypical children also having difficulties thriving in the classroom environment. The old ways of compliance, conformity, and one-size fits all instruction no longer benefit learners, educators, or stakeholders. Changes in how we approach mental and emotional health issues in educational settings are here to stay.

The long-fought-for shift toward educating students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms is a positive move toward educational equity. However, neurodivergent (ND) learners (ADHD, Autism, Tourette's, etc.), comorbid with the diagnosis of emotionally and behaviorally disabled (EBD), continue to struggle in classrooms with educators who need more support and knowledge (McGuire & Meadan, 2022; State et al., 2019). All educators, administrators, and staff who serve ND and EBD students need more recent neuro-affirming information and training to best support these learners (Armstrong, 2017; Bettini et al., 2022; State et al., 2019). In addition, general and special educators must collaborate more to facilitate the inclusion of disabled learners (McGuire & Meadan, 2022; Oliver-Kerrigan et al., 2021), ultimately benefiting all community members.

The social-emotional and learning needs of ND/EBD students are unique, and failure to meet these needs can result in numerous adverse outcomes, including poor academic performance (Bettini et al., 2022; Valenti et al., 2019; Zolkoski & Lewis-Chiu, 2019) and higher rates of high school dropout, suspensions, and incarceration (McGuire & Meadan, 2022; State et al., 2019). For those students who must mask (hide their natural behaviors) their neurodivergent traits to survive in school and life, there are also higher risks for depression, social anxiety, suicidal ideation, and suicide (Laurent & Fede, 2020). The current problem is an ever-increasing need for transformational professional learning focused on neurodiversity specifically and equitable, culturally responsive, and differentiated instruction more broadly (Armstrong, 2017; Bettini et al., 2022; Latouche & Gascoigne, 2017; McGuire & Meadan, 2022; State et al., 2019).

This school improvement plan aims to detail various opportunities for delivering professional learning to administrators, general educators, special educators, and staff focused on the most recent information, strategies, and tools to include and support neurodivergent and other diverse learners in inclusive classrooms, schools, and communities. The hope of the project is for the school community to benefit from the impact of empowered administrators, educators, and staff who become more intentionally inclusive, culturally responsive, and neuro-affirming. Educators who participate in neuro-affirming professional learning will benefit from increased self-efficacy (Conroy et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2021) while leading a paradigm shift school-wide to help make the learning community more supportive and inclusive, ultimately improving educational outcomes for all students (Griffiths, 2020; Oliver-Kerrigan et al., 2021). Most importantly, individual students will benefit from being truly included, accepted as they are, and celebrated, leading to improved quality of life and positive educational and social-emotional outcomes (Laurent & Fede, 2020).

The literature review focuses on peer-reviewed articles and input from educational experts from the last five years available through DeWitt Library at Northwestern College, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Sage Journals, and Google Scholar. Older articles are referenced when they inform the historical or ideological position of the current research. Topics for the review include defining terms associated with neurodiversity, placing the neurodiversity movement and neurodivergence squarely within culturally responsive education (CRE), the status of ND/EBD students, and the need for professional learning (PL) for educators of ND/EBD students. The articles span a variety of related subjects which inform the creation of a school improvement plan dedicated to developing and delivering impactful professional learning for the growth of educators in their support of diverse learners generally and neurodivergent learners specifically in k-12 public schools.

The genuine inclusion of ND/EBD students in general education classrooms requires transformational professional learning for school leaders and all (special and general) educators and staff to improve school culture, teacher efficacy, and educational and social-emotional learning outcomes (Armstrong, 2017; Bettini et al., 2022; Latouche & Gascoigne, 2017; McGuire & Meadan, 2022; State et al., 2019). Improving administrator and teacher efficacy related to neurodiversity benefits all school community members by refining understanding, increasing acceptance and celebration of difference, and empowering individualized instruction and differentiation to create authentic inclusion and improved learner outcomes (Conroy et al., 2019; Cumming et al., 2021; Gezer-Demirdagli & Cavkaytar, 2022; Griffiths, 2020; Johnson et al., 2021).

Ensuring the professional learning offered is relatable, engaging, and transformative requires careful planning, with attention given to the participating educators' preferred delivery

methods and expectations. The PL must be *intentionally informed* by neurodivergent perspectives (Dawson, 2022; Laurent & Fede, 2021) and be based on the current understanding of best practices for supporting ND/EBD youth. Along these same lines, addressing and discussing individuals as they ask to be described is essential in life and academic discourse (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021). Like other recent Autistic-led research, this work honors current advocacy. It will follow the Autistic community's preference by using inclusive identity-first language (Bonello, 2022; Minalili, 2021) and capitalizing Autistic when referring to the community (Autistic Self Advocacy Network, 2023).

Organized by topic, the literature review begins by defining terms to be used throughout the school improvement plan and placing the concepts of neurodiversity, neurodivergence, and emotional/behavior disorders within the realm of culturally responsive pedagogy. Next, the review will detail the status and needs of ND/EBD youth. Finally, the need for neuro-affirming professional learning and some effective delivery options are detailed.

### **Review of the Literature**

#### **Neurodiversity and Neurodivergence**

As Griffiths & Leach (2022) detail, “the term ‘neurodiversity’ is used in several different ways in current literature and on social media. While the term was originally coined [or, more correctly, used in academic writing] by Singer (2020) as an alternative way of conceptualising the autistic spectrum, it has since been used in reference to a variety of learning differences (e.g., Baker, 2011)” (The idea of ‘neurodiversity’ section). Neurodiversity is the acknowledgment of humans having all kinds of minds. Singer currently defines neurodiversity as “A biological truism that refers to the limitless variability of human nervous systems on the planet, in which no

two can ever be exactly alike due to the influence of environmental factors” (Singer, n.d., Minimalist definition section).

At present, neurodiversity is sometimes misused as interchangeable with *neurodivergence* in advocacy and research spaces. While researching for this work, some sources confused neurodiversity, which explains the whole of humanity, with *neurodivergence*, the term for those minds which vary from the status quo or current norm in the researched society. Understanding the nuance between neurodiversity and neurodivergence is essential to the work of this project and for broader advocacy efforts.

Although sometimes confused or misused, neurodiversity differs from *neurodivergence* (Fletcher-Watson, 2020). Neurodivergence, in contrast to neurodiversity, is “an epistemologically useful construct *from the neurodiversity paradigm* [emphasis added] does *not* [emphasis added] dehumanize or pathologize a person’s divergence from dominant conceptualizations of mental functioning or selfhood (Chapman, 2020)” (Minalili, 2021, p. 22). Neurodivergence is one concept *within* the overall paradigm of neurodiversity.

In the context of this proposal, as in previous work, Allen (2022) continues to assert: *Neurodivergent* [emphasis added] (ND) “means having a mind functioning in ways that diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of ‘normal’” (Walker, 2014). “The terms neurodivergent and neurodivergence were coined in the year 2000 by Kassiane Asasumasu, a multiply neurodivergent neurodiversity activist” (Walker, 2014). Autistic or ADHD students and students with emotional or behavioral support needs (EBD) are neurodivergent. Some people are also “multiply neurodivergent”; for example, a student can be dyslexic, Autistic and need support for anxiety simultaneously (Walker,

2014). In contrast, Neurotypical (NT) describes typically developing children who do not have unique support needs related to their neurotype. (p.2).

Many disabilities are categorized as neurodivergent, which “can be largely or entirely genetic and innate, or it can be largely or entirely produced by brain-altering experience, or some combination of the two” (Walker, 2023, Neurodivergent and Neurodivergence section, para. 2).

A human can be neurodivergent from birth (genetic or birth-related difference) or become neurodivergent due to any one of several reasons (stroke, trauma, etc.).

### **Neuroaffirming Practice**

Teaching all students about neuroscience and their unique minds can be a lesson in neurodiversity; planning for, accommodating, and celebrating the neurodivergent minds in a learning community is a *neuroaffirming* and culturally responsive practice. Neuro-affirming practice is inclusive and respectful of the lived experiences of neurodivergent individuals (Bottema-Beutel, 2021). Rather than focusing on the deficiency or cure-based medical model, neuro-affirming education focuses on the social model of disability (Armstrong, 2017; Dawson, 2022). It is strengths-based, ideally focused on the accommodations and differentiation required to ensure academic and social inclusion can be successful (Armstrong, 2017). The neurodiversity *movement* is a social movement working towards acceptance and inclusion for neurodivergent individuals (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2019, Neurodiversity Perspectives section). The movement advocates for neuro-affirming policies and practices throughout society, including public schools.

### **Neurodivergence as a Key Component of Culturally Responsive Education**

Including, planning for, and teaching to all kinds of minds (neuro-affirming practice) is a best practice for special educators (Armstrong, 2017) and fits in well as a pillar of culturally

responsive pedagogy (Dawson, 2022; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2019). Montgomery (2001) states, “Culturally responsive classrooms *specifically acknowledge* [emphasis added] the presence of culturally diverse students and the need for these students to find relevant connections among themselves and with the subject matter and the tasks teachers ask them to perform” (p. 4).

Identifying and understanding *neurodivergence* (ND) and placing it alongside other historically oppressed categories (race, gender identity, sexuality, class, religion, disability) within the paradigm of culturally responsive education is affirming and inclusive, ultimately benefiting communities, educators, and learners alike.

“Taking a multicultural approach to work with neurodivergent students can increase understanding and awareness of their experience” (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2019, abstract). The neurodiversity movement creates communities for neurodivergent individuals. These individuals come together to find support and community; therefore, they can be considered a culture. As Gobo & Shmulsky (2019) state:

“The American Psychological Association defines culture broadly, not just race and ethnicity, but also gender, sexual orientation, immigrant status, disability/ability, and other salient aspects of social being (APA, 2017). Based on the APA definition, neurodiversity [neurodivergence, more specifically] is a culture with membership of autistic people and others with hidden disabilities” (Neurodiversity Perspective section paragraph 2).

The neurodiversity *movement* seeks to increase acceptance and inclusion for neurodivergent individuals who experience disability due to societal constructs and ableism. Bringing neuro-affirming practices into schools furthers the aims of the neurodiversity movement and is an integral part of culturally responsive education.

The research base surrounding culturally responsive pedagogy (culturally relevant/responsive education/teaching, multicultural teaching, etc.) is extensive (Montgomery, 2001; Shannon-Baker, 2018). A Google Scholar search for culturally responsive education returns over 100,000 results. Despite decades of work on culturally responsive education, researchers only recently began to highlight neurodivergence/the neurodiversity movement as an area of focus for k-12 educators. While extensive research addressing individual neurodivergence and related disabilities (especially ADHD and autism) can be easily found, it is not necessarily focused on respecting and including these learners in k-12 education, nor is it consistently conducted by neurodivergent researchers. The present research is just starting to include the social model of disability and data centered on strengths or, even better, useful reality (Fede, 2022) rather than deficit-based medical models of disability. Neurodivergent voices must inform neuro-affirming education. Neuro-affirming education includes and supports all types of minds within a culturally responsive, inclusive education model (Fallon et al., 2023; Griffiths, 2020; Griffiths & Leach, 2022; Laurent & Fede, 2021).

### **Current Status and Needs of ND/EBD Learners**

ND/EBD youth are at risk for adverse educational and social-emotional, especially mental-health, outcomes (Bettini et al., 2022; Laurent & Fede, 2020; McGuire & Meadan, 2022; State et al., 2019; Valenti et al., 2019; Zolkoski & Lewis-Chiu, 2019). Each article related to ND/EBD youth analyzed for this work reiterates the dire statistics, and this researcher has personal and professional experience with the problematic outcomes and struggles associated with the unmet needs and lagging skills of ND/EBD learners (Greene & Winkler, 2019).

Averett (2021) and others share parent perspectives related to the needs of students served by special education during and after Covid 19. Many families struggle and need more

practical support from their children's schools. PL for inclusion and differentiation for ND/EBD learners could empower educators and staff to provide the needed collaboration and support these learners' parents seek. Post Covid-19, neurodivergent *and* neurotypical learners have been increasingly struggling with emotions and behaviors (Delisio et al., 2023). Many students, ND/EBD students especially, need neuro-affirming trauma-informed support from all school stakeholders, particularly special and general educators (Averett, 2021; Delisio, 2023). Current research and news reporting in the U.S. extensively detail many young people's emotional and behavioral support needs. To facilitate learning, public schools must meet ND/EBD youth's immediate needs, which will benefit all learners (Danniels & Pyle, 2023). Most educators do not have to be convinced ND/EBD students are suffering to want to meet their needs adequately. Any professional learning which empowers administration, educators, and staff to improve educational access for ND/EBD learners ultimately benefits *all* learners and school stakeholders, improves climate, and increases teacher efficacy (Conroy et al., 2019; Johnson & Gutierrez de Blume, 2021; Oliver-Kerrigan et al., 2021).

### **Professional Learning**

Teaching requires life-long learning, and most educators want to be more inclusive in general and specifically for ND/EBD learners (McGuire & Meadan, 2022). Forward-thinking districts prioritize becoming culturally responsive, and states are becoming more focused on social-emotional learning, especially post-Covid-19 (Dermody & Dusenbury, 2022). Thankfully, research on the necessity and impact of PL is available if one knows where to look and has time to devote to the research. Researchers and educational experts recommend various support strategies for ND/EBD youth, and the recommendations require professional learning for the educators on the ground who will be delivering this daily support (Aylward & Neilsen, 2021;

Delisio et al., 2023; Gezer-Demirdagli & Cavkaytar, 2022; Griffiths, 2020; Johnson et al., 2021; Latouche & Gascoigne, 2019; Mintz et al., 2021; State et al., 2019).

The professional learning teachers require and desire is often inaccessible due to time or financial constraints. Accessing and choosing the best PL can be daunting, especially when so many types of professional learning are available. A Google search for “teacher professional development” brings back over one *billion* results, while a Google Scholar search only returns around 27,000. The difference in these numbers highlights the disparity between all available PL and PL with a solid research base to back it up. Recently, teachers have been accessing social media for helpful hints for their teaching practice. It is lovely to find an affordable way to learn more, but the quality of the support is suspect without proper vetting. Finding the most valuable PL grounded in research is often challenging. Districts, individual schools, and local experts or mentors must assist with vetting resources and serve as guides to accessing, or ideally, be providers of time and funding while navigating their educators toward the most relevant and transformational PL available.

### ***Why is the PL Necessary?***

Providing valuable strategies for supporting ND/EBD youth (trauma-informed instruction and self-regulation strategies in their case) requires more professional learning if the strategies are to be implemented effectively and with fidelity (Delisio et al., 2023). Most of the research analyzed for this project evaluated existing PL or possible strategies for supporting ND/EBD learners. The common theme throughout the research is PL is necessary for increasing teacher self-efficacy related to supporting ND/EBD learners.

Special educators work with ND learners, many of whom qualify as EBD students. These educators need up-to-date neuro-affirming guidance, information, and resources to best support

ND/EBD learners in reaching their goals (Bettini et al., 2022). Special educators who were provided training to better support ND/EBD students reported positive results such as reduced stress, anxiety, and fear, increased sense of worth and value, and increased capacity, teamwork, and skill. Educators who took part in professional learning reported feeling empowered and proud of the improvement in their programs for educators, staff, students, and families (Aylward & Neilsen-Hewett, 2021). Special educators need time and resources to collaborate with and train paraprofessionals (Bettini et al., 2022). They also need collaboration time with general educators, parents, and administrators to ensure the support needs of the ND/EBD students can be met (Bettini et al., 2022).

General educators also need more immediately helpful information about fully including and increasing access for ND/EBD youth to the curriculum. General educators need more PL related to ND/EBD students and collaboration time with special educators who support these students (McGuire & Medan, 2022). The participants in McGuire & Medan's (2022) study shared they had "limited professional development... about how to socially include students with EBD" (p. 23). This researcher has noticed a lack of SEL or CRE-focused professional learning available through her district, much like the educators in the McGuire & Medan (2022) study,

"Educators acknowledged currently school- or district provided professional development emphasizes academics (e.g., reading), but felt professional development should include behavioral and social-emotional needs of students so educators can create more socially inclusive environments for their students." (p. 23)

Increased collaboration between special and general educators is needed to improve educational access for all learners. "Students' movement from self-contained into general education settings substantially changes the roles of special education teachers (SETs), requiring

they engage in more intensive coordination with other educators” (Bettini et al., 2022, p. 98).

McGuire & Medan (2022) found that educators wanted to work with EBD learners but needed more collaboration with special educators and desired more PL. Ideally, *all* educators should be prepared to serve *all* learners. Until then, special and general educators need more collaboration and professional learning time to work together to support ND/EBD learners. The mindset, skills, and strategies they acquire will ultimately increase their efficacy and collegiality. The entire learning community will benefit as a result.

To make any lasting and systemic change, administrators and district/state leaders must lead the charge and advocate for authentic inclusion, improve professional learning for social-emotional learning, and support positive academic and quality-of-life outcomes for all learners by participating in and providing neuro-affirming professional learning. Armstrong (2017) states, “The field of special education needs to rid itself of its negative baggage and embrace a more progressive way of educating students who learn differently. The concept of neurodiversity provides the catalyst for such a change” (para. 2). Armstrong (2017) also suggests creating “neurodiversity coordinators” within existing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) offices and special education departments, supporting teachers in accessing professional learning, and sponsoring school community events (parent academies, learning fairs, etc.) where neurodiversity can be highlighted (para. 27-29).

There are numerous reasons why neuro-affirming professional learning is necessary. The knowledge can be utilized to improve school culture, increase authentic inclusion, and support ND/EBD learners, educators, and staff. Educators quoted in the research approved of the various types of professional learning and gained confidence and self-efficacy in supporting ND/EBD youth. After committing to providing neuro-affirming professional learning, schools have

choices about how to deliver professional learning. The options for PL can be as diverse as the districts or schools requiring it or educators desiring it. When given some control over the delivery of the PL, educators are more likely to embrace the content thoroughly. The more access points educators can use to internalize and utilize information from professional learning, the better for an initiative's overall success. The research for this project offers an array of choices for moving forward with professional learning to support ND/EBD students.

### *Effective Methods for Delivery*

The research details various delivery methods for much-needed professional learning. Some researchers described individualized or group online delivery (Delisio et al., 2023; Gezer-Demirdagli & Cavkaytar, 2022; Johnson et al., 2021; Laurent & Fede, 2021), in-person training, including lecture, group learning, train the trainer style, and feedback/coaching models (Conroy et al., 2019; Griffiths, 2020; Latouche & Gascoigne, 2019; Sam et al., 2021; Smith Canter et al., 2017), research learning communities (Mintz et al., 2021), and hybrid models (Yasar-Akyar et al., 2022). Yasar-Akyar et al. (2022) and Griffiths (2020) presented quite compelling PL content and delivery models.

A few of the researchers evaluated the efficacy of existing professional development focused on specific interventions such as “a comprehensive program created by the National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorder (NPDC)” (Sam et al., 2021, p. 2308), the “BEST in CLASS intervention” (Conroy et al., 2019), and a program called “One of the Kids” for training educators and paraprofessionals in the use of the Early Start Denver Model (ESDM) (Aylward & Neilsen-Hewett, 2021). Griffiths (2020) evaluated a program called “Teaching for Neurodiversity” (TFN), specifically targeting the area of need for dyslexic learners but informing educators about neurodiversity in broader strokes as well. Positive results

were reported for educators and learners in all the studies. The research establishes the benefits of professional learning and details many options for delivery.

The most neuro-affirming articles researched are very clear about the need for the research and any professional learning associated with it to be informed by neurodivergent perspectives (Armstrong, 2017; Clement et al., 2022; Laurent & Fede, 2021). Ensuring representatives of the community members served by any plan are consulted and included in creating the project is vital to transformational change. All proposed professional learning must be informed by neurodivergent researchers, educators, and learners as much as possible.

### **Site Profile**

#### **District, Community, School, & Student Characteristics**

This school improvement plan is intended first to reach a special education teacher leader and the administration of Kadena Elementary School (KES), a Department of Defense Education Authority (DODEA) school on Kadena Air Base in Okinawa, Japan. The plan will then be shared with DODEA Pacific South Instructional Support Specialists and up the Professional Learning chain as appropriate. The school and district are unique. DODEA is one of only two federal school systems in the United States, the other being the Bureau of Indian Education (DODEA, 2023b). DODEA schools are fully accredited by U.S. accreditation agencies (DODEA, 2023c).

DODEA schools serve military-affiliated children dependent upon military members or civilians supporting American military missions. The *2022-2023 DoDEA by the Numbers* (2023a) publication documents 66,416 enrolled students in 160 schools in 60 military communities worldwide. Students attending DODEA schools have families who serve in the Army (38%), Air and Space Forces (19%), DOD Civilians (15%), Navy (13%), Marine Corps

(10%), and Coast Guard (<1%) (DODEA 2023a). Students experience numerous cultures and have unique life experiences due to multiple moves and their caregivers' exceptional service. Student diversity reflects America and the military more specifically (DODEA, 2023a). DODEA reports students by gender 49% female and 51% male (nonbinary/genderfluid students are not mentioned). The racial breakdown is 42% White, 21% Hispanic/Latino, 12% multiracial, 10% Black, 6% Asian, 3% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 2% not identified, and 1% American Indian/Alaska Native (DODEA, 2023a). There is socio-economic diversity also; however, every DODEA student has at least one employed caregiver, access to housing and food, and health care, including mental health care. The exact percentage of qualified students was not found, but free and reduced lunches are available for those families who qualify.

Kadena Elementary School is in the Pacific South District of the DODEA Pacific Region. DODEA Pacific serves 21,390 students in two countries and one territory, with three districts comprising 45 schools (DODEA, 2023d). Pacific South operates thirteen schools across four communities in Okinawa, Japan (DODEA, 2023c). KES is the larger of two elementary schools on a base with one high school, two middle schools, two elementary, one primary, and one intermediate school (DODEA 2023c).

Okinawa is Japan's smallest prefecture and is a sub-tropical island on the westernmost and southernmost end of the Japanese island chain. According to the Okinawa Prefectural Government (2018), there are thirty-one "military exclusive-use facilities" and approximately 25,843 American military personnel (p. 6), as well as DOD civilians, DODEA staff, and family members in Okinawa. The total American population can be estimated at nearly 60,000.

KES is a "state of the art, 21st-century school which cover [sic] 194,000 square feet." (DODEA, 2022a). The school is organized into neighborhoods of open-concept classrooms with

flexible and multi-use furniture and integrated technology. The school serves approximately 620 Pre-K (PSCD/Sure Start) through 5th-grade students (DODEA, 2022a). About 18% of the students are served by special education and are on active IEPs (Individual Education Plans) (Principal, Dr. K. White, personal communication, April 26, 2022). The KES “faculty comprises over 82 professional level staff members...with an additional 40+ paraprofessionals and office staff members for support and supervision” (DODEA, 2022a). Three-quarters of the staff have advanced degrees, and “turnover among the professional teaching staff is low to moderate for a DoDEA school of this size, averaging between 5-15 reassignments per school year” (DODEA, 2022a).

Special educators are essential team members at KES. The team serves the most special education students in the district. The school employs the largest special education team on the island, made up of four learning-impaired moderate/severe (LIMS) teachers, one emotionally impaired (EI) teacher, three learning-impaired mild/moderate (LIMM) teachers, one teacher for preschool children with disabilities (PSCD), three speech and language pathologists, one traveling teacher for Hearing-Impaired or Deaf students, one traveling Autism Teacher Leader, as well as a consulting physical therapist, psychologist, and occupational therapist. KES has two school counselors and administrators who round out the special education team.

### **Mission & Vision**

DODEA’s (2022b) vision is “Excellence in Education for Every Student, Every Day, Everywhere,” and its mission is to “Educate, Engage, and Empower military-connected students to succeed in a dynamic world” (p. 4). Kadena Elementary School’s (KDES) vision is “Knowledge Equals Success,” and their purpose is “Develop adaptable learners for a changing world.” Their motto is “Where Kids Come First” (DODEA 2022a, Kadena ES section). DODEA

has a strategic plan for continuous improvement, which includes four focus areas for the 2023-24 school year (2022b). Three have either “equity” or “equitable” in their descriptions. Most relevant to this project is Focus Area 1:

**Focus Area 1: Strategic Initiative 1.1:** Equitable Learning Experiences for All Students

To provide equitable opportunities for students in a safe and secure learning environment, we will implement programs and supports to address achievement gaps between racial, ethnic, ability, and *other identified groups* [emphasis added].

Schools *must provide learning environments where students feel safe, secure, and supported by the entire learning community* [emphasis added]. Over the next Fiscal Year, two Critical Success Factors in this Strategic Initiative, 1.1.a Data-Informed Instruction and 1.1.b *Differentiated Instruction for All Students* [emphasis added] will together ensure students receive equitable learning opportunities.

This school improvement plan aligns directly with the initiative and should empower educators to reach the goals necessary to support all students. “Other identified groups” must include ND/EBD learners to ensure we are genuinely equitable in our efforts.

**Parent Involvement**

Military-affiliated parents with students in DODEA schools are typically more involved than some parents in traditional United States school districts. The parents tend to value education, military communities are tight-knit (especially overseas), and when students struggle, support services are available for the students and the parents through several military family support systems. At KES, parents are involved as staff members, PTO volunteers, and classroom volunteers. Some parents participate in the School Advisory Committee. High numbers of parents turn out to activities and conferences at the school. Parents can stay informed using a

student information system called Aspen, and most classroom teachers consistently communicate with parents via email, in-person, or telephone conversations. The administrators at KES often communicate via Facebook, email, and a newsletter. Parents can also access the school and DODEA's websites easily.

### **Student Performance**

KES students are assessed in kindergarten through third grade using Benchmark Education's Oral Reading Record Kit, students in second grade take the Cognitive Abilities Test, and students in the third through fifth grades take criterion-referenced assessments in Literacy and Mathematics aligned to the DODEA College and Career Ready Standards (CCRS) (DODEA, n.d.). The most recent results on DODEA's website for the CCRS Summative results are from 2019. The results report growth in every area from the previous year for almost all groups (the exceptions being 6th-grade math, Algebra 2, Black/African American [0% growth], and missing race data [-1.9%]) and overall results of 53.1% of students meeting or exceeding standards in literacy and 42.6% in mathematics (DODEA, 2019, p.6). Some fourth-grade students are also assessed using the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which compares students across the nation (DODEA, n.d.). In 2022, DODEA students "led the nation in scoring" on the NAEP; "DoDEA students' average scale scores ranged from 15 to 23 percentage points higher than corresponding national average scores and held steady or increased while national average scores decreased. DoDEA was the only state/jurisdiction to see an increase in score for any grade/subject" (DODEA, 2023b).

### **Current Student Learning Goals**

The Kadena ES "Key Goals" follow:

**Organizational CCRSL Goal:** Kadena Elementary School will implement College and Career Readiness Standards in Literacy (CCRSL)

**Academic CCRSM Goal:** Kadena Elementary School students will show an increased level of proficiency in Mathematics (DODEA, 2022a, Kadena ES section).

Although the goals named here do not touch on special education, social-emotional learning, or equity, the teachers and administration at KES are very aware of the increasing needs of students in these areas. There has been ongoing discussion during FCTs and other meetings about increasing behavior concerns related to emotional and physical regulation, especially in the lower grades. The DODEA Blueprint for Continuous Improvement: Strategic Plan/Volume IV (2022b) does include goals focused on equity, as mentioned above. DODEA students receiving special education support have individualized learning plan (IEP) goals unique to their needs. The EI students often have specific goals addressing emotional and physical regulation and expected behaviors at school. Ideally, special educators and general education teachers work together to assist students in meeting those goals. At KES, general educators often request consultations regarding challenging behaviors from the Autism Teacher Leader, Autism ISS, school counselors, school psychologist, and EI teacher.

### **Professional Development Practices**

The Pacific South District and KES currently provide quarterly PL days focused on the College and Career Readiness Standards (CCRS), weekly grade level collaboration/Focused Collaboration Time (FCT), and job-specific learning such as Safe Crisis Management (SCM) training for crisis response team members, new teacher training, training for math and reading specialists, and so on. Analyzing KES's 2022-2023 professional learning calendar finds no content explicitly related to equity, neurodiversity, or Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) except

for one section of “behavior needs” for kindergarten taught by the Autism Teacher Leader. KES educators also participated in instructional rounds and grade-level collaboration days for analyzing assessment data and team-level planning.

Focused Collaboration time (FCT) is one hour weekly when students are released early. The FCT time has district and building-level expectations associated with it. The calendar for 2022-23 included an option for monthly district-level job alike meetings, but these were not yet observed in the KES special education department. (Kadena Elementary School, 2022)

### **Needs Assessment**

This school improvement plan hopes to improve outcomes for individual ND/EBD students by improving school climate and culture while increasing staff capacity through targeted professional learning for empowering educators to include, support, and differentiate for diverse learners. During three years as a staff member and educator for DODEA schools, this researcher has personally observed numerous opportunities for improvement in the inclusion and differentiation of instruction for ND/EBD learners in special and general education spaces. The researcher attended multiple required PL sessions focused on academic standards and technology integration during the same time frame. However, only two optional (for a fee and outside of contracted hours) PL courses, one centered on culturally relevant teaching (using the AVID curriculum) and one on the History of Autism, were accessible and publicized by the local district (Europe East-KMCC area). One optional *Equity and Access Summit* was available, and the researcher attended and earned college credit for attendance and reflections.

Educators need help finding the time and financial resources to learn more about ND/EBD learners (and all diverse learners). They require clear and accessible guidance to fully include and differentiate instruction for diverse learners. As detailed in the literature review,

ND/EBD learners struggle to meet personal and academic goals and remain safe in our current system. While DODEA reports academic success, partly due to their unique demographics (employed and involved caregivers, housing, food, healthcare, mental health support, fair wages, and good benefits for faculty), they publicize being focused on continuous improvement, and there is a current need. DODEA could become a national model of ideal education if it focused on CRE, SEL, inclusion, and differentiation by fully developing its faculty and staff to meet the goals outlined in the *Blueprint's* increased focus on equity.

The *Blueprint* states, “DoDEA is committed to implementing a systemic Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework will support students by increasing access and removing barriers to student achievement through *social and emotional supports* [emphasis added]” (DODEA, 2022b, p. 20). To truly remove barriers, educators and staff must be well-informed, have access to up-to-date neuro-affirming best practices, and be allowed to create fully inclusive and equitable learning spaces with differentiated instruction and necessary accommodations readily available to all learners.

DODEA does not currently have SEL standards in place, and they have only minimal data publicly available regarding the status of diverse learners and their struggles or success (CCRS results broken down by gender and race). To fully understand the extent of their needs, it would be valuable to collect, analyze, and share data specifically about academic and IEP goal progress, counseling referrals, and disciplinary actions for all diverse (including ND/EBD) learners. Surveying current and former students, educators, and parents about perceptions of inclusion and support for ND/EBD learners would be valuable information for informing department policies, resource allocation, and future PL.

DODEA does highlight equity in the *Blueprint* (2022b), and DODEA's *Learning Walkthrough Implementation Guide 2.0 (LWIG2)* (2023e) targets student-centered learning. The challenge is that student-centered learning, as described in the guide, does not explicitly include cultural responsiveness, differentiation, or accommodation as attributes of the student-centered environment. The guide does come very close when it says, “[g]roup and *individualized resources* [emphasis added] support student learning (adaptive technology, ESOL resources, SPED resources, manipulatives, reference materials, etc.)” will be observed in the environment (DODEA, 2023f, p. 17).

To DODEA's credit, the *LWIG2* (2023f) goes into detail in the glossary of terms regarding differentiation. Differentiation is highlighted under Indicator 5 in the “Questions to Teachers” section, “How do you determine the method of differentiation, process, product, and/or content as you design workstation tasks for students who struggle and for advanced learners?” (DODEA, 2023f, p. 21). It is positive differentiation has a focus in the guide, but how do educators become adept at meeting the expectation?

The guidance is a great tool for understanding the expectations for excellent instruction throughout DODEA; however, educators need more information, readily available resources, collaboration time, and possibly coaching to ensure their teaching is *truly student-centered* (equitable, trauma-informed, inclusive, differentiated). An educators' version of the walkthrough guide should be developed to include a self-assessment tool and easily accessible PL resources related to each area evaluated to ensure educators can meet the outlined expectations. Providing PL centered on cultural responsiveness, equity, inclusion, trauma-informed teaching, and differentiation, along with the academic standards-based PL currently provided quarterly, will empower educators to meet expectations similarly to how DODEA is working toward providing

quality tiered support for learners. Quarterly PL or instruction embedded in FCT focused on these areas would be the adult's quality tier-one instruction. Suppose an educator is struggling to meet the expectation for student-centered learning. They should be coached and supported more specifically by mentor teachers and colleagues (tier two) or given more intense support (tier-three) via reteaching or coaching from an Instructional Support or Professional Development Specialist.

DODEA's expectations are addressed in the *Blueprint* (2022b) and the *LWIG2* (2023f); however, clear expectations alone cannot create success. Without resources and deliberate instruction (PL) to meet the expectations educators and staff are left struggling, as students would be, with only standards to guide them. Excellent instruction should be provided *to* educators and staff, not only expected. Providing high-quality PL centered on becoming adept at including and differentiating for diverse learners will empower educators to be truly equitable and student-centered for all learners.

### **Data Analysis**

#### **Assessment Options**

In an ideal situation, community stakeholders would be surveyed to gauge the school's climate and the need for and success of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. Data related to counseling interactions, discipline referrals and outcomes, and special education goals and accommodations should also be collected, broken down by categories, analyzed, and acted upon. It would be most beneficial for DODEA to adopt SEL standards and to assess SEL competencies at least half as often as they assess CCRS. Professional Learning focused on equity/SEL broadly, or ND/EBD learners specifically, would ideally include affordable and accessible trauma-informed, culturally relevant, inclusive theories, research, resources, and

strategies to meet all student learning needs. Educators would be surveyed or observed before and immediately after training and three to six months later to assess the success of any learning or a need for more support.

### **Data Summary and School Challenges**

Due to limited publicly available information and a strict and time-intensive vetting process for research in DODEA schools, there is little to no accessible peer-reviewed data or research available regarding special education, social-emotional learning, neurodivergence, or emotional and behavioral disabilities directly associated with DODEA. First-hand anecdotal information indicates a need for increased professional learning for general and special educators to meet DODEA's high expectations for inclusion, differentiation, and student-centered learning. Teachers have struggled to understand how best to support ND/EBD learners in multiple settings.

Recently, general educators have been heard discussing the increased number of "behaviors" and describing students just "not knowing how to do school." They highlight how students struggle to interact socially with adults and peers (personal communications, 2020-2023). When teachers did have consultation time and access to trauma-informed, culturally relevant resources, they felt more confident, students benefited and were more regulated and successful at school. On the other hand, when some educators were un/misinformed about ND/EBD learners, the students struggled. Many externalizing (disruptive) and internalizing (anxiety and self-harming) behaviors increased.

The researcher has interacted with students in crisis who might have avoided escalation if their general education teachers had been exposed to differentiation techniques and coached in using some essential support and de-escalation strategies. Sometimes, students with support

needs are not included in general education settings as much as possible because general educators still need to learn more in order to include these diverse learners successfully. From personal experience, it is not usually a lack of will on the teacher's part; it is a lack of confidence or skill.

Another huge challenge related to supporting ND/EBD youth this researcher observed in DODEA schools is inadequate paraprofessional staffing due to low pay (GS-04), slow onboarding, and inadequate training. Often, paraprofessional positions, called Educational Aids by DODEA (Special Education, Kindergarten, or Sure Start), are filled by substitute teachers, and the personnel can change daily. The training available for the aids is minimal, and for substitutes, even more so. This situation is untenable and requires immediate action: increased pay, more timely onboarding, and specific in-depth training for working with ND/EBD youth. Paraprofessionals often spend as much time as or more with individual students than their special educators do. This challenge requires its own improvement plan and is a crucial component that must be addressed to meet the goals of DODEA's *Blueprint*.

### **District and School Strengths**

The DOD provides contracted social workers and counselors as Military Family Life Counselors (MFLC) to support students and families with short-term counseling needs. KES has two MFLCs assigned to them during the school year. KES also has one school psychologist shared with another elementary school and two school counselors serving full-time. These faculty members are essential to positive SEL at KES. These professionals and special educators consult and collaborate as often as possible with general educators when they become aware of a need. DODEA also has a DEI division and Instructional Support Specialists in Special Education, Counseling, Autism, and Professional Development who could be included in

working to improve PL for all educators and staff related to equity, differentiation, and inclusion goals which would inform the way educators meet ND/EBD learners' needs.

Many educators at KES seek professional learning independently, and all DODEA educators must earn six college credits every six years to remain certified and employed. These required credits are sometimes earned through coursework taught by local district employees for educators to choose from. Some educators also access continuing education through book studies via Project Read for DODEA and International School Educators offered by the University of San Diego Professional and Continuing Education. DODEA educators often pursue advanced degrees; some independently seek information about diverse learners. If a system were in place for educators and staff to learn from each other and research together about these opportunities to improve inclusion, differentiation, and cultural responsiveness, then teacher efficacy, school climate, and student well-being would increase.

Another DODEA strength is it does provide some funding for extra-duty contracts. KES should consider a school-level diversity coordinator/multicultural club leader and a professional learning leader/coordinator. Funding either (ideally both) of these extra duties would enhance learning for everyone in the building while honoring the focus initiatives and values of DODEA.

### ***Success to Build On***

One definite strength observed at KES this year that should be duplicated and expanded upon was the effort of the Autism Teacher Leader and her staff to create interactive displays, videos of Autistic and neurotypical students sharing about Autism, and an "Autism Experience" during April for Autism Awareness/Acceptance/Appreciation Month. Recreating the "Autism Experience" at a schoolwide event focused on building community and teaching about Neurodiversity would benefit even more individuals. Many educators were impressed and

desired to spend more of their own time with the experience. It would be beneficial to incorporate an experience like this into an annual teacher training about Neurodiversity. The Autism Teacher Leader has an office at KES yet serves the entire district. Staffing this position is an excellent step towards equity and proper support for ND/EBD students. One could argue more than one position is justified in a district this size.

Building on the success of the Autism Teacher Leader position, another positive enhancement to DODEA's focus on equity would be to create and staff a position like a "neurodiversity coordinator," as Armstrong (2017) suggests. This position would work on coaching educators and staff about ND/EBD challenges, providing neuro-affirming research, resources, and targeted professional learning. DODEA could consider having this position be a specific role for a Special Education ISS. The educator could work district-wide to provide PL and coaching for educators to empower them to become more culturally responsive, trauma-informed, inclusive, and affirming. It might be beneficial to have Special Education ISSs serve as experts for different support needs (EI, LIMS, L IMM, IEP monitoring); they already have Autism ISSs.

### **Opportunities for Action**

As discussed in the literature review, there are neuro-affirming ways to support ND/EBD learners, ultimately improving learning for most students and the school climate overall. As with any systemic change, needs must be highlighted from above through departmental directives and initiatives (*Blueprint, LWIG2*, etc.), and change will also necessarily bubble up from a grassroots level (individual parents, students, or educators seeking knowledge and advocating). Ideally, numerous stakeholders will address needs from multiple levels at once to make the most impact. Opportunities for improvement can be found throughout DODEA at every level. Ensuring all

educators have a deep understanding of DODEA’s vision and values to guide their daily practice while at the same time providing school-level specific and accessible practical guidance will improve instruction and school climate.

### **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**

Over the time the researcher has been employed, DEI guidance from the DODEA HQ level has been confusing at best, frustrating, and potentially harmful at its worst. In all honesty, the researcher has been following the posting and removal (twice at least) of DEI resources on the DODEA public website. The first director of DEI was named in December 2021 and then sadly reassigned amid a manufactured controversy in 2023 (Jowers, 2023). It is still being determined what the status of the DODEA DEI office will be moving forward. Educators need access to HQ-level information to understand what it all means. Some information indicates DEI specialists may be spread throughout the organization, hopefully benefiting all stakeholders.

While noting the situation and remaining curious, this work must focus on currently available resources. There is published guidance (the *Blueprint*) to direct this project’s efforts, “However, diversity, equity, and inclusion effort will be intentionally integrated across our organization into our Human Capital Plan, curricular decisions, and *instructional practices as well as into our everyday interactions continually advance our organizational culture* [emphasis added]. (DODEA, 2022b, p. 6). Professional learning under the DEI umbrella can fall into many categories and touch on broad concepts for mindset shifts or detailed ideas for specific teaching and support strategies. This project details opportunities for improvement at many levels to inspire the most action possible.

### ***Big Picture***

ND students are not always formally recognized as having a disability, and some would argue they are not disabled simply because they have an ND neurotype. Respecting individuals' stated identities is essential. However, in DODEA, students with EBD are always members of a protected class (disability) and, therefore, must be supported via 504 accommodations or IEPs. All students can be better supported whether they have formal accommodations or not. Focusing on DEI makes education more accessible for all. To this end, the DODEA-wide equity goals outlined in the *Blueprint* are big-picture guideposts for providing the best possible education for individual students in a safe and affirming environment for all community members. The DODEA goals, expectations, and values should be clear and accessible to all stakeholders. Publishing the *Blueprint* is a vital part of this, but are all employees on the same page? Have they even read the document? It would be a valuable exercise to create a yearly training or work session for educators to come together and break down and discuss the most recent iteration of the *Blueprint* and how it impacts their daily efforts in the classroom.

**Yearly Focus Areas.** Using the yearly "Focus Areas" as a touchstone to guide planning for each school year would bring collaborating teams together to create a shared vision for their work and will prioritize equitable, inclusive, and differentiated student-centered learning. In the same ways educators use CCRS to guide academic instruction and assess for learning, these focus areas, and the learning indicators from the *LWIG2*, can guide administration, faculty, and staff toward fully embracing equity for all school community members while assessing their success or need for improvement. All stakeholders need time and guidance to immerse themselves in the values and understand the expectations fully. Yearly review and discussion will benefit everyone involved. Assessing understanding and attitudes before and after collaborative learning would benefit the ongoing process.

One way to ensure stakeholders are focused on DODEA's goals could be to learn from and repeat the efforts of Europe East in 2021 with a virtual conference focused on DODEA's core values and a yearly focus area. Ensuring continuing education credit is available and offering the conference at a convenient time to increase attendance is essential. *The Equity and Access Summit* in 2021 was exceptionally well done and inspiring for individual educators and working teams. One of the best parts of the summit was that the sessions were led by fellow educators, ISSs, and administrators who shared relatable stories, best practices, and examples. Giving choices for which sessions to attend live while granting continued access to the sessions afterward was a brilliant idea for ensuring educators could gain as much knowledge as possible at their own pace. The reflections required to earn college credit for attendance were a valuable activity solidifying the participants' understanding. One way to improve a summit of this type would be to conduct it as a kick-off rather than a wrap-up to the school year.

### ***Credit for Learning***

One underutilized strength DODEA has related to professional development is they have partnered with universities to provide courses for credit for DODEA educators and staff. DODEA has previously offered college-level courses led by district staff in various topics eligible for credit from these universities. DODEA also allows educators to complete book studies for recertification. "A maximum of three Project READ credits can be used towards a recertification cycle." (DODEA, 2023e).

The READ program is a viable option for PL accessed and paid for by individual educators. DODEA should consider facilitating time and space for groups to study together to increase engagement and collaboration. DODEA could provide grants for tuition money. Teachers might enjoy a "book club" atmosphere for any meetings associated with one of these

classes. It would be beneficial to work to add additional books to the University of San Diego's READ program course options relevant to equity, inclusion, differentiation, and improving support for ND/EBD learners.

Another great way to increase engagement and encourage personal and professional learning would be to financially compensate motivated school or district faculty for creating and facilitating courses for credit with partner universities. Educators are more likely to sign up for coursework when they can participate with and learn from respected colleagues. These courses would be available in person and virtually if necessary. In addition, it would be in DODEA's best interest to always offer a for-credit option for any education-related required or optional (like the *Equity and Access Summit*) system-wide professional development. DODEA and the teacher unions have already made a positive move by negotiating contract time to complete the DOD's required yearly training.

There is a need, and DODEA should work to ensure there are courses for credit like this offered every school year. DODEA can better promote these courses, incentivize the coursework with tuition grants, and should organize times and locations for groups to study the content together. Many of the suggested books/topics below would teach about more than one focus area at a time.

### ***Culturally Relevant Education, Differentiation, and Inclusion***

The expanse of materials available to empower educators in this study area is vast and can be overwhelming to navigate. The Project READ for DODEA/Int'l Educators Series lists thirteen choices in their booklist's Equity and Diversity Section (University of San Diego, 2023). While independent professional learning is valuable, working in groups can increase enjoyment, learning and help to hold learners accountable. An AVID ISS and her team delivered an

excellent course for CRT for credit in Europe East in the winter of 2020. It was called *Culturally Relevant Teaching (CRT) AVID, A Schoolwide Approach*, and was worth two credits with the University of San Diego, Professional and Continuing Education. Many texts, articles, and professional learning groups exist to further the goals of CRE. It would be beneficial and appreciated if DODEA could create even more options for groups to come together and earn college credit.

Inclusion and differentiation are important areas to focus on when becoming more student-centered. These topics also partner well with CRE. There are many works by various authors related to inclusion and differentiation. For a solid introduction to inclusion, Paula Kluth (2023) has easily accessible books and includes internet resources for support. Special education ISSs and interested special educators would be excellent leaders for book studies or short professional learning sessions to build confidence in this area.

Yasar-Akyar et al. (2022) present an analysis of a compelling delivery format for professional development related to CRE and inclusion. Educators in the study participated in workshop-based “digital storytelling (DST)” to “enhance their professional development concerning inclusive education” (Yasar-Akyar et al., 2022, p.89). A digital storytelling system was created where educators, students, and community members could upload inclusion-related stories. The workshops helped the educators learn how to use the system impactfully. The study focused on the tool’s use for special education, but it could be helpful for all learners. It would be transformational to create a tool of this sort to bring educators together and help them to relate to each other about various DEI topics.

**Local Example: Teaching for Neurodiversity.** Griffiths (2020) details implementing a nationwide, government-funded professional learning strategy focused on Neurodiversity. The

“aim was to provide a better understanding of diversity in learning and to provide a basic ‘toolkit’ of strategies” to build educator confidence in meeting the needs of diverse learners (Griffiths, 2020, para. 1). The information was disseminated through a train-the-trainer style professional learning model, with slides and other resources accessible online. An administrator and a lead teacher attended the training together and then returned to their sites to share the information with others. The train-the-trainer method with one full-day workshop could fit DODEA well. The topics covered and the toolkit strategies to take back are precisely what many educators need right now to feel more confident in reaching and supporting diverse learners.

If DODEA created or utilized a similar curriculum for administrators and teacher leaders to attend, they would teach others in their buildings, thus building staff capacity across the board and empowering educators at all levels to sync with the DODEA values and expectations for equity, inclusion, and differentiation. The primary training could occur prior to school starting or during the school year if funding for a substitute is allocated.

One idea for integrating this training would be incorporating it into the existing Safe Crisis Management (SCM) training schedule for administrators, counseling staff, and special educators. As a model teaching practice, TFN would fit well as a lead in for the SCM sessions. The information provided and toolkit resources are a perfect way to empower educators to preempt escalating behaviors. They would provide more detailed strategies and time for collaborative learning about ND/EBD youth and their support needs. The first day of the two or three-day training (SCM is usually two days for initial certification and one day for recertification) would be reserved for the TFN session.

The trainers will use the knowledge they gain to teach others during FCT or staff meetings. All the curriculum and resources for the learners could be housed on a PL site within

TEAMS for anyone to access as they are able. To create interest at the start of the training day, it would be beneficial to build upon the success of the KES's Autism Teacher Leader's Autism Experience by recreating the immersive experience as an attention-grabber for the day-long study of teaching for neurodiversity.

### ***Universal Design for Learning***

“UDL is a learning approach that designs curricular materials, activities, and instruction with the flexibility to meet individual learners’ strengths and needs so all students can have access to what is being learned in the class” (Smith-Canter et al., 2017, pp. 2-3). There are many guides for understanding and implementing UDL. It would be great to have a research community set up where each member could dive into a book or some articles about UDL and then bring their findings back to the larger group to discuss and create plans for utilizing the benefits of UDL together for their unique situations. Working as a group to dissect the CAST website and gain a basic understanding of UDL would be beneficial. The group would benefit by having an ISS well-versed in UDL coach them through the content. Cardin & Novak’s (2021) *Equity by Design: Delivering on the Power and Promise of UDL* simultaneously speaks to UDL and Culturally Relevant Education (equity). A group book study on this text could fulfill many needs.

### ***Social Emotional Learning***

Incorporating social-emotional learning throughout the organization is necessary to become an equitable agency (a DODEA focus as of July 2022) and ensure ND/EBD students are supported in schools. “The benefits of social and emotional learning (SEL) are well-researched, with evidence demonstrating an education promotes SEL yields positive outcomes for students, adults, and school communities” (CASEL, 2023). All students benefit when SEL is prioritized,

and ND/EBD students can be much more successful without being singled out when SEL is prioritized and permeates every area of the school.

SEL has become a focus in many school districts, especially in response to the numerous emotional and behavioral challenges recognized post-Covid (Delisio et al., 2023). Dermody & Dusenbury (2022), reporting for CASEL, found “support for SEL at the state level has never been stronger – with 27 states offering free-standing K-12 SEL competencies and 44 states offering guidance for SEL implementation” (p. 1). DODEA should work to implement SEL competencies to prioritize the heart of learning. The competencies would fit nicely alongside the CCRS.

SEL standards are especially beneficial to EI teachers. The researcher often references the Washington state SEL standards when working to create goals and specially designed instruction for students. They are handy for guiding ND/EBD learners toward understanding neurotypical expectations for behaviors. They are also beneficial for coaching NT students about diversity and inclusion. The potential growth from focusing on these standards for all students is highly desirable.

It is important to start work on SEL even while the competencies must be implemented systemically. SEL could be a focus area for a suggested back-to-school Equity and Access summit. Improving educators’ ability to incorporate SEL into their daily rhythm does make education more equitable. Individual educators interested in SEL can access one of nine book studies available through Project READ. SEL could also be an excellent topic for short professional learning chats during FCT. Once per month, teams could use 20 minutes of their FCT time to watch a short SEL-related video or read an article and discuss its relevance to their

classroom, team, and school. The teams could brainstorm how to use shared strategies to improve their practice.

**Local Example: Research Learning Community on Self-Regulation.** Self-regulation is one important SEL topic to include in future professional learning and is particularly relevant to ND/EBD learners. A valuable professional learning opportunity would be to teach educators how to support students with self-regulation. One specific plan for a professional development opportunity is to introduce EI teachers to a specific set of research-based self-regulation tools and then empower them to conduct action research about the tools, eventually teaching others in their buildings about them if they prove beneficial. Allen (2022) has created an action research proposal to use as educators' starting point. That proposal is based on assessing the efficacy of regulation support tools created by Drs. Laurent and Fede, creators of the *Autism Level UP!* website. Laurent and Fede offer online professional learning for educators and numerous free online resources to empower educators to support ND/EBD students, especially Autistic learners, respectfully. Their work is research-based and informed by ND creators and community members.

Empowering educators to conduct action research in a professional research learning community model (Mintz et al., 2021) would benefit EI teachers, who would then inform, coach, and support other special and general educators. During job-alike FCT, EI teachers will connect virtually and learn more about the Energy Regulation tools created by *Autism Level Up!* They will be guided through their action research and continue to meet, discuss, and adjust their research. After the EI teachers conduct the research, if the results are favorable, they will teach other educators about their findings while refining their practice.

**Behaviors.** A pressing concern for general educators is how to manage challenging behaviors successfully. ND/EBD students often struggle due to an educator's need for experience and confidence in this area. Coaching and additional learning are vital for new educators. Adding positive research-based behavior support strategies to the opportunities for professional learning would benefit many educators. Some essential works to consider for study follow:

1. Dr. Ross Greene/Collaborative and Proactive Solutions (CPS). One of Dr. Greene's books, *Lost at School*, is already a Project READ course option.
2. Dr. Laurie Desautels *Connections Over Compliance*. Dr. Desautels has already created a book study (Desautels, 2020) that could be used to guide a study group.
3. Dr. Mona Delahooke *Beyond Behaviors*. Dr. Delahooke offers online professional development related to the book with 6.5 Continuing Education hours available.

It would be wonderful if the Desautels and Delahooke books could be added to the Project READ options. DODEA can advocate for them to be added.

There are numerous ideas for ways to support ND/EBD learners using varied educational theories and models of PL will also benefit all learners in the community. Providing PL beginning with the overarching values of DEI, narrowing down to CRE, SEL, and other more specific competencies and strategies can improve education overall while ensuring ND/EBD and other diverse children are fully included and supported.

### **Implementation of School Improvement Plan**

Implementing any of the suggestions presented would benefit learners. The two local examples provided are a good way for Pacific South and KES to increase their support for ND/EBD learners. Implementing either of the two plans will require detailed planning,

collaboration, and administrator or above school-level support. Timelines, clarification of the roles and assignments of personnel, progress monitoring, and limitations are offered here as a starting point.

**Timelines**

Both local example projects can be started in the fall of 2023, and planning will need to occur for one school year. Each project could then be fully implemented during the following school year. Slow approval processes could disrupt the timelines, making these estimates overly hopeful.

The Teaching for Neurodiversity (TFN) project will require three to four months to recruit trainers, develop the curriculum, create a cache of easily accessible toolkit resources, and secure approvals. The curriculum could then be beta tested at a spring 2024 SCM session. The curriculum can be implemented at all SCM training if it is well received. The timeline for the trainers' presentation of what they learn will vary based on individual schools' schedules.

**Table 1 Timeline**

Timeframe	Teaching for Neurodiversity Project	RLC Project
<b>Fall 2023</b>	Research and create the curriculum and a “Neurodiversity Toolkit” (digital collection of resources).	Recruit interested educators to come together to research a specific Social-Emotional competency and related tools for educators to use with students.
<b>Winter 2023-24</b>	Beta-test the curriculum with administrators and special educators during an additional day of training paired with Safe Crisis Management. Assess knowledge and attitudes before and after the initial training.	Prepare and seek approval for action research based on the RLC’s recommendations.
<b>Spring 2023-24</b>	Send trainers out to share knowledge with their building faculty and staff. Assess longer-term results by surveying all participants at the end of May 2024.	

<p><b>School Year 2024-25</b></p>	<p>If the results are favorable, roll the training out for all SCM training during the year.</p>	<p>Conduct action research, analyze data, and share results. If the interventions the RLC researched are found to be beneficial, they will seek approval for the implementation of the intervention school/district/DODEA-wide.</p>
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The research learning community (RLC) model self-regulation project might take a while to be approved. The timeline will depend on local interest and the creation of the project’s proposal. The action research portion will require submission to DODEA’s Research, Accountability & Evaluation Division. The deadlines for research approvals in 2023 (January and April) have already passed, so the project may have to wait to be approved in 2024. The coordinator and adult participants in the project could accomplish all their research on the strategies without human subject approval. However, they could not study the results of the interventions with children until approval was secured. The community could begin to meet in September and meet monthly during job-alike FCT days for the remainder of the school year while preparing the project proposal for approval. The action research could occur in the 24-25 school year.

**Role Clarifications and Assignments**

Both projects will need coordinators and participants. The coordinators for the NFT PL would likely be the researcher, the Autism Teacher Leader, the Autism ISS, and one or more special education ISSs. These individuals would work together to create the curriculum and resources for the PL. One or more would lead the PL modules on the training days. The first participants will be school psychologists, counseling staff, special educators, administrators, and possibly paraprofessionals. These participants would then become trainers for other staff

members and take their learning back to their home schools to share with other faculty, staff members, and possibly community members.

The coordinator for the RLC on self-regulation would need to be an educator or ISS with research experience who could lead the RLC members through the research, implementation, and analysis of the potential self-regulation intervention.

### **Progress Monitoring**

For the two local examples presented here, Google Forms will be created to assess pre-intervention educator attitudes, background knowledge, and comfort levels with the PL topics and delivery process. Post-intervention surveys will assess knowledge gained as opposed to background knowledge. It will be fascinating to see how teachers feel about the RLC model for the EI PL. The educators should also be surveyed 6-8 weeks post-intervention to see if the PL made a lasting impact.

### **Limitations**

The main limitation of both example projects is they require higher-level approval for implementation. Educators' buy-in could also prove to be complicated. After all, PL is often seen as something to complain about or takes time away from the perceived more critical work of planning or classroom set-up. Educators can feel frustrated by yet another required PL. The researcher hopes by proposing many possibilities and making suggestions to make the PL more accessible, affordable, and relevant, individual educators may find value in PL again.

### **Conclusion**

ND/EBD learners struggle in typical general education classrooms. Their struggle is one of many wake-up calls to educators and administrators urging them to deliberately shift their focus toward DEI. Participating in professional learning, specifically about neurodiversity and

supporting ND/EBD learners while using the information to fulfill the promise of DEI initiatives, is beneficial for all learning community members. Relevant, affordable, and accessible professional learning is needed to inspire and empower educators, staff, and administrators to fully include, accommodate, and differentiate for all diverse learners. Identifying systemic opportunities to improve while at the same time implementing support for individual educators and students is the most impactful way to improve education for all learners. Viewing ND/EBD support needs as a DEI imperative and through the lenses of CRE and SEL can help administrators, faculty, and staff make individual adjustments, leading to positive outcomes for diverse students and entire schools. It is strategic to zoom in on specific needs while also pulling back to observe how those needs fit into the focus areas of DODEA. Educators, learners, and families will benefit from focused attention to these areas of opportunity. Suppose educational professionals work to improve their practice for the authentic inclusion and celebration of all diverse learners. In this case, the canaries may live to sing another day while the mining company shifts its focus toward less toxic endeavors.

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