

Supporting the Transition to Independence for Neurodivergent Individuals *moving beyond the deficit model*

i Benjamin Kaupp, MAT, M.Sp.Ed
Director, Tools for Transition & Work
Foothill College



About Me & TTW

I'm an overeducated neurodivergent car nerd from a small mountain town who accidentally became a professor - which in turn got me accidentally into the neurodiversity movement.

At Foothill College, I direct Tools for Transition & Work (TTW) - a one-year, cohort-based academic program for disabled young adults. TTW builds independence, confidence, and employability through courses in communication, technology, self-regulation, and workplace readiness.

We operate from one principle: growth happens through mistakes, not by avoiding them.



Session Goals

3

Reframe neurodivergence through the language-barrier model rather than the deficit model.

Recognize logistical and systemic barriers that interfere with independence.

Understand how belonging, not IQ, predicts persistence in adulthood.

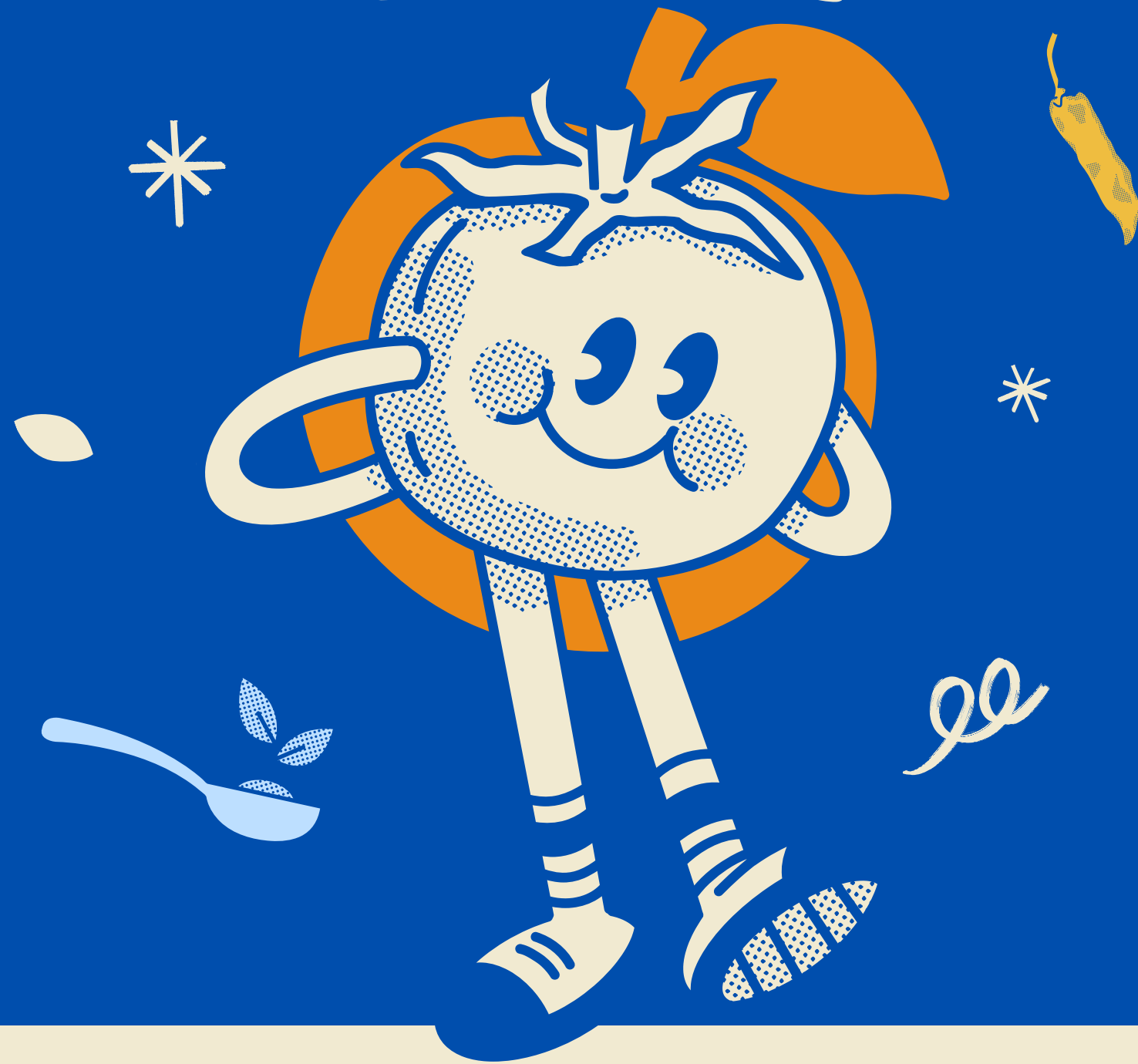


Miguel (2025) attends a career fair.

The Myth of the Deficit

<i>Leave ID Behind</i>	<i>Ignore Normalcy</i>	<i>Heck, Ignore Normal</i>	<i>Learn a new Language</i>
Autism, Down Syndrome, and other neurodivergences are not deficits of intelligence but differences in communication and processing.	Lennard Davis (1995) reminds us that “normalcy” itself is a cultural invention. When we mistake the dominant norm for intelligence, we erase entire ways of thinking.	Most neurodivergent students perform on par with peers when environments value multiple ways of learning (Gee, 2008; Stephenson et al., 2023).	What looks like inability is often a mismatch between the learner’s logic and the system’s language.

The Language Barrier Model



5

Think of neurodivergence as fluency in a dialect society hasn't standardized.

- Miscommunication becomes misjudgment.
- "Different" becomes "less."
- Access fails, not aptitude.

As Lim & Renshaw (2001) argue, learning depends on cultural tools and shared meaning; when the cultural script excludes neurodivergent voices, misunderstanding masquerades as deficit.

Our role is to build shared fluency, not force conformity.

Barriers of Logistics, not Intellect

6

Most failures arise from logistics, not limits.

Lost passwords, inaccessible forms, unclear directions, or contradictory emails create walls of confusion.

These obstacles are not signs of low ability but examples of what Garland-Thomson (2002) calls “misfitting” - when environments are built for one body-mind standard.

When systems require insider knowledge, they test privilege, not intelligence.



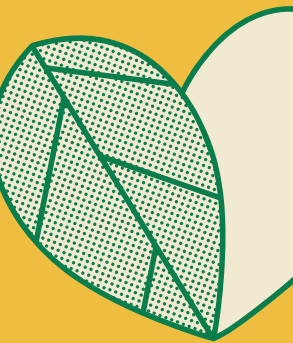
Class of 2025 students rode Caltrain and VTA to get to Foothill every day.

Belonging as the Bridge

Belonging is the best predictor of persistence and growth (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Strayhorn, 2018; Morina, 2019).

Connection transforms barriers into solvable problems.
Predictable routines and transparent communication signal, “You belong here.”

As Gee (2008) notes, learning communities are identity spaces; when students are recognized as legitimate participants, motivation and achievement follow.



The Hidden Curriculum

The hidden curriculum is everything we expect students to “just know”: how to email, how to ask for help, how to read social cues or institutional jargon.

Neurodivergent learners often don't pick up these lessons through exposure. What schools assume are “naturally acquired” social or executive-function skills often remain gaps into adulthood.

Resnick (1987) reminds us that school knowledge and real-world competence are learned differently; if the bridge isn't built intentionally, independence collapses later.

Passed Along with Good Intentions



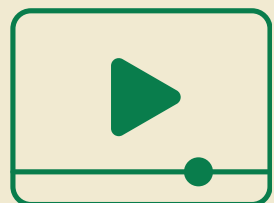
Compassion



Many students have been passed along by kind, well-meaning K-12 educators who wanted to protect self-esteem.

While compassionate, this sometimes taught the wrong lesson: *You are fragile.*

Accommodations



Assignments are shortened, deadlines erased, grading softened.

This is often necessary. But should be used sparingly.



Failure as Equity

Siebers (2008) argues that true equity requires equal expectations and equal opportunity to fail.

When we remove the right to fail, we also remove the right to grow.

The Right to Fail



The “Right to Fail” movement insists that dignity and autonomy require risk.

Failure is feedback;
protection is paralysis.

As Fals Borda (1987) and participatory-action researchers emphasize, empowerment begins when people act for themselves, not when success is guaranteed in advance.

Allowing small, supported failures - missing the bus, misreading an assignment, owning a mistake - builds competence far faster than constant rescue.

Vygotsky & the ZPD

11

Vygotsky (1978) described learning as social and scaffolded within the Zone of Proximal Development — the gap between what can be done alone and with guidance.

Remove scaffolds too soon, and learners fall; never remove them, and learners never climb.

As Parson & Major (2020) note, context and culture define what counts as “support.” For neurodivergent learners, the goal is supported struggle: enough help to keep moving, enough space to make meaning.



Class of 2026 students collaborating on a list of things they can control.

Quiet Activism

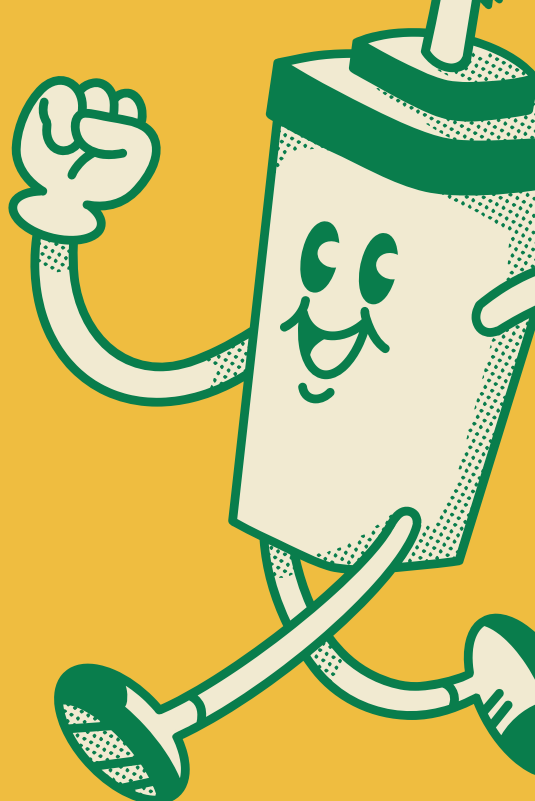
Quiet activism is the act of expecting a seat at the table and proving you belong there.

Garland-Thomson (2002) frames representation as activism - presence itself challenges exclusion.

Each time a neurodivergent adult participates fully - in a class, workplace, or meeting - the next one will face less resistance.

Parents, educators, and allies practice quiet activism whenever we expect competence rather than assume fragility.

From Deficit to Design



<i>Barrier</i>	<i>Design Shift</i>
<i>Bureaucratic or inconsistent systems</i>	Transparent steps & visual guides
<i>Hidden expectations</i>	Clear, explicit communication
<i>Exclusionary tone</i>	Accessible, affirming language
<i>One-size-fits-all design</i>	Multiple means of participation & assessment

Davis (1995) and Shakespeare (2006) remind us that disability is created by structures, not individuals.

Inclusive design corrects the environment, not the person.



Success through Failure

14

In TTW we teach that failure is **information**, not **identity**.

Sir Ken Robinson (2010) warned that education punishes mistakes even though creativity and growth depend on them.

Jenhaug & Askheim (2018) found that disabled young adults consistently name autonomy, contribution, and self-worth as their deepest goals - none of which develop without risk.

The safest places for our students are those where it's safe to fail.



Class of 2026 students hanging out at the end of the day.

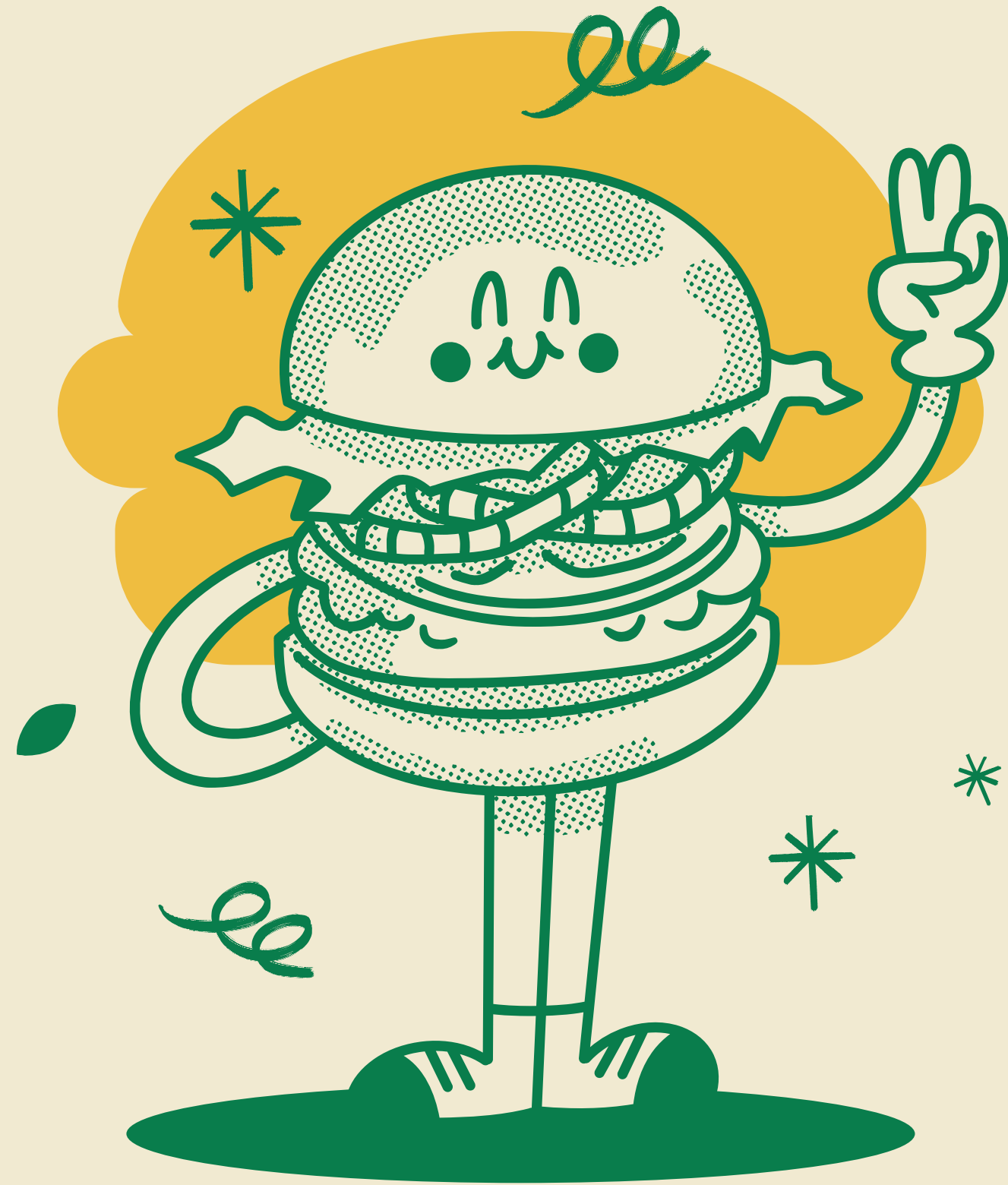
My Point

Neurodivergence
is difference, not
deficit.

Barriers are
structural, not
intellectual.

Belonging drives
persistence
everywhere -
college, work, or
home.

High expectations
signal belief, not
pressure.



Remember

Your children are likely capable of more than they (and you) think.

As long as they have a soft landing, failure is GOOD.

Don't do their homework for them!

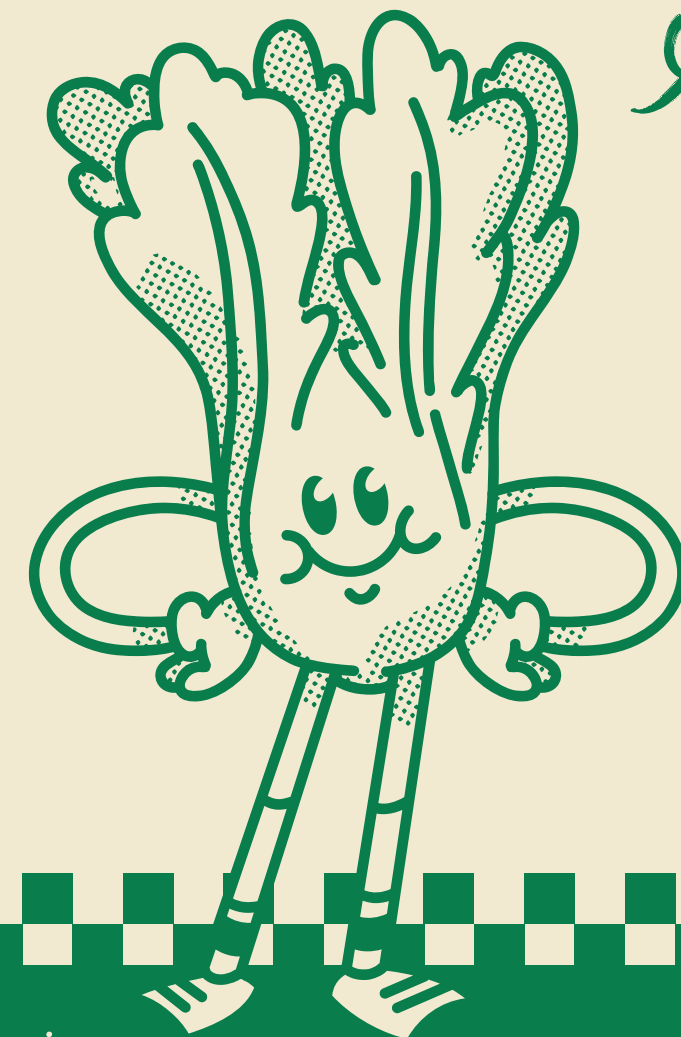
Get In Touch

Me
benkaupp.com

The TTW Program
foothill.edu/ttw

Email Me
kauppben@fhda.edu

Text me
408-874-6380



I have a tradition of only using childish and absurd slide decks. This is to protest the academic obsession with being serious and using dense inaccessible language to both consciously and unconsciously exclude laypeople.

References



- Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). *The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation*. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 497–529.
- Davis, L. J. (1995). *Enforcing normalcy: Disability, deafness, and the body*. Verso.
- Fals Borda, O. (1987). *The application of participatory action-research in Latin America*. *International Sociology*, 2(4), 329–347.
- Garland-Thomson, R. (2002). *Integrating disability, transforming feminist theory*. *NWSA Journal*, 14(3), 1–32.
- Gee, J. P. (2008). *A sociocultural perspective on opportunity to learn*. In P. A. Moss, D. C. Pullin, J. P. Gee, E. H. Haertel, & L. J. Young (Eds.), *Assessment, equity, and opportunity to learn* (pp. 76–108). Cambridge University Press.
- Grinker, R. R. (2020). *Nobody's normal: How culture created the stigma of mental illness*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Jenhaug, L. M., & Askheim, O. P. (2018). *Empowerment and participation in services for young people with intellectual disabilities*. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 20(1), 274–283.
- Lim, L., & Renshaw, P. (2001). *The relevance of sociocultural theory to culturally diverse partnerships and communities*. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 10(1), 9–21.
- Morina, A. (2019). *The keys to learning for university students with disabilities: Motivation, emotion and faculty-student relationships*. *PLOS ONE*, 14(5), e0215249.
- Parson, L., & Major, C. (2020). *Learning theory through a social justice lens*. In L. Parson & C. C. Ozaki (Eds.), *Teaching and learning for social justice and equity in higher education* (pp. 7–38). Springer.
- Resnick, L. B. (1987). *Learning in school and out*. *Educational Researcher*, 16(9), 13–20.
- Robinson, K. (2010). *RSA animate: Changing education paradigms* [Video]. RSA. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDZFcDGpL4U>
- Shakespeare, T. (2006). *Disability rights and wrongs*. Routledge.
- Siebers, T. (2008). *Disability theory*. University of Michigan Press.
- Stephenson, J., Carter, M., & Mowat, L. (2023). *Intelligence, adaptive behaviour and autism: A meta-analysis*. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 53(1), 412–426.
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2018). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.