

# Teaching Individuals with Differing Abilities

## Being Human

Teaching students about individuals with differing abilities means teaching students about the diversity of the human condition. Some aspects of being human may stay the same, and some things may change over time, but they are all part of being human. We may be born male or female and African-American or Asian-American or another ethnicity, but we are also born as an infant and become an adult. Our childhood may have its challenges if our family has little money or is homeless. Some families have reverence for a specific faith tradition, while other families may follow a different tradition. Some of us have the ability to see, hear, walk, and learn quickly, while others have some challenges in using their senses and their physical and cognitive abilities. These different abilities may also change over time as individuals mature or experience different circumstances. This diversity is all part of being human.

## Teaching and Talking about Differing Abilities

Teaching students about individuals with differing abilities may be challenging for both teachers and students, depending on their knowledge and prior experience. The frequently used term *disability* has often been interpreted to mean that an individual is not able or capable. As a result, just as there is sexism, racism, and ageism, there is also ableism: when individuals without physical or cognitive challenges receive preferential treatment. To address issues of ableism, the term *differing abilities* is often used. This term helps us to understand that we all have differing abilities, but no one is better or less than another. For example, some of us have 20/20 vision, others are near-sighted and wear glasses or contact lenses, and others have limited vision or are blind and use Braille.

To understand more about differing abilities, it is important to learn factual information about the types of differing abilities and what barriers exist that make it difficult for all individuals to function in the world.

## Terminology

The terminology we use when we refer to individuals with differing abilities is important because it relates to individuals. We must be careful to not use language that is demeaning or negative. The use of words like *retard* may be thought to be acceptable if someone we know acts in a certain way, but this term is also hurtful. Just as there are terms that are not acceptable in referring to people of color or a specific gender, it is important to use terms that are just and fair. “Person-first language” is preferable because it makes the individual the primary focus. For example, if a student has a learning disability, the preferred language would be “Susan has a learning disability” rather than “Susan’s LD.”



# Inclusion, Catholic Social Teaching, and Social Justice Education

Catholic social teaching calls us to be inclusive regarding all human beings (see Scanlan, 2009). Scanlan states that the commitment to being inclusive is based on the tenets of Catholic social teaching, including “an appreciation of the dignity of each individual person coupled with a commitment to the common good and a preferential option for those who tend to be marginalized” (p. 8). Therefore, it is important that we treat all human beings, especially those with differing abilities, with respect and acceptance. We should also critically examine our behavior to be sure that it is consistent with these tenets of Catholic social teaching. To do so will further social justice education, which Scanlan describes as “the pursuit of equitable education for all students” (p. 24).

## Activity Ideas

Try these activities with your students to raise their awareness of and respect for differing abilities:

1. Make up bumper stickers about not using language that is hurtful or demeaning (e.g., *retard*).
2. Research myths about individuals with differing abilities, and make a chart that shows the myth and the fact.
3. Write a book report or movie review on a book or movie that has one or more characters with differing abilities. Research information about those differences to analyze whether the portrayal of the character is accurate and respectful.

## Bibliography

Scanlan, M. K. (2009). *All are welcome: Inclusive service delivery in Catholic schools*. Notre Dame, IN: Alliance for Catholic Education Press.

