

Ability is NOT the Issue

Kristy Johnson and Fernanda M.

BEFORE YOU READ:

1. Note: This piece is written by a teacher, Kristy Johnson, and her student, Fernanda M., who does not want to use her full name.
2. *Rehab.* is short for rehabilitation. It means to make healthy again. Do you know anyone who has been in *rehab.*? What are examples of when we might need rehabilitation?
3. Read about the word accommodation in the box below, especially the third definition. What are some examples of accommodations at your school?

Kristy: A Brain Injury Means I Need Accommodations

I was a PE and Health teacher, personal trainer, and athlete, until I was not. A traumatic brain injury (TBI) that I got while teaching in Juvenile Detention changed my life. I was diagnosed with Ehlers Danlos Syndrome while in brain *rehab.*

What Is Accommodation?

Accommodation comes from the Latin verb, *accommodare*, which means to fit or to meet someone's needs. In English, accommodation can mean:

1. a place to stay, for example, a hotel
2. a compromise, for example, your job may be able to accommodate your request to change your vacation time
3. an adjustment to the work, community, or school environment that allows people with disabilities to participate, for example, wheelchair ramps



Prior to my injury, accommodations for people with disabilities was not something I thought about very much. But when I acquired my disability, I became aware of all the obstacles that made it hard for me to participate. The simplest accommodations – no fluorescent lights, being able to work from home, a ramp – can mean the difference between me being able to participate or not.

I will never forget the moment Fernanda, a student of mine, and a wheelchair user, found out that I am disabled. She was talking about how hard her day had been, and how it had taken so long to finish her degree because remote school had not been an option, and there was no accessible transportation for her as a wheelchair user.

I said, “I understand. I am able to teach because this program is remote. If it was not, I would struggle with energy and accessibility issues too.”

“Wait a minute,” Fernanda responded, shocked. “YOU’RE disabled?! But, you’re a teacher!”

I often tell my students that the issue is not



their lack of ability, but the need for accessibility. Fernanda's shock made me realize how important disabled representation in education really is.

As our country moves to get rid of remote education, it closes doors for students like Fernanda, and for teachers like me. One of the simplest accommodations we can make is to continue offering remote work and remote education. Remember: the problem is not a lack of ability, but a lack of accessibility.

Fernanda says she does not like the term disability, because it sounds like a person is not able. I personally do not mind the word disability. I think it indicates that my ability is compromised, and I will need accommodations to be able to do something you might not need the same accommodations to do. I am still ABLE to do a lot, but I respect Fernanda's passion and emphasis on what we CAN do. Disabled people, with the right tools and resources, ARE able.

Fernanda: I have a Disability, But I am Able

People with disabilities should have the same rights as able-bodied people. I don't like the term "disabled," because it sounds like you are not able to do things. There is so much I CAN do, when I have the accommodations to do it!

For example, remote classes made it possible for me to graduate high school. Then I took an interpreter course. I am now working as an interpreter. This would not have been possible without remote classes!

Also, all schools need an elevator that works, and ramps to get in the door, as well as accessible transportation. Grade-school kids can get accessible buses. Adult learners need accessible buses too. This is an equity issue, and every state should take it seriously!

I was diagnosed with HTLV (a viral infection that can affect the spinal cord), and that is why I use a wheelchair. My wheelchair helps me do more, so all I need is the buildings around me to be accessible.

Kristy and Fernanda: Make Space for Us and We Will Thrive

We support access for all. We believe that the issue is NOT ability, but accessibility. Make space for us, and we will thrive! With the right accommodations, we can participate fully! We can go to school and do our jobs. We can have dreams. We can succeed in life. We ARE able. We just need access.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. What is the main point that Kristy and Fernanda agree on?
2. What is one thing they disagree on?
3. Is public transportation accessible in your city or region? Write a letter to your local government officials, commenting on the state of accessible transportation in your area.

Kristy Johnson is a licensed teacher with over a decade of experience and a passion for inclusion and accessibility. She teaches at the LARE Institute in Chelsea, MA. Kristy is an editor for "The Math Practitioner," and she presented with the Adult Numeracy Network at COABE in 2025. She hopes to serve as Equity Officer for 2025-2026, and continue advocating for access for all in adult education.

Fernanda M. is a recent HISET graduate from the LARE Institute in Chelsea, Massachusetts. She works as an interpreter and a Lyft driver, and she is the mother of two.
