

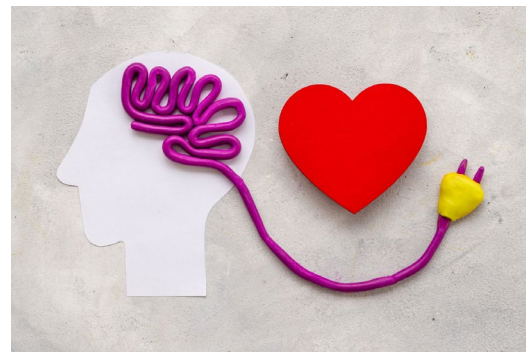
# Creating Self-Awareness

## a place to begin

As educators, we strive to meet our students' fundamental need for connection and belonging every day. This ongoing effort requires differentiation to meet the diverse social, emotional, and academics needs of our students. Our commitment to this work is driven by a desire to see our students meet their individual goals and thrive, both during the years they spend with us and in their future.

Elena Aguilar, CEO of [Bright Morning](#) and author of many books on transformational coaching, explains that to build resilient and healthy communities within our school buildings, we must tend to the beliefs, behaviors, and ways of being for not only our students but also ourselves as educators.

In this section of our guide, we will explore the importance of understanding our beliefs by creating self-awareness. "All of our actions emerge from beliefs, whether we are conscious of those beliefs or not," (Elena Aguilar, "The Art of Transformational Coaching," 2024, p. 37). Self-awareness, according to the California Department of Education's [Transformative Social and Emotional Learning Competencies](#), "is the ability to understand one's own emotions, thoughts and values and how they influence behavior across contexts."



### Self-awareness includes the following:

- Identifying one's emotions
  - Having a growth mindset
  - Identifying personal, cultural, and linguistic assets
  - Integrating personal and social identities
  - Demonstrating honesty and integrity
  - Linking feelings, values, and thoughts
  - Examining prejudices and biases
  - Experiencing self-efficacy
  - Developing interests and a sense of purpose
  - Reflecting on one's personal role and contributions within a community
- (Adapted from the [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2020](#))

## Why is this concept included in an IEP Success Companion Guidebook?

Just as we teach self-awareness as a crucial competency to our students, we must begin by developing it ourselves. By surfacing and examining our own beliefs through heightened self-awareness, we can better understand our actions and their impact on others.

### Research shows that this introspective practice leads to improved:

- Identity
- Self-knowledge about purpose, values, and roles in the community
- Emotional intelligence (i.e., the ability to recognize emotions and their connection to behaviors)
- Growth mindset
- Strong and fair relationships

Becoming self-aware about our beliefs helps shape our ways of being and ultimately drives our behaviors towards our students, parents, educators, and—most importantly—ourselves.

## Let's explore!

We invite you to walk through the following activities to strengthen your sense of self-awareness and deepen your understanding of how you present yourself as an educator and how you perceive others. This understanding is essential for meeting the human needs of our students, staff, and families, ultimately fostering a sense of connection and belonging.



## Mental Models

Our experiences and identities are responsible for the beliefs we hold. Business theorist Chris Argyris explained how people form and maintain their assumptions, which he termed “mental models.” Mental models refer to internal frameworks that shape how we understand and interact with the world. Formed through our experiences and learning, mental models simplify complex information and influence our thoughts, perceptions, decisions, and actions. By examining and improving these models, we will think more clearly and reduce biases; in fact, recognizing and understanding our mental models is crucial in cultivating critical thought. By challenging and improving these internal views, we avoid biases and approach our day-to-day interactions more compassionately.



[Let's watch a short video on mental models!](#)

### Let's practice!

Recall a time when you've worked or interacted with a child with disabilities. As you explore those memories, ask yourself the questions listed below. While exploring your thoughts with curiosity, you may experience a wide range of feelings — some more comfortable than others:

- What is my mental model around students with disabilities?
- Where might my mental models have come from?
- What might have contributed to the creation of this mental model?
- What's the impact of holding this mental model?
- What does this mental model allow me to—or not do?
- How has it served me in the past?
- Is there evidence that the model I hold might not be true?
- Can I test an alternative to the model?

### PAUSE AND REFLECT

Notes for reflection:

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We are often unaware of the mental models we hold, having learned them subconsciously from society at large and the people around us. By surfacing them, we put them in “check,” so to speak. When we examine these mental models, we can identify both their inherent biases and any disparities or inequities they may perpetuate through our actions.

Another way to think of our mental models is that some of our thoughts are on “autopilot.” Metaphorically speaking, “autopilot” describes a state of doing something automatically or unconsciously, without thinking or putting in much effort—such as when we perform routine tasks out of habit. This happens with our thoughts as well.

Use the following activities to develop awareness of your “autopilot” thoughts. Follow the prompts to describe the impact these thoughts have on those around us, as well as alternative thoughts that could be equally or more effective and equitable.

## Autopilot Thinking Activity

Event	Autopilot (automatic thought)	What view does this thought represent?	Alternative thought
“Example: The parent does not agree with the written goals.”	“I can never satisfy this parent.”	“I’m not good enough.”	“Perhaps the parent would prefer another goal,” or, “I’m going to communicate with the parent before the meeting to make sure we’re on the same page regarding goals.”

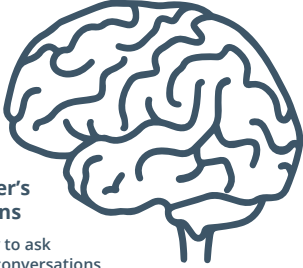
## Here's another activity to try!

Click on the following image for a more complex and insightful mental-model activity:

[click to download](#)

Mental models are the attitudes, beliefs, morals, expectations and values that allow structures to continue to function in their current state. Often, these are learned subconsciously from society or family and we are largely unaware of them.

### User's Guide to: Mental Models



**1 Check Your Assumptions**

What beliefs are at play? Where did they come from? What data did you filter – why? What assumptions are grounded in facts? How might a different set of assumptions result in different conclusions and actions? Be mindful of your mental models and help others be able to see theirs.

**2 Check Other's Assumptions**

Consider how to ask questions in conversations with others to uncover people's mental models and the assumptions behind their perspectives. You also can facilitate conversations about mental models in the context of efforts to improve an outcome.

Source: The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook, Senge et al, 1994

**15 minute deep dive into Mental Models and disparities:**  
*Do by yourself or with community partners*

**Step 1:**  
2 minutes

How do you privately explain the persistence of disparities the families you work with are facing?

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**Step 2:**  
2 minutes

List the disparities in your community and describe the supporting evidence (observation/data) that they exist.

Disparities	Evidence
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.....	.....
.....	.....
.....	.....
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**Step 4:**  
6 minutes

From the list you just generated, choose the most common mental model for explaining a disparity. How do your current strategies to address this disparity align with, contradict or disrupt these mental models?

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**Step 3:**  
5 minutes

What are some of the mental models in your field that are used to explain these disparities? What do people say out loud and what do they say behind closed doors?

Spoken Mental Models	Unspoken Mental Models
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.....	.....
.....	.....
.....	.....
.....	.....


Mental models are the “big lifts” to creating sustainable social change. Understanding what they are in ourselves and society and how they are creating the outcomes we see in our community, is key to unlocking real results.

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**Hey you!**

Grab a pen and fill in the work areas.



## Biases

Bias, or the preference for a particular person, group, or perspective, is not usually based on fact, but rather a combination of factors such as our age, gender, culture, personal experiences, and more. The source of our biases stems from our culture and social norms. Biases are part of our human nature and we all hold them. They can be both conscious (explicit) and unconscious (implicit), powerfully shaping not only our thoughts but also our behaviors and decisions:

**Explicit bias** is processed at the conscious level, allowing the person to be clear about their feelings and attitudes.

**Implicit bias** operates outside a person's awareness and consists of automatic assumptions and stereotypes that unconsciously influence our attitudes and behaviors.

**Implicit bias can come in many forms, including, but not limited to:**

- Race and ethnicity bias
- Age bias
- Gender bias
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) community bias
- Ability bias



[Watch a short video on countermeasures to implicit biases.](#)



## Social Identity

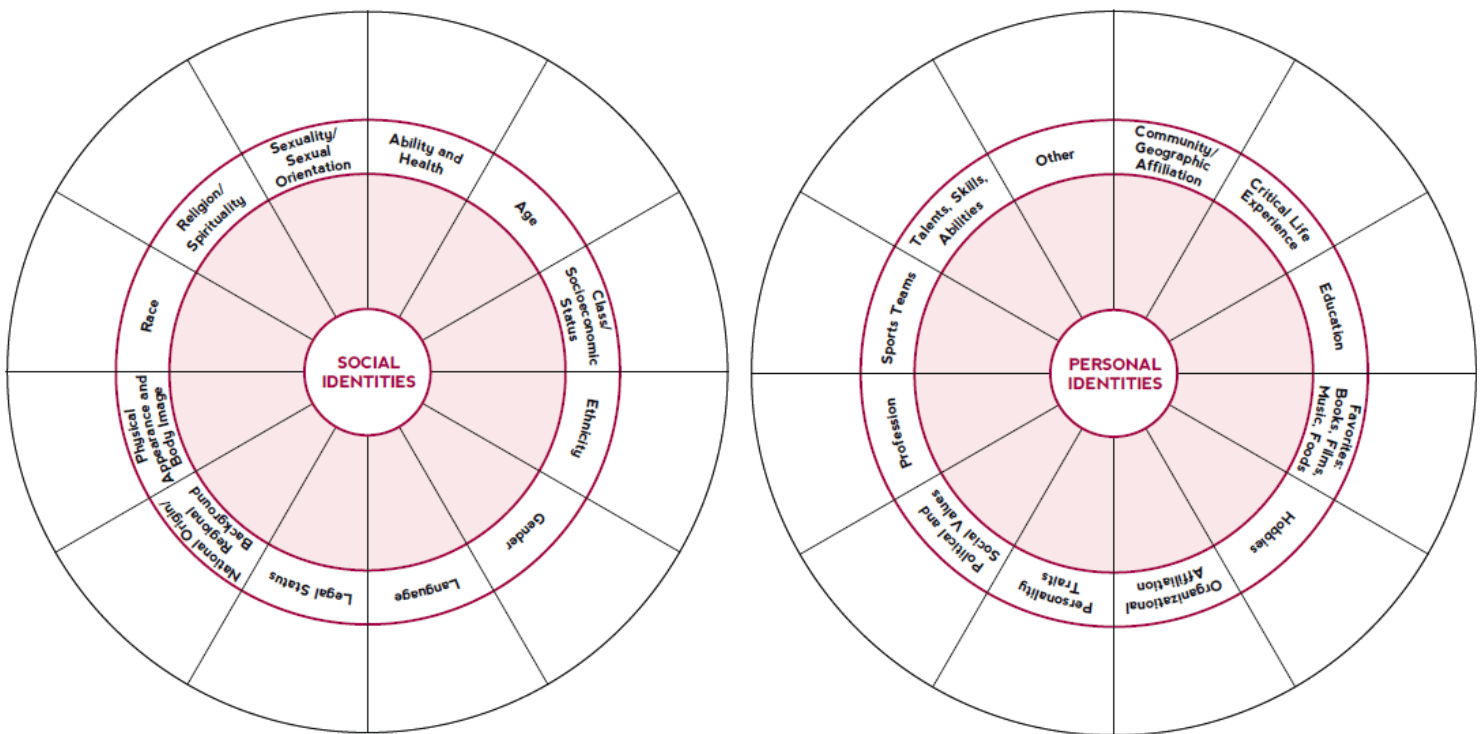
Cultivating self-awareness begins with understanding our social identities—the sense of who we are based on our group memberships. These identities, which are distinct from our personality traits, are socially constructed categories such as race, gender, religion, and sexual orientation. Our experiences are fundamentally shaped by these social identities and how they intersect in our lives.

### Why is it important to understand social identity as an educator?

Our social identities shape how we view the world and influence our interactions with students, families, and colleagues. By examining these influences, we can better understand what drives our actions and perceptions.

### Let's get started!

[Download](#) and complete the following identity wheels, created by Northwestern University, which illustrate the various dimensions of both our personal and social identities. It is important to remember that these identities are socially constructed and can provide power and privilege that influence our access and opportunities—whether consciously or not.



[CLICK TO NAVIGATE TO THE ACTIVITY](#)

## II PAUSE AND REFLECT

### Reflect on the following questions after exploring the wheel:

- Which identities do you think about or feel most often? When are you most aware of these identities?
- Which identities do you think about or feel least often? Why do you think you are often unaware of them?
- Which identities have the strongest impact on how you perceive or define yourself?
- Which identities have the strongest impact on how you believe other people perceive or label you?
- As you reflect on your identities, do they afford you opportunities that are not available to individuals who have other identities?

When processing an experience, our minds move quickly and unconsciously from facts to conclusions. In MIT Professor Peter Senge's book "The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization," Senge illustrates the mental movement from facts to conclusions using a model called "the ladder of inference." This metaphor helps to build awareness of our assumptions and challenge our thinking before we act.

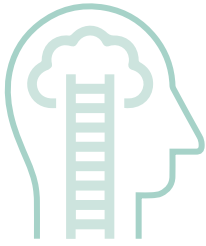
[This short video further explains how Senge's ladder of inference can help us mitigate our biases.](#)



### Let's practice!

The following activity will guide you through the ladder of inference, showing how we move from observable experiences to actions based on our beliefs. We often climb up and down these rungs unconsciously, but creating awareness of this process helps us surface and challenge our biases and any inequities they create.





### Where does this fit in the Equitable Results Sequence?



As an individual, it is important to understand what biases you are holding since these impact which data you will select or filter out. They also can influence how you analyze the problems in your community and create strategies. As you move through the Equitable Results Sequence, stop often to check your assumptions using the Ladder of Inference. Next time you notice yourself reacting negatively to your experience, pay attention.

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### User's Guide to:

## Ladder of Inference

[click to download](#)

### What is this?

The Ladder of Inference explains how we select data, attach meaning to that data and move to action. Because of our biases and limited perspectives, we can move in error based out of a incomplete or wrong understanding of reality.

### How could this show up in my work?

Remember a time you jumped too quickly to a negative conclusion and later regretted it? You probably climbed up the ladder of inference without stopping to slow down. We all do it. Unfortunately, it's part human nature. However, by being mindful of our biases, we can counteract systemic prejudices and create better outcomes for our communities.

### Framework in context:

Study this image. After seeing a scene of this man sitting on a bench, three different people could notice very different sorts of data and come to completely different conclusions based on their inner ladder or inference.



Your biases and limited perspectives allow you to only see certain parts of others' experiences and can lead you to draw conclusions that may be very different from reality.

**Notes:** \_\_\_\_\_  
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**Go on the portal to learn more!**  
[strivetogetherportal.org](http://strivetogetherportal.org)

The Ladder of Inference shows how you can move from data you observe (bottom rung of the ladder) to beliefs and actions based upon assumptions (top of the ladder) very quickly.

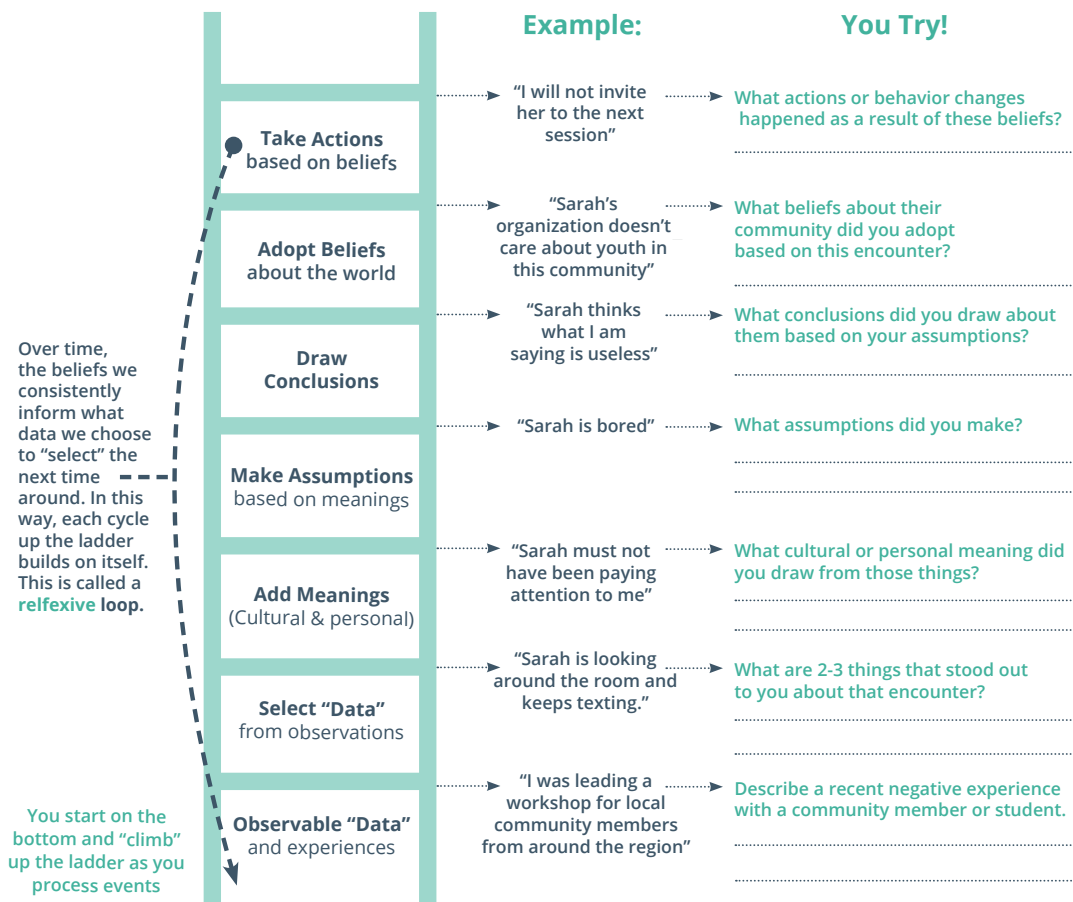
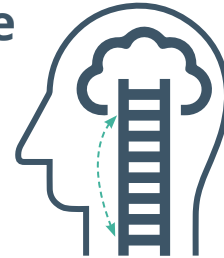
### User's Guide to:

## Ladder of Inference

Every day, you meet people and process experiences by making inferences and developing beliefs about the world. There's so much happening around you at any given time that eventually you naturally begin to take mental shortcuts to make sense of the world.

Oftentimes you can move up and down the Ladder of Inference so quickly (within seconds) in your mind that you barely notice it has happened.

[click to download](#)



\*The Ladder of Inference was developed by Chris Argyris and was later adapted by Peter Senge to help explain mental models in his book *The Fifth Discipline: the Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*

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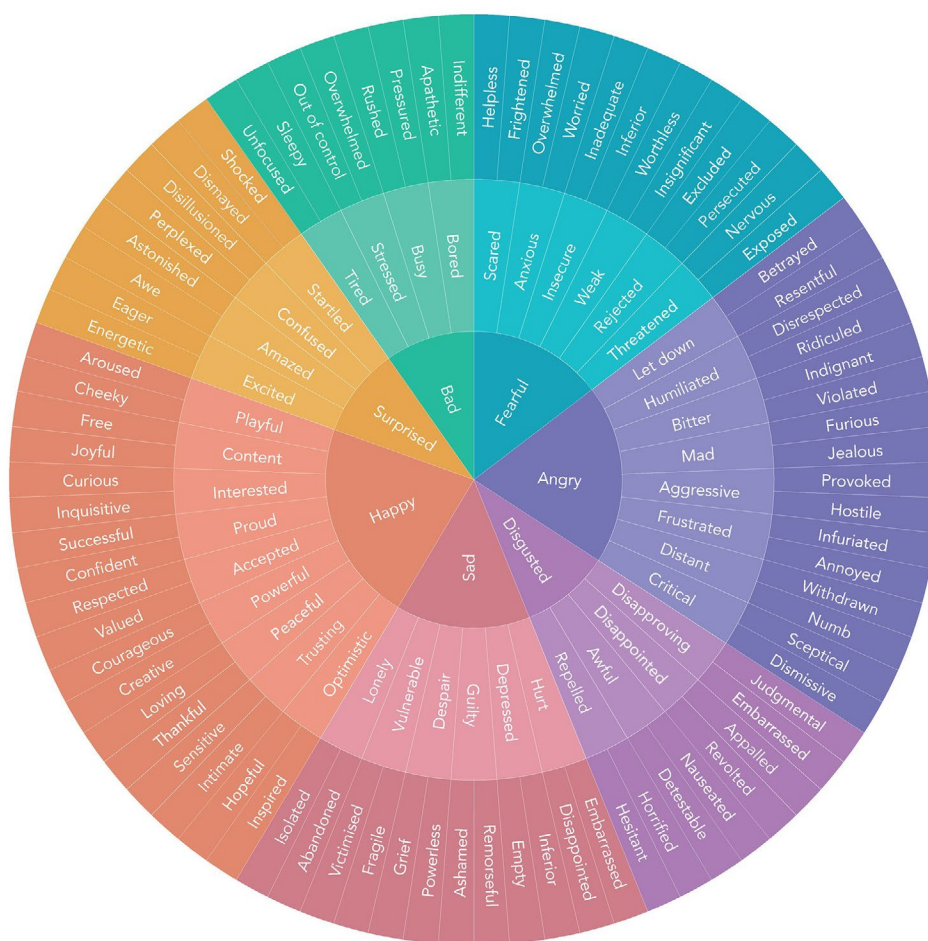
**Hey you!**

Grab a pen and fill in the work areas.

The “feelings wheel,” created by Dr. Gloria Willcox, is a valuable tool designed to help individuals more accurately identify and express their emotions.

To use the feelings wheel, start by identifying a general emotion that you are experiencing from the center of the wheel, such as “happy” or “sad.” Then, move outward to find more specific emotions that better describe how you feel, like “content” or “lonely.” Doing so will help pinpoint your emotions more precisely and better understand your emotional state.

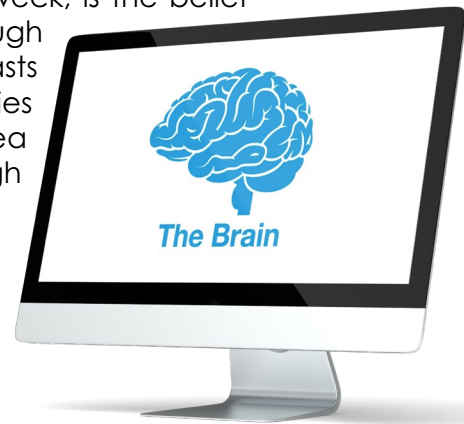
The feelings wheel allows us to better understand and express our emotions. It offers a range of specific feelings, making it easier to recognize complex emotions, communicate them clearly, and manage them in relationships and personal growth.



## Growth Mindset

A growth mindset, as defined by psychologist Carol Dweck, is the belief that abilities and intelligence can be developed through effort, dedication, and effective strategies. This contrasts with a fixed mindset, by which individuals see their abilities as unchangeable. The short video below discusses the idea that intelligence and abilities can be developed through learning and effort.

[Let's watch a short video on growth mindset!](#)



**For educators, adopting a growth mindset offers the following benefits:**

- **Enhanced problem-solving skills:** A growth mindset encourages us to view challenge as learning opportunities. An example of a growth mindset for educators is the belief that every student can succeed with proper support and strategies.

For instance, a teacher might think, "This student is struggling with solving addition problems right now, but with extra practice and personalized support, they can get better." As a result, the teacher tries different teaching methods, provides encouragement, and helps the student develop problem-solving skills, fostering both their learning and confidence.

- **Increased adaptability:** A growth mindset empowers educators to embrace adaptability by viewing challenges as opportunities for learning and improvement. Whether navigating new teaching methods, responding to evolving student needs, or integrating emerging educational technologies, educators with a growth mindset remain open to experimentation, refinement, and continuous development.

For instance, if a student's progress isn't as expected, the teacher might think, "This strategy isn't working as well as we hoped, but by trying new accommodations or supports, we can find a better approach." Instead of feeling discouraged by setbacks, the educator adapts by revising the student's IEP to better meet their unique needs.

## How Our Beliefs Also Impact Students

An educator's beliefs can significantly affect students with disabilities, influencing their academic success and well-being. The following research findings offer evidence in support of this idea:

### Expectations and Academic Achievement:

- [Hattie \(2018\)](#): "Collective teacher efficacy" refers to teachers' collective belief in their ability to positively affect students. With a 1.57 effect size, collective teacher efficacy is strongly correlated with student achievement.
- [Jussim and Harber \(2005\)](#): This review confirms that teacher expectations often lead to self-fulfilling prophecies in students' academic performance.

### Inclusive Practices:

- [Cook, Cameron, and Tankersley \(2007\)](#): This study found that teachers' positive attitudes toward inclusion correlate with more effective implementation of inclusive practices, thereby benefiting students with disabilities.

### Student Self-Esteem and Motivation:

- [Good and Brophy \(2008\)](#): This research indicates that teachers who hold positive beliefs about students' abilities consequently boost their confidence and motivation.

### Classroom Environment:

- [Pianta, La Paro, and Hamre \(2008\)](#): The findings of this study emphasize the role of positive teacher-student relationships in creating a supportive classroom environment, which especially benefits students with disabilities.

### Professional Development and Advocacy:

- [Scruggs and Mastropieri \(1996\)](#): This research shows that teachers who believe in the potential of students with disabilities are more likely to seek out and benefit from professional development in inclusive practices.

### Collaboration with Families:

- [Epstein and Sanders \(2000\)](#): This study demonstrates that teachers who value family involvement create stronger partnerships with families, leading to better student outcomes.
- [Hornby \(2011\)](#): The evidence of this study demonstrates that teachers' positive beliefs about family involvement enhance collaboration, benefiting students with disabilities.

## Putting It All Together

This section of our guide has reviewed how self-awareness helps us understand the way our beliefs influence our ways of being and, ultimately, our actions. We've explored tools that reveal how our experiences and mental models can lead to biases, affecting our interactions with others and how we contribute to group dynamics. These interactions occur in "generative social fields", which are collaborative environments where individuals and groups interact to foster creativity, shared understanding, and collective growth, leading to deeper connections and new solutions. The concept of generative social fields can be readily applied to our experiences in both IEP team meetings and other peer collaborations. [This short video](#) further explains the concept of generative social fields. Our ways of being and behaviors within the construct of the IEP team and throughout the IEP process are dependent on the intentions we bring to these interactions. By cultivating self-awareness and engaging mindfully, we can create spaces that encourage collaboration, respect diverse perspectives, and prioritize the needs and voices of students, ensuring that the IEP process remains both inclusive and effective.



### II PAUSE AND REFLECT

#### Reflect on the following questions:

- What information in this section resonates with me?
- How can I use what I've learned to build my relationships within the IEP team and positively influence the IEP process?
- What did I learn about my beliefs and assumptions?
- What is one idea or strategy I will commit to investigating further when it comes to building my self-awareness?