

## Chapter 4

# Understanding Autism: We Know so Much More; We Still Know so Little!

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Autism is one disability that everyone has heard about. It is also the disability about which educators still know so little. This chapter will inform preservice teachers about autism using the narrative of two young men and their lives with autism. Theoretical groundings of autism, along with the myths, misperceptions, and mistakes surrounding autism are shared in the chapter. Importantly, for preservice teachers, strategies for successful teaching of students with autism will be outlined.*

*The things that make me different, make me, me! Piglet*

### **INTRODUCTION**

As an undergraduate education major in 1985, I found myself taking the only special education course required for my degree. One assignment had each student research a topic in special education. The latest teacher journal featured a one-page discussion about autism. At the time, what we seemed to know was that particularly boys were affected and the prevalence rate was 1 in 1,000 births or so. Today, the Center for

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Disease Control and Prevention (2021) reported that 1:54 births have been identified with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The literature was so limited (pre-internet days) concerning autism. Today, we know so much more, but still know so little.

Often, when one hears the word, autism, the association is made with the 1988 movie, *Rain Man*. The main character of the movie was actually inspired by the late Laurence Kim Peek, a gentleman diagnosed with autism and other conditions. Peek, a savant [see (Treffert, 2014)] for discussion about autistic savants), had the unusual ability to read and memorize vast amounts of information. Interestingly, Peek read by using his left eye to scan the left page in a book, and his right eye for the right page. A newspaper account asserted that Peek could recount the contents of more than 12,000 books (Times, 2009).

Autism spectrum disorder is much more than what was learned from *Rain Man*. Dr. Stephen Shore is credited to having said “If you’ve met a person with autism, you’ve met a person with autism” (Shore, 2018, pg. 1). By the statement he means to communicate that autism is so much more than one person. Likewise, autism is much more than can be discussed in this one chapter; in fact, volumes have been written on the subject, and there is still much that is just simply not known about the disorder.

Quite possibly one of the scariest words for parents to hear about their child is the term *autism spectrum disorder* (throughout the rest of the chapter the term autism or ASD will be used). As the reader will find in this chapter, that word is exactly what the parents of three young men heard from a doctor at a very early age concerning their child. In this chapter, the reader will encounter three young men who have been diagnosed with autism. The stories of three young men who grew up from each other only separated by a few miles and fewer years will provide understanding of the disability category known as autism spectrum disorder. The chapter will provide insight into how parents coped with raising a child with autism that will include the celebrations and the challenges. The reader will also discover the layers of support that were needed to educate and transition each of these three young men to adulthood. Additionally, the preservice educator will learn about teaching strategies, accommodations, and modifications found to be helpful for the education of students with autism.

## **AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER DEFINED**

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a disability category recognized by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a law that makes available a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to eligible children with disabilities throughout the United States and ensures special education and related services

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