

The Intersection of LGBTQ+ Identity and Disability: A Need for School Based Support

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Abstract

Grounded in intersectional theory, this article explores the experience of LGBTQ+ students with disabilities. LGBTQ+ students with disabilities experience higher levels of bullying, harassment, suicidal ideation and other challenges in school. Post-school outcomes also reveal negative realities. Schools need to ensure that support is provided to students living at the intersection of LGBTQ+ identity and disability. Implications for school leaders, educational professionals, and educator preparation programs are discussed with recommendations for improving outcomes.

Keywords

LGBTQ+, disability, special education, school support

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2023), it is estimated that there are over 61 million individuals who report having a disability, whether academic, behavioral, or medical. In addition, the US Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey (2023) revealed that there are approximately 20 million people who openly identify as LGBTQ+. When examining each demographic together, it is reported that there are approximately three to five million LGBTQ+ individuals who report having a disability (Movement Advancement Project, 2019). These statistics reveal the need to analyze these intersecting experiences.

Disability & LGBTQ+ Identity

Disability can be viewed in two ways. The medical model views disability as a condition caused by a disease or other factor that requires treatment and intervention (World Health Organization, 2001). Alternatively, the social model views disabilities as a problem created by an ableist society due to barriers and lack of accommodations, not as a problem in itself (World Health Organization, 2001). In the United States, schools utilize a medical model for identifying,



evaluating, and planning for students with disabilities.

Children begin to identify themselves and their gender identity prior to the onset of puberty (Turban et al., 2023). As children begin to develop their identity, they begin to realize that they might be different from the norm that has been established by a heteronormative majority via social constructs that exist. It is important to note that LGBTQ+ identity in this article is specified toward those students who openly identify themselves as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, as these students face numerous challenges and difficulties. Student privacy, readiness for “coming out,” and cultural considerations can cause some students to not reveal their sexual orientation; however, these students who are not open about their identities, or who are unsure of their identity, need to be considered as well.

Intersectional Theory

Utilizing intersectional theory to examine how LGBTQ+ students with disabilities experience school systems, I propose the need for improved school supports to be put in place by school professionals. The term intersectionality is grounded in Black feminist thought, specifically in regard to race and gender. This theory, initiated by the Combahee River Collective, and later coined by Crenshaw in 1989, examines how various characteristics of an individual intersect to create a unique experience (Crenshaw, 2017). This intersectional experience is analyzed through a social justice perspective in which societal structures create, embrace, and continue discrimination and bias (Collins, 2019). Intersectionality, while premised on gender and race, is also applicable as an analytic tool to examine other identities and established inequalities and barriers (Collins & Bilge, 2020). In using intersectionality as an analytical tool, I will demonstrate that LGBTQ+ students with disabilities require strong, effective, and meaningful school-based support for success.

Significance of this Intersectional Experience

According to the *2021 National School Climate Survey* conducted via the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), many students who identify as LGBTQ+ have feelings of being unsafe, worried, and anxious (Kosciw et al., 2022). These students report being harassed or bullied due to their sexual orientation, actual or perceived (Kosciw et al., 2022). Research and studies continue to demonstrate that students who identify as LGBTQ+ face many obstacles and difficulties while in the school system (Johns et al., 2019; Myers et al., 2020; Steck & Perry, 2018). Sadly, these barriers do not necessarily collapse after exiting the school system. LGBTQ+ individuals face many hardships in relation to family, careers, religious expression, and health (Fric, 2019; McGraw et al., 2023).

When these students also have a disability, whether learning, behavioral, or medical, these experiences become even more challenging. Students with disabilities often face higher levels of being bullied or harassed due to having a disability (Gage et al., 2021). In addition, students with disabilities are often placed into restrictive environments in some states, despite requirements for inclusion in the least restrictive environment (Hogan, 2024). This is especially

true for students who are culturally and linguistically diverse (Grindal et al., 2019). These experiences can hinder social development, and prevent students with disabilities from being exposed to grade-level general education curriculum, thus setting them at a disadvantage (Parekh et al., 2019).

Purpose

My primary purpose in this article is to examine the experiences of LGBTQ+ students with disabilities, to review the support systems that can be used in schools, and to highlight the need for improvement in this area. When conducting research for this article, there is a gap in the literature specifically focusing on this intersectional experience, especially for students in K-12 settings (Miller, 2018; Miller & Smith, 2021; Munro et al., 2019). This is problematic because these students need support, guidance, and advocates. I hope this article will spur further research in this area.

Literature Review

A literature review was conducted to address the purpose of this article. Google Scholar and EBSCOhost were utilized to search the literature for K-12 students with disabilities identifying as LGBTQ+. The terms used for the literature review included: “experiences of disability,” “LGBTQ+ identity and school challenges,” “outcomes for students with disabilities,” “outcomes for LGBTQ+ students,” and the “intersection of disability and LGBTQ+ in K-12.” Inclusionary criteria included empirical studies, theoretical papers, and organizational reports from 2010-2024. Exclusionary criteria included dissertations, studies focused primarily on LGBTQ+ educator experiences, and studies conducted prior to 2010. The studies cited were included because they met the inclusionary criteria shared above and addressed the purpose of this article. I begin by sharing research on the experiences of disability, LGBTQ+ identity, and the intersection of these identities. I then examine support systems found in the literature for LGBTQ+ students with disabilities, and how these can be used in schools. Finally, I highlight the need for improvement in this area from the research.

Experiences of Disability, LGBTQ+ Identity, & Intersecting Identities

Experiences of Disability

Students who are identified with disabilities often report high levels of harassment and bullying when compared to non-disabled peers (Gage et al., 2021). Often, students are given limited experiences in school-wide programs. For example, students might be placed into small class settings with limited exposure to general education, grade-level curriculum, thus hindering their progress and chances for post-school success (Grindal et al., 2019).

In addition to academic concerns, students with disabilities are often infantilized by caregivers, families, and education professionals (Santinele Martino, 2022). This is especially true when reviewing how students with disabilities are exposed to sexual education and discussions of sexuality. Often, students with disabilities are told that they do not know who

they are, or they are told they do not possess the ability to know because of their disability (Gill, 2015). These instances of infantilization are problematic because they limit the child's free expression to be who they are as individuals (Toft et al., 2019).

Post-school outcomes for students with disabilities are not much better than what is found in the school systems. After graduation, students with disabilities face difficulties with employment (Shogren & Ward, 2018). Many report that they face challenges from employers not believing in their abilities or assigning them work that is below their skill level (Bonaccio et al., 2020). In addition to these challenges, it is reported that discrimination is found in the workplace through unequal pay and lack of inclusion in social outings (Lindsay et al., 2023). Furthermore, students with disabilities who attend college face other obstacles, such as not having their needs met, difficulties with coursework, and lack of resources on campus (Francis et al., 2019).

Aside from these experiences, once in adulthood, individuals with disabilities share difficulties with having sufficient community resources, experiences, and assistance with daily living (Emerson et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2017). These experiences are required areas that school systems need to address in the individualized education plans (IEPs) per the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004). It is evident these areas need to be strengthened as students move through their educational journeys.

Experiences of LGBTQ+ Identity

In the K-12 school system, many students who identify as LGBTQ+ endure numerous difficulties at home, in school, and in their community (Ormiston, 2022). For many LGBTQ+ students, they must first come to terms within themselves about their identity. This internal discussion can either be a struggle or easily accepted depending on the familial foundation that exists for the child (Lo et al., 2022). It is reported that students who have supportive, open, and inclusive families often face an easier time with acceptance of being LGBTQ+ (Ryan et al., 2010). Contrarily, students from unaccepting families endure difficulties and strained relationships, with some children becoming homeless as a result of "coming out" (Ormiston, 2022; Roe, 2017).

Family is an integral part of a person's development and well-being. When the structure of the family is removed, especially in a harsh manner such as being disowned, kicked out, and in some cases physically beaten, much trauma is ingrained within a person (McCormick et al., 2018). The rates of LGBTQ+ mental illness, depression, and anxiety are very high (Rhoades et al., 2018). In addition, the homeless rates of children identifying as LGBTQ+ is much higher than other demographic groups (Cray et al., 2013). These statistics shed light on the reality facing some students who identify as LGBTQ+. For those in welcoming and supportive families, a network is available upon which the child can rely for love, support, and encouragement (Ryan et al., 2010).

The school system is another area in need of improvement for children who identify as LGBTQ+. According to various studies, students who are openly identifying as LGBTQ+ face very

high rates of bullying, harassment, intimidation, and bias (Kosciw et al., 2022). Microaggressions toward LGBTQ+ students from educators and professionals are abundant (Munro et al., 2019). Students face challenges and difficulties with trying to fit the mold of the established heteronormative constructs, which causes stress and feelings of depression (Steck & Perry, 2018). Sometimes, these experiences cause students to rebel, leading to disciplinary issues (Palmer et al., 2017; Snapp & Russell, 2016).

Beyond the school system, adulthood can be a challenge, as studies reveal increased sexual risks, higher use of drugs, increased rates of mental illness, and lack of medical care (Espelage et al., 2018; Scheer & Antebi-Gruszka, 2019). Furthermore, LGBTQ+ individuals can face employment discrimination, harassment in the workplace, and microaggressions from colleagues (Resnick et al., 2019). Society as a whole lends itself to these difficulties by passing laws that allow discrimination to exist and permits those who claim religious liberty to choose not to serve or to work with LGBTQ+ members of the community (*303 Creative LLC v. Elenis*, 2023).

Experiences with Intersecting Identities

Through the discussions above about the experiences of both students with disabilities and students who identify as LGBTQ+, it is evident that when these two identities intersect, challenges and difficulties endured by students, and later as adults, are exacerbated. The experiences in school systems require improvement. Students living at the intersection of LGBTQ+ identify and disability report the highest levels of suicidal ideation when compared to peers (King et al., 2018). In addition, there are increased levels of cyber bullying for LGBTQ+ students with disabilities (Gates et al., 2023). Furthermore, LGBTQ+ students with disabilities face numerous microaggressions due to their intersecting identities with increased levels of victimization (Miller & Smith, 2021).

It is also documented that LGBTQ+ youth with disabilities have educators who are not skilled or trained to work with these intersecting identities (Philip, 2020). Research reveals that while embracing the diversity of students with disabilities has grown, there is a lack of regard for LGBTQ+ identity as part of this embrace, including limited attention regarding educational planning in this area (Pohl et al., 2017). This is problematic, as LGBTQ+ students with disabilities report increased feelings of invisibility in the school system (Miller, 2018).

Within this intersectional experience, LGBTQ+ individuals with disabilities experience increased vulnerability to abuse drugs and alcohol, to engage in high risk sexual behaviors, and to harm themselves due to the stresses experienced (McCann et al., 2016). Rates of social isolation are heightened by these intersecting identities, which limits the student's availability of having a social network of support (Pohl et al., 2017). Coupled with these increased mental health needs, LGBTQ+ individuals with disabilities report discrimination in healthcare, thus limiting available treatment and support (Rodriguez-Roldan, 2020).

From the literature, and grounded in intersectional theory, the intersection of disability and LGBTQ+ identity opens numerous pathways to societal constructs that perpetuate

discrimination (Horner-Johnson, 2021). This begins in schools where welcoming environments are not established, nor is inclusivity demanded (Kosciw et al., 2022); rather, some schools will offer safe spaces for students (Sadowski, 2017). Safe spaces, while well intentioned and important, are not the only answer to help students. In fact, safe spaces can send the opposite message that students who are LGBTQ+ can only be themselves when in a small space, such as the counselor's office (Hogan, 2023). This messaging creates a structure in which the student who is LGBTQ+ will only be "safe" to be themselves in these sheltered areas.

Outside of the school systems, there continues to be a push to limit discussions and acceptance of LGBTQ+ identity. Schools across the United States have been forced to disband Gay-Straight Alliances, pride flags have been removed from classrooms, and libraries and curriculums have been forced to erase the literature and stories of LGBTQ+ individuals (O'Loughlin et al., 2022; Schey, 2023). In the 21st century, the United States Supreme Court now permits discriminatory practices against persons who are LGBTQ+ based on freedom of religion, using this avenue to allow freedom to discriminate (*303 Creative LLC v. Elenis*, 2023). Warnings and advisories are in place to ensure that LGBTQ+ individuals are aware of the dangers in a large state in America (Schuster, 2023). Companies, such as Target and Bud Light, are being boycotted and attacked for offering messages of inclusivity and embracing diversity (Crews, 2023). It is evident that societal barriers to equity and inclusion remain quite strong.

Disability and disability rights are not immune to these types of societal constructs embracing discrimination. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) passed in 1990 protects and prohibits discrimination to individuals with disabilities; however, there have been many legal cases showing the lack of ADA compliance in its current form (Blanck, 2021). Furthermore, individuals with disabilities often report delays in getting health care and treatment, as well as having medical care providers who do not try to understand their unique needs (VanPuymbrouck et al., 2020). These concerns are coupled with the realities of underemployment, harassment, and other forms of bias in the workplace (Shogren & Ward, 2018).

Resources and Programs to Support LGBTQ+ Students with Disabilities

It is evident that students living the intersection of disability and LGBTQ+ identity need support to navigate the challenging experiences of school, as well as support for familial difficulties and post-school life. To assist students living this intersectional experience, and to prepare them for a future outside of the school system, there needs to be a greater focus on developing resources and programs for students and to ensure that the educational professionals charged with their care are trained for these experiences. These challenges exist; however, it is pivotal to remember that various resources and advocacy groups also exist. Schools need to be aware of these support systems in order to help their students in the moment, as well as for future experiences. Schools are no longer held to academic standards alone; rather, they are also responsible for the behavioral, social, and emotional well-being of students (Allen et al., 2018).

Creating Safe and Inclusive Schools

There are numerous resources available to schools to help in creating a welcoming and inclusive environment. Through organizations, such as the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), *Welcoming Schools* provides a wide array of programs, lessons, resources, and training (Goodboy & Martin, 2018). These can specifically help to address inclusiveness of all family types (non-traditional), to create inclusive school climates, to assist with bully and bias prevention, as well as to support transgender students (Kroeger, 2019). School leaders and teachers can use the resources shared by *Welcoming Schools* to develop school-based lessons for inclusivity in classes. In addition, professional learning opportunities can be offered to faculty and staff with the support of the *Welcoming Schools* resources.

A similar program through the HRC is *Project Thrive*, which is a campaign that helps to foster a system of support and to build communities of support for LGBTQ+ youth (Foote, 2022). *Project Thrive* encompasses a wide array of tools and resources for schools, health care facilities, and community agencies to develop a more inclusive environment. They also offer the *Time to Thrive* conference, which specifically works in other essential areas, such as healthcare, legal assistance, mental health, and homeless assistance (Baz, 2016). These can be partnered with school districts to ensure that the needs of the whole child are addressed.

As schools work to build inclusive environments, school leaders can use existing resources to begin the process of reforming their school environments. School leaders are responsible for all aspects of the school building (Hauseman, 2020). As leaders, they need to hone their vision and goals for inclusive and welcoming schools that embrace diversity. Aside from the programs discussed, school leaders can also utilize resources through *GLSEN*, as well as state organizations that are in place, such as New Jersey's *Garden State Equality*. These organizations can be of great assistance in helping to create inclusive schools, while also assisting in eliminating bias and microaggressions (Kroeger, 2019). School leaders can utilize professional development to assist faculty and staff in developing more awareness and empathy for students. Various resources, such as webinars and live presentations, are available.

In discussing school wide supports, it is important to consider the use of safe spaces. Safe spaces are important parts of school communities that provide students who identify as LGBTQ+ with a space that is welcoming and supportive (Sadowski, 2017). School professionals can identify their classroom or office as a safe space by using Safe Zone stickers from the *Safe Zone Project*. This resource provides online training to be an ally for LGBTQ+ youth, and it signals that the space is a safe area. In addition, classroom posters can include positive affirmations for diversity with acknowledgement that the room is a safe space. While safe zone and safe spaces have positive aspects and good intentions, safe spaces can also create the opposite environment. By limiting the ability of students to feel safe only in small spaces, the school-wide climate is left unchanged and unwelcoming (Steck & Perry, 2018). Hallways, classrooms, cafeterias, and so forth all remain areas in which students feel unsafe and create anxiety (Short, 2017). By working on school-wide inclusivity through *Welcoming Schools* coupled with safe spaces, the entire school community becomes a safe space for all students.

Student Specific Resources

For school-based professionals, resources are available to help students with disabilities who identify as LGBTQ+. This allows the education professional to be cognizant of specific needs, unique challenges, and helps to create empathy for their students. Being supportive and viewed as an ally is a major positive experience for students (Smith, 2018). It is also pivotal to know about resources that can assist LGBTQ+ students with disabilities who might be struggling socially and/or emotionally. Programs and resources, such as the *Trevor Project*, can assist school professionals with providing counseling and networking for students on their caseload (Phillips, 2022). By accessing these resources, school professionals can enhance their understanding, skills, and knowledge for students living with these intersecting identities.

As part of this, special education professionals need to be aware of the intersectional experiences of students with disabilities who are also members of the LGBTQ+ community (Hogan, 2023). As a student with a disability possessing an IEP, students who also identify as LGBTQ+ will benefit from the support of counseling and having a strong relationship with their case manager and/or counselor (Hogan, 2023). In addition, social/emotional goals can be developed in the IEP that specifically target managing emotions, dealing with anxiety, self-acceptance, and understanding perceptions of others (Dale et al., 2022). These become invaluable skills as students face bias, harassment, and microaggressions on various levels both in and out of school (Buckley & Mahdavi, 2018).

Schools are required to prepare students with disabilities for transitions into adulthood, specifically in daily living skills, employment, and post-secondary assistance through the IEP (Suk et al., 2020). The use of various agencies and community organizations play a key part in transition services for students with disabilities (Taylor et al., 2016). Being aware of resources, agencies, and groups specifically addressing the unique needs of LGBTQ+ students is pivotal to ensuring that necessary supports are in place (Hogan, 2023).

For students who have non-supporting families, these services become even more pivotal, especially considering the increased risk of suicide, drug abuse, and homelessness for LGBTQ+ students (Tierney & Ward, 2017). These services can provide an avenue for improved outcomes for students and shape their future through building self-advocacy and possessing the skills necessary for the unique challenges faced by living this intersectional experience.

Curricular Enhancements & Educator Preparation

There is also a need to enhance curriculum to support LGBTQ+ students with disabilities. Curriculum offerings need to address the history and contributions of members of the LGBTQ+ and disability communities. When students see themselves in the curriculum, as well as learning of the various figures in history, students can feel empowered and grow in their understanding of their identity and strengths (Cruz et al., 2022). This is essential not only for LGBTQ+ students with disabilities, but for all students of various races, genders, and disabilities (Schey, 2023). Valuing diversity and the inclusion of all is a beneficial aspect of culturally sustaining pedagogies, and students can see the value of diverse individuals who make society stronger (Waitoller & King Thorius, 2016).

Curriculum enhancements can embrace diversity and focus thematic units of study in this regard. For example, ELA and Social Studies units can examine the contributions of disability rights advocates and LGBTQ+ historical figures in a thematic cross-curricular unit. In addition, celebratory months, such as LGBTQ+ History Pride Month in June and Disability Awareness Month in October offer opportunities to specifically focus on these notions in curriculum plans, along with school-wide activities during those months.

A final consideration regarding supporting students with disabilities identifying as LGBTQ+ is that more educator preparation is needed. Teacher preparation programs provide limited exposure to disability studies and inclusive pedagogy for students with disabilities (Hogan, 2024). Often, future teachers and school professionals are prepared without much discussion of LGBTQ+ identity (Brant, 2017). Some have minimal coursework dedicated to diversity in education, and specifically to growing in the knowledge and understanding of LGBTQ+ experiences (Brant & Willox, 2021). To help school professionals grow in this area, which could also help with limiting microaggressions (Thacker et al., 2022), educator preparation programs should include coursework on diversity and inclusion ensuring a focus on LGBTQ+ identity (Brant & Willox, 2021). This can help school-based professionals in working with LGBTQ+ students with disabilities, and it can help them understand the unique experiences of these students.

Need for Improvement & Implications for LGBTQ+ Students with Disabilities

Some students have increased obstacles that provide unique challenges, such as sexual orientation, gender identity, race, socio-economic status, and religious expression (Kosciw et al., 2022). It is important that school leaders, case managers, counselors, and higher education professionals become more attuned to the experiences and outcomes of LGBTQ+ students with disabilities. As part of modern education, academics become a part of the school-based experience, with social/emotional needs now equally important (Temkin et al., 2020). School wide programs, such as Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), specifically seek to build school-wide support for students and staff through academic intervention, positive behavior support systems, building school-wide climate and culture, and addressing social/emotional issues (Wexler, 2018). These are important aspects for educational professionals who must now meet the needs of the whole child.

As part of this endeavor to provide the necessary support for all students, students with disabilities identifying as LGBTQ+ must also be considered. Students living this intersectional reality have a unique school and life experience (Miller & Smith, 2021). Their needs are important, and they are unique. To improve the outcomes of students who live the intersection of disability and LGBTQ+ identity, schools must prepare students for the future and provide them with the skills necessary. Current outcomes are dire, and the current cultural climate does not provide a positive outlook for students; however, through support, encouragement, and advocacy, LGBTQ+ students with disabilities will have a brighter future with positive outcomes.

School leaders can begin to employ more inclusive practices in their school communities. By

doing so, they can foster a climate that is welcoming and inclusive. Through services offered through advocacy groups and organizations, leaders have the support, materials, and guidance necessary to build these inclusive communities (Kroeger, 2019). From school-wide practices, classrooms will also become inclusive (Pedaste et al., 2021). Curriculum development can implement changes to include the contributions of LGBTQ+ individuals and those with disabilities in society. Students will be able to see themselves in the curriculum and be motivated and inspired (Schey, 2023).

School-based professionals need more preparation in order to meet the needs of their students. By engaging with resources offered through various programs and groups, school professionals can develop their skills and knowledge to be more understanding and more supportive of students with disabilities who identify as LGBTQ+ (Brant, 2017). Special education professionals need to ensure that their students' needs are met through a well-developed IEP for students who are open about their LGBTQ+ identity (Hogan, 2023). For those not open, it is important to be an ally and advocate for the student to ensure that necessary supports are available (Smith, 2018).

Finally, preparation programs for educational professionals need to implement coursework that address LGBTQ+ identity, queer studies, and teaching students with disabilities (Brant & Willox, 2021; Hogan, 2024). By doing so, school professionals can develop an understanding of the unique experiences of LGBTQ+ students with disabilities. They can also develop their skills and build empathy for students who might have difficulties and struggle in this area (Brant & Willox, 2021). The need for preparation is evident, as many students living this dual reality face difficulties and hardships unique to their identity (Gage et al., 2021; Rhoades et al., 2018). It is important to have resources, or to at least know where to turn when needed.

Conclusion

LGBTQ+ students with disabilities face a unique experience at home, in school, and later in life. As evidenced from the literature, there are numerous challenges that exist, and when the intersection of LGBTQ+ identity and disability occurs, there are many obstacles for students to overcome. Homelessness, suicidal ideation, mental illness, drug abuse and many other barriers (Rhoades et al., 2018) can impede a LGBTQ+ student's success. When a disability intersects this experience, whether medically, behaviorally, emotionally, or intellectually, the experience becomes even more challenging. While society continues to embrace an ableist perspective (Goodley & Lawthom, 2019), supports need to be in place to empower LGBTQ+ students with disabilities, especially focusing on their strengths and unique abilities.

While some might argue that school should focus on academic ability, and not on topics such as social and emotional areas, the evidence points to the contrary (Scott et al., 2021). There is a need for this focus, especially post-pandemic (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Students need the support, skills, and assistance to self-advocate and grow in their identity. Schools are no longer siloed into an academic focus; rather, schools now focus on a whole child approach

ensuring that social and emotional wellbeing is taken into account (Allen et al., 2018). This is not a new ideology, as we can see these foundational frameworks in Maslow's Hierarchy put forth in 1943 (Kenrick et al., 2010), which discusses the needs of the child before worrying about academic content (Bucchio et al., 2021).

It is through this perspective that a concerted effort is needed to improve the support in schools for LGBTQ+ students with disabilities. This is important for their school-based experiences, as well as life outside of school and post-graduation. Every child deserves support, and every child deserves a chance for success. The educational journey may possess more barriers for LGBTQ+ students with disabilities, but through the support of educational professionals and school leaders, they can navigate life's journey with the support needed and lead a happy, successful, and positive life.

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