# DISABILITY STUDIES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION: A PERSONAL AND SYSTEMIC EXPLORATION

By

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the intersection of disability studies and special education, focusing on the integration of disability-affirming practices within special education teacher preparation programs. The overarching goal is to enhance the preparation of preservice special education teachers by incorporating disability studies content, promoting a more inclusive and affirming approach to disability in education.

Chapter 2 presents a critical autoethnography that examines the author's personal journey of discovering their disabilities—Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and Autism (AuDHD)—while enrolled in a doctoral program in special education. This exploration highlights the dissonance the author discovered between the prevalent deficit-driven perspectives of disability they were taught in their special education program and disability studies' more holistic, identity-affirming views of disability that they found through their own identity exploration. The autoethnography delves into the challenges faced by disabled students in higher education, the absence of disabled voices in special education curricula, and the impact of ableism within academic settings. The study underscores the importance of incorporating disability studies perspectives to foster a more inclusive and supportive educational environment for disabled students.

Chapter 3 critically examines the extent to which disability studies content is included in introductory special education courses across 10 of the top 12 undergraduate programs in the US. Through a transformative analysis of course syllabi, this study reveals a significant gap in the integration of disability studies concepts within preservice special education teacher preparation. The findings indicate that current curricula predominantly adhere to a medical model of disability, emphasizing deficits and interventions rather than a holistic understanding of disability identity

and culture. This study advocates for the inclusion of disability studies perspectives to enrich the training of future special educators, promoting a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to teaching disabled students.

Building on the findings from Chapter 3, Chapter 4 offers practical recommendations for integrating disability studies content into an introductory special education teacher preparation course. This practitioner-focused guide provides a roadmap for incorporating disability-affirming practices, including a sample syllabus, assignments, and project ideas. The recommendations aim to equip instructors with the tools to provide future special educators with the knowledge and skills necessary to foster an inclusive classroom environment that respects and celebrates disability as a part of human diversity. Additionally, the study addresses potential barriers to implementation and offers strategies for overcoming these challenges.

Together, this dissertation contributes to the ongoing discourse on the integration of disability studies in special education. By highlighting the tensions between special education and disability studies, the dissertation calls for a paradigm shift in how special education is taught and practiced. The work advocates for a more inclusive and affirming approach that recognizes and values the voices and experiences of disabled individuals. This dissertation ultimately seeks to bridge the divide between special education and disability studies, fostering a more holistic and equitable educational landscape for all students.

This dissertation is dedicated to everyone who
helped me believe that this work is worth doing.
Thank you.

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# CHAPTER 1

# EDUCATING THE SPECIAL EDUCATORS: ENHANCING SPECIAL EDUCATION WITH DISABILITY STUDIES

Recognized as the largest minority group, nearly 1 in 4 Americans are estimated to be disabled (Centers for Disease Control, 2024), including 15% of school-age children, 19% of undergraduate students, and 12% of graduate students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). These numbers are likely to rise with the long-term impact of COVID-19 (Raveendran et al., 2021), such as Long COVID (Office for Civil Rights, 2021). In 2021, 1.2 million people in the U.S. workforce alone were disabled as a result of COVID-19 infections (Roberts et al, 2022). Given the high rates of disabilities across the country, discussions and decisions regarding disabled people[1] should not be viewed as an appendix to a larger conversation. Instead, they should be integral and central to our societal discourse, fostering inclusivity, understanding, and equal opportunities for all.

Recognizing the critical importance of including disabled people in our societal discourse, various fields and professions have emerged to provide vital support across all stages of life. Fields such as special education, speech-pathology, physical therapy, occupational therapy, and counseling are just a few examples of professions whose clientele largely include disabled individuals. Whereas these fields seek to support and teach those with disabilities, a separate field, disability studies, analyzes *what* disability is. This dissertation focuses on the similarities and differences between studying the concept of disability within the fields of special education and disability studies.

[1] Identity-first language, as opposed to person-first language, is used by default throughout. The author recognizes that the person preference of who you are talking to or about should be used but when that preference is unknown, the author prescribes to the narrative that a disability is an integral part of one's identity. Sharif et al. (2022).

## How to Study Disability within Higher Education

While both the disciplines of special education and disability studies are centered around disability, the focus and approach that these fields take to teach about disability is significantly different. If a student hopes to learn how to teach disabled people, they will most likely enter the field of special education. On the other hand, if the student wants to focus on understanding the identity of disabled people and the concept of disability, then they will likely enter the field of disability studies.

### *Special Education*

Undergraduate students who choose to major in special education are likely seeking a career as a special education teacher. Special education is a system of supports to give disabled students more individually tailored instruction in school (Kauffman et al., 2017; Massoumeh & Leila, 2012; Sandoval Gomez & McKee, 2020). The focus of special education is to help students make gains on the identified deficits that facilitated the student's placement in special education services (Bateman & Cline, 2016).

The first higher-education program devoted to training teachers to work with disabled students (i.e., special education) was created in 1914 at Michigan State Normal College (which would later become Eastern Michigan University; Eastern Michigan University, n.d.). Since that time, the field of special education has faced criticism both from those within the field and outside the field. Within special education, Lloyd Dunn published his often-cited article addressing the concerns that "present special education classes are obsolete and unjustifiable since a large proportion of pupils so placed are socioculturally deprived with mild learning problems rather than [disabled]" (1968, p.5). Others also stated concerns with the

conceptualization of disability, the purpose of special education, expected outcomes, and the current state of knowledge (Andrews et al., 2000).

Specifically, the field of special education is grounded in the medical model of disability and its content is focused on strategies to teach disabled students (Massoumeh & Leila, 2012; Retief & Letšosa, 2018). The medical model of disability defines a disability on the binary of normal / not normal (Massoumeh & Leila, 2012; Retief & Letšosa, 2018). Identifying and subsequently viewing disabilities through *deficits*, the medical model focuses on developing and delivering intervention to make the person as close to "normal" as possible (Massoumeh & Leila, 2012). For example, the academic, social, and behavioral performance of a disabled student is compared to their non-disabled peers and interventions are developed to help the disabled student's performance catch up to the non-disabled students' performance (Hallahan et al., 2018). In taking this approach, the stigma of "able-bodied as the gold standard" and the discrimination against disabled people thrives.

***Disability Studies***

As criticism grew with the way special education orients disability solely through a medical lens (Dunn, 1968), the disability studies field was created (Taylor, 2006). The first US disability studies program was offered in 1994 at Syracuse University by merging their teacher training programs in special education and the School of Education's Teaching & Leadership (Syracuse University, n.d.).

Those who choose to major in disability studies are likely seeking a career within higher education or various support positions beyond the school setting, such as rehabilitation and senior centers (Goodley, 2016). Disability studies, as an interdisciplinary field, aims to challenge ableism, promote disability rights, and advance social inclusion and justice for disabled people

(Connor, 2014, Connor et al., 2008; Garland-Thomson, 2018; Goodley et al., 2017; Goodley et al., 2018; Kofke & Morrison, 2021). Disability studies scholars strongly support the social model of disability, which looks beyond the individual when determining disability (Shakespeare, 2006). This model focuses on how societal barriers and prejudices create disadvantages for individuals with disabilities, stating that "society disables individuals" (Retief & Letšosa, 2018; Shakespeare, 2006). The efforts of disability studies scholars often lead to advocacy, policy change, and a broader cultural understanding of disability (Connor et al., 2008; Fine, 2019; Pearson et al., 2016).

**Disability Studies in Education**. Disability Studies in Education (DSE), a subfield within disability studies, narrows its focus to the intersection of disability and education (Freedman, 2016; Ware, 2011), examining how educational systems and practices affect students with disabilities and how these students experience schooling (Freedman, 2016). The field of Disability Studies in Education (DSE) originated from the efforts of disillusioned special educators who were dissatisfied with the conventional approaches to disability within the special education framework (Connor, 2014). These educators sought to challenge the prevailing medical model of disability, which often pathologized students and focused on their deficits rather than recognizing their potential and rights (Connor, 2014).

The formal establishment of DSE can be traced back to the late 1990s and early 2000s. It was during this period that scholars and educators began to coalesce around the idea that disability should be understood as a social and cultural construct, rather than merely a medical condition. This shift was catalyzed by the broader disability rights movement, which advocated for the rights and inclusion of individuals with disabilities in all aspects of society, including education (Connor, 2013). Influential works published in the early 2000s then laid the theoretical

foundation for DSE. In "Disability Studies and Inclusive Education — Implications for Theory, Research, and Practice," Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, and Morton (2008) highlighted the need for a paradigm shift in how disability is perceived and addressed in educational settings. They argued for a move away from the deficit-focused medical model towards a social model that recognizes the role of societal barriers in disabling individuals. For example, whereas individuals practicing within the medical model would recommend medicating someone with attention regulation difficulties, individuals practicing within the social model would examine the environment to determine what could be changed to help the person thrive without changing (i.e., medicating) the individual. Baglieri, Valle, Connor, and Gallagher (2011) further advanced the discourse with their article, "Disability Studies in Education: The Need for a Plurality of Perspectives on Disability." This work underscored the importance of incorporating diverse perspectives and experiences into DSE, advocating for a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of disability (Baglieri et al., 2011). Thus, DSE addresses issues such as inclusive education, special education policies, classroom accommodations, and the ways in which schools can be more accessible and equitable for disabled students (Kofke & Morrison, 2021; Naraian, 2021; Taylor, 2006; Ware, 2011).

A significant milestone in the development of DSE was the formation of the Disability Studies in Education Annual Conference in 2001. This conference provided a crucial platform for educators, scholars, and activists to share their research, ideas, and experiences, while fostering a sense of community and collaboration (Conner, 2014). In his 2014 article about the DSE Annual Conference, David J. Connor, a prominent figure in the field, emphasized the importance of this conference in challenging traditional special education practices and advocating for a more inclusive and socially just approach to disability. He stated

> Even the most cursory look at this list [of previous DSE annual conference themes] reveals a desire for DSE to advance changing education and society as the recurrence of "politics," "policy," "practice," "pedagogy," "inclusion," and "law," conjure a collective stance of critical educators interested in disability who seek to "rethink," "reimagine," and "reform" schools and society. We recognize that the radical change we seek cannot be achieved overnight, but take some satisfaction in *creating* different ways to understand disability that can be useful in undoing the damage done by limited, self-imposed, and oppressive framings of disability proliferated by the field of special education (The Annual Disability Studies in Education Conference section).

Overall, the progress of DSE has been marked by a continuous effort to challenge ableism, promote social justice, and advocate for the rights and inclusion of students with disabilities. By focusing on the social, cultural, and political dimensions of disability, DSE has provided valuable insights and strategies for creating more inclusive and equitable educational environments (Baglieri et al., 2011; Connor, 2014, Connor et al., 2008; Naraian, 2021; Taylor, 2006). This transformative field continues to grow, driven by the commitment of educators and scholars to reimagine and reshape the landscape of special education.

**The Tensions Between Special Education and Disability Studies in Education**

Although both the fields special education and DSE have evolved throughout the decades, there is an ever-existing tension between the two disciplines. Seemingly the difference between special education and DSE lies in the interest of teaching disabled students (i.e., special education's focus) versus examining how disabled students are taught and navigate the educational system (i.e., DSE's focus). The differences, however, are far greater than this simple distinction. Disability studies' view of *disability* through societal, cultural, and political lenses

(Goodley, 2016), as opposed to a medical lens, brings about a significantly different view than what is taught within special education courses. And it is this distinction of how the concept of disability is viewed that makes the current approach to special education and disability studies incompatible; to teach disability studies content in a special education course would mean going against the pedagogies of special education.

As a scholar who studies both the field of special education and disability studies, Connor (2019) recently examined this tension by analyzing the published "attacks of disdain and distortion" toward disability studies by authors within special education. Connor identified three characteristics that are commonly present critiques within special education publications regarding disability studies, including: (1) a harsh critique of the social model of disability including straw man arguments as to why the social model is wrong; (2) arguments for why scientific knowledge should be the "true" basis of special education; and (3) a general tone of fear, anxiety, and anger towards disability studies. The results of Connor's analysis further demonstrated that the tension between the two fields is rather one-sided. Throughout his analysis, Connor emphasized that DSE pursues an interdisciplinary approach to the study of disability, including the scientific perspectives within special education; this interdisciplinary focus on disability is not reciprocated, however, by the field of special education (Connor, 2019).

**Integration of DSE in Special Education Courses**

Despite these tensions, the integration of DSE into special education teacher preparation courses has progressed significantly over the past decade through recommendations in journal articles, textbooks being written, and publications providing suggestions for the direct implementation of DSE within the teaching of special education. Central to this movement is Susan Baglieri's influential series (2012, 2017, 2022) "Disability Studies and the Inclusive

Classroom," which provides comprehensive frameworks for educators, including pre-service and in-service teachers, as well as school administrators and policymakers to embed DSE principles into special education classrooms. Baglieri's third edition (2022) offers updated methodologies for inclusive education, whereas earlier editions focus on embracing diversity and fostering least restrictive environments (Baglieri, 2012, 2017). In collaboration with Priya Lalvani, Baglieri's "Undoing Ableism: Teaching About Disability in K-12 Classrooms" presents practical strategies for teachers to dismantle ableism, advocating for the critical engagement of educators in promoting inclusivity (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019). This work aligns with the comprehensive approach provided by Jan W. Valle and David J. Connor in "Rethinking Disability." Their second edition delves into the theoretical underpinnings of DSE, while the first edition offers tangible strategies for educators, highlighting the evolution and practical application of DSE principles (Valle & Connor, 2019, 2011).

The edited volume by Connor, Valle, and Chris Hale, "Practicing Disability Studies in Education: Acting Toward Social Change," showcases various contributions demonstrating the practical implementation of DSE in fostering social change (Connor et al., 2015). This work illustrates how DSE can challenge traditional paradigms and promote inclusive pedagogies. Further contributions by Srikala Naraian and Scot Danforth emphasize the application of critical disability studies in teacher education. Naraian's "Making Inclusion Matter" and Danforth's "Becoming a Great Inclusive Educator" advocate for preparing educators well-versed in inclusive practices, highlighting the transformative potential of DSE in teacher education (Naraian, 2017; Danforth, 2014). Connor's articles provide specific examples of DSE integration. His work "Practicing what we teach" and "Revamping a graduate course to (in)fuse disability studies" explore the benefits and challenges of incorporating DSE into special

education curricula (Connor, 2015, 2022). These articles, along with the collective scholarship in the DSE Series edited by Danforth and Gabel (n.d.), underscore the ongoing efforts to integrate DSE into educational practices, promoting inclusive and equitable learning environments.

**Time to Bridge the Divide: My Call to Action**

Despite the vast amount of scholarship and supportive materials provided by DSE scholars to support the implementation of DSE principals into special education courses, I found a significant gap between theory and practice within my own educational experiences. Through my lived experience as a special education doctoral student who discovered I am disabled during the program, I identified that the teachings and practices within my special education PhD program did very little to prepare me, a special education academic, to critically discuss the identity of disability. After searching published literature, internet resources, and personal stories to see if my experience was an outlier and uncommon, I discovered the works of DSE scholars and learned that my experience is not a novel critique of the field of special education. I discovered that calls to bring the discussion of disability identity and related critical topics about disability to special education have been made for decades. I also discovered that not only have these calls gone largely unanswered by scholars within the field of special education, but they also have been acknowledged and refuted by special educators (see Connor, 2019). Some within special education even go so far as to villainize the field of disability studies. As one author wrote:

> It is considered that the challenges to special education have come about because of "zombie" ideas (Krugman, 2020), that is, ideas that go on and on and just won't die, regardless of lack of evidence or sound logic or any redeeming value. They're ideas that

are clearly wrong, illogical, and inconsistent with what we know. Yet these ideas live on, maintaining adherents and often gaining popular support." (Kauffman, 2022, Preface)

These "zombie" ideas encompass a variety of disability-affirming and non-deficit based views of disability that are espoused by disability studies scholars. This quote demonstrates that there are people within the field of special education that are both aware of the ideas within disability studies and outwardly against them. By describing disability studies through strawman arguments (Connor 2019), some scholars within special education clearly express that they do not see value in the multiple articles, books, and textbooks disability studies scholars have created.

Based on my experience, I chose to conduct this dissertation to add a disabled person's perspective to the discussion of how special education can and should be taught. Currently, the narratives and conversations seem to revolve around what able-bodied special educators believe, despite opposition from disabled people and disability studies scholars. My perspective is a synthesis of both worlds; I started my journey as an academic specializing in special education, initially introduced to and studying the concept of disability while identifying as able-bodied. Simultaneously, I am now embracing my own disabled identity and exploring special education and disability studies from the perspective of a disabled individual.

This dissertation advances the "nothing about us without us" mantra of disability advocacy to the very field that teaches disabled students. This dissertation is a call for change to the entire field of special education. Learning that I was disabled as I was both taking and teaching courses in special education led me to identify the gaps and missteps in the special education curricula I was assigned to teach. This dissertation expands the lens far outside my own experiences and seeks to further explore if my experiences with the teaching of special

education are similar to others, when examining beyond my program.

## The Present Dissertation

This dissertation consists of three separate but related studies. The primary aim of the dissertation is to encourage the incorporation of more disability-positive discourse within the preparation of preservice special education teachers. The three studies represent a critical analysis of my own experience in a special education doctoral program (Chapter 2), a critical analysis of the extent to which disability studies content is included in the syllabi of 10 of the top 12 undergraduate special education programs (Chapter 3), and strategies to incorporate disability studies content in special education courses (Chapter 4).

### Study 1: Navigating Identity: A Critical Autoethnography of Disability in Special Education Doctoral Studies

Chapter 2 (Study 1) presents a critical autoethnography analyzing my experiences of learning that I am disabled during my special education doctoral program while also teaching introductory special education classes and noticing a dissonance between those two worlds. Autoethnographic research centers cultural experience (ethno) through description and analysis (graphy) of personal experience (auto) (Ellis et al., 2010). Autoethnography challenges the more tradition path of research of a "neutral party" representing others and, instead, focuses on the researcher, and how their experiences have influenced and impacted them, enabling them to look beyond themselves in determining where their values lie in relation to others (Ellis et al., 2010; Starr, 2010). A *critical* autoethnography brings about cultural commentary through critical self-reflexivity (Boylorn & Orbe, 2021). In this study, I apply a critical perspective because my position in this research includes both dominant (White, upper-middle class, cis-gender passing woman) and marginalized (queer, disabled) identities. This acknowledgement and analysis of the

"politics of positionality" (Madison, 2012, p. 7) is an essential component as there is a long-standing precedent set in the field of special education of non-disabled individuals deciding what should be taught to special educators and disabled students.

Early in my doctoral program I discovered[2] I have two neurodevelopmental disorders, Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder and Autism (AuDHD). As I was navigating this new understanding of my identity, I was enrolled in a variety of degree-required special education classes and was assigned to teach multiple sections of an undergraduate introduction to special education course. My optimism that these classes would be a great personal resource to help me understand my new diagnoses quickly deflated. Where I hoped my doctoral courses would be a space for philosophical discussions surrounding disability and special education's place in the conversation, I instead experienced an uncritical perspective of the field itself and endless hours of content about how we can quantify progress using advanced statistical measures on a collection of outlier students (i.e., disabled students). I noticed that the general demeanor in which disability was discussed was deficit-driven and solely focused on the weaknesses displayed by the individual with a diagnosed disability. In the introduction to special education course, I was assigned to teach, I was expecting content and conversations about the identity of disabled students, yet I found only positive discussion of the history of legislation on the rights of disabled people and students. As the course progressed, I failed to find any humanized conversations about disability or how to talk about the identity of being disabled in either the textbook or course lecture materials I was provided. Overall, the courses I encountered in both the special education doctoral and undergraduate programs included only discussions on the

[2] I use "I discover" as opposed to "I was diagnosed" to shift the narrative away from the external validation of doctors. As is explored in Chapter 2, the process of getting my doctors to believe me was extensive. Much of my learning occurred in the time between I identified my disabilities and doctors agreeing with me.

ways in which we are "helping" disabled students, but no discussion regarding the harms that can come along with the notion of helping.

This purpose of Study 1, Chapter 2 is to critically explore my experience as a non-disclosed disabled student in a special education doctoral program. The questions that guided this inquiry included:

(1) What can be learned from the subjective personal perspective (autoethnographic research) of a disabled doctoral student's experience with regard to the field of special education?

(2) How did the discourse surrounding disability in special education courses shape the self-perception and identity development of a disabled doctoral student navigating the field for the first time?

(3) In what ways did the gaps in discussions on the lived experiences and perspectives of disabled individuals in special education courses contribute to a disabled doctoral student's personal understanding of disability?

(4) How did the rejection of attempts to shift the special education discourse to a more disability-affirming approach impact a disabled doctoral student's perception of the field of special education?

In seeking answers to these questions, I review a variety of topics, including the absence of any disabled voices in the special education coursework, the lack of disability studies content within special education graduate and undergraduate courses, the rejection of my attempts to shift discussion to a more disability-affirming approach, the unacknowledged roots of special education including positivism and other research philosophies and their influences on how disability is oriented and researched, and why I ultimately chose to not disclose my disability

status to my program.

This autoethnography is driven by the belief that a disabled person's perspective on how future special educators are taught should be valued and celebrated by the field of special education. So often, at every level, disabled voices are not heard, let alone thought of in discussion and decisions directly about them. While the field of special education exclusively focuses on teaching educators of disabled students, disabled voices seem to be completely absent from any foundational principles of the field (Freedman, 2016). Chapter 2, then, contributes to the existing body of literature by shedding light on the experiences and challenges faced by a disabled student within the higher education teaching of special education, offering valuable insights that can inform both academic research and practical approaches to fostering inclusivity and support for this often-overlooked demographic grounded within the phrase commonly used within disability advocacy, "nothing about us without us" (Charlton, 1998).

**Study 2: Reimagining Special Education Training: A Critical Examination of Disability Studies Integration**

Chapter 3 (Study 2) presents an analysis of introductory special education syllabi from 10 of the top 12 undergraduate special education programs in the US. The transformative analysis sought to identify to what extent disability studies content is currently incorporated into special education courses through a critical curriculum studies approach. To accomplish this, a content analysis was conducted on 30 syllabi of special education teacher preparation courses within 10 of the top 12 undergraduate special education programs. The research questions included:

(1) To what extent are disability studies concepts taught in undergraduate introductory special education teacher preparation courses?

(2) If disability studies concepts are included within introductory special education teacher

preparation coursework, in which courses are disability studies concepts most often included and which concepts are most often included?

The results of this study have important implications for ways to advance special education teacher preparation programs and enhance the overall preparation of special educators. By evaluating the extent to which disability studies content is integrated into these programs, areas for improvement and innovation are identified. This, in turn, enables us to better equip future special education professionals with a more holistic understanding of disability, promoting inclusive and equitable practices in the classroom and beyond. Ultimately, the findings from this study contribute to the ongoing evolution of special education curricula, ensuring that it remains relevant, responsive, and attuned to the diverse needs of disabled people in today's ever-changing educational landscape.

**Study 3: Empowering Future Educators: A Roadmap For Disability Studies Integration in Special Education**

Using the results from Chapter 3, Chapter 4 (Study 3) provides a guide for special education programs and courses to incorporate disability studies content into introductory special education courses. These recommendations include topics with which course instructors should be familiar to lead a disability-affirming special education course and how instructors can organize their course, including a sample syllabus and assignments/projects. In addition to these recommendations, barriers to implementing these recommendations are also discussed with strategies offered to overcome these challenges. The goal of Chapter 4 is to provide instructions and recommendations for special education teacher preparation programs to make their curriculum more disability-affirming and respectful to disabled people.

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# CHAPTER 2

# NAVIGATING IDENTITY: A CRITICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF DISABILITY IN SPECIAL EDUCATION DOCTORAL STUDIES

In the academic landscape, disability remains a multifaceted force, influencing not only personal experiences but also shaping the very structures, policies, and practices of educational institutions (Pfeiffer, 2001). A critical analysis of the identity of a disabled academic within this context unveils intricate layers of systemic ableism, internalized stigma, intersectional marginalization, and the continuous negotiation of identity within both academic and social spheres. These layers include navigating institutional barriers, confronting societal biases, balancing multiple intersecting identities such as race, gender, and disability, and the personal challenges of self-acceptance and advocacy. This study explores the intersections of disability and the teaching of special education. Guided through the frameworks of intersectionality, Critical Disability Studies (CDS), and Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS), I present a critical autoethnography that reexamines my lived experiences of entering, navigating, and completing a special education PhD program while simultaneously discovering that I am autistic and attention deficit hyperactivity disordered (AuDHD) and how this drastically has altered my perception of special education as a field of study.

## Exploring the Intersectionality of Disability Through Critical Disability Studies and Critical Whiteness Studies

Intersectionality is a framework created by Kimberlé Crenshaw for understanding how various social and cultural identities—such as race, gender, disability, and class—intersect and interact, resulting in unique experiences and impacts of oppression and privilege (Crenshaw, 1989). The experiences of disabled individuals are shaped by the intersection of multiple

identities (Wickenden, 2023). Critical Disability Studies (CDS) and Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) provide valuable frameworks for examining the intersectionality of disability. CDS, as an interdisciplinary field, challenges traditional perceptions of disability by emphasizing its social, cultural, and political dimensions rather than viewing it solely as a medical condition (Davis, 2013). Similarly, CWS scrutinizes the construction and implications of whiteness, focusing on how it operates as a position of power and privilege within society (Dyer, 1997; McIntosh, 1988).

Both CDS and CWS acknowledge that disability and whiteness are not mutually exclusive categories and encourage a dual analysis of these intersecting identities (Garland-Thomson, 2017; Applebaum, 2016). Perceived levels of support needs, cultural nuances, language barriers, and varying access to resources contribute to a diverse landscape of challenges faced by students navigating disability identities within academia (Fernández-Batanero et al., 2022; Jones, 2022; Shpigelman et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2021). This dual analysis challenges people to move beyond a singular focus on either disability or race and recognize the interconnected nature of oppression (Goodley et al., 2017). These theoretical frameworks prompt us to critically analyze not only explicit instances of discrimination but also the systemic structures that contribute to the marginalization of disabled individuals. By incorporating principles from CDS and CWS, scholars can uncover the ways in which intersecting experiences shape the lived realities of disabled individuals.

Departing from traditional perspectives that pathologize disability, CDS and CWS center on key concepts and principles that illuminate the intersectional and society-dependent truths of disability (Mitchell & Snyder, 2015; Yancy, 2017). These frameworks provide a comprehensive understanding of how intersecting identities shape individuals' experiences within educational

settings. They emphasize the social constructions of race and ability and recognize the material and psychological impacts of being labeled as raced or disabled, which often positions individuals outside of Western cultural norms (Garland-Thomson, 2017).

Furthermore, these frameworks privilege the voices of marginalized populations that are traditionally not acknowledged within research and consider legal and historical aspects of disability and race and how both have been used separately and together to deny the rights of some citizens (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Erevelles, 2011). CDS and CWS also recognize whiteness and ability as forms of property, noting that advancements for people labeled with disabilities have often resulted from the interest convergence of white, middle-class citizens (Leonardo, 2004; Lipsitz, 1998). Both frameworks advocate for activism and support all forms of resistance against oppressive structures (Erevelles, 2011). By applying the principles of CDS and CWS, scholars and educators can develop a more nuanced understanding of disability's intersectionality, ultimately fostering more inclusive and equitable educational environments.

**The Relevance of Critical Perspectives in Understanding Disability**

Beyond a medical understanding of disability critical perspectives are integral to understanding disability and the relation that race has when it intersects with disability. Traditional perspectives of disability often isolate disability as a personal struggle, overlooking the broader societal factors that contribute to the exclusion and marginalization of disabled individuals (Brinkman et al., 2023). Additionally, race has a deeply entrenched history with relation to ability as both racism and ableism are rooted in the perception that the dominant group's superiority is based on superior ability (Annamma et al., 2013). CDS and CWS provide lenses through which dominant narratives can be questioned, oppressive structures can be challenged, and societal changes that foster inclusivity can be advocated (Goodley et al., 2017;

Leonardo, 2004). By adopting critical perspectives, scholars and activists can analyze disability and race within the larger context of power dynamics, systemic inequalities, and cultural norms. This broader view allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how societal structures perpetuate discrimination against multidimensional identities.

Critical perspectives on disability identity are integral to understanding of the multifaceted experiences of disabled people. Research by Shakespeare (2013) and Oliver (2013) emphasized the socio-political context in which disability is constructed, challenging dominant narratives that pathologize difference. These perspectives underscore the importance of recognizing disability not as an individual deficit, but as a product of societal attitudes, structures, and policies. Furthermore, scholars like Titchkosky (2011) highlight the intersectionality of disability with other social categories such as race, gender, and sexuality, emphasizing the need for an inclusive approach that considers diverse identities. By centering the voices and experiences of disabled people, critical perspectives advocate for social justice and empowerment, promoting a shift towards more inclusive and equitable societies.

**Autoethnography**

Autoethnography is a qualitative research approach that intertwines personal experiences with scholarly analysis, creating a rich depiction of understanding (Ellis et al., 2011; Ellis & Adams, 2014; Méndez, 2013). Exploring the intricacies of the autoethnographic approach, autoethnographies examine how personal experiences serve as valuable sources of data (Ellis & Adams, 2014; Chang, 2016; Muncey, 2005) and the pivotal role storytelling plays in conveying nuanced experiences (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Chang, 2013; Méndez, 2013, Muncey, 2005). In essence, autoethnography provides different "ways of knowing" (hooks, 1994, pp. 88–89).

Unlike traditional research methods that often rely on detached observations,

autoethnography positions the researcher as a participant and observer within the study (Chang, 2013; Méndez, 2013; Muncey, 2005). Personal experiences become data points that offer unique insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Pitard, 2017). The researcher's lived experiences are considered not only as anecdotal evidence but as integral components of the research process (Ellis & Adams, 2014, Méndez, 2013; Muncey, 2005). These experiences are scrutinized and analyzed to reveal underlying patterns, themes, and meanings (Keleş, 2022). By integrating the researcher's personal narrative into the study, autoethnography aims to provide a holistic and authentic understanding of the researched phenomena (Wall, 2008).

### *Reflexivity and Positionality in the Research Process*

Reflexivity and positionality are foundational elements in the autoethnographic research process (Méndez, 2013), addressing the importance of acknowledging the researcher's perspectives and biases and how personal experiences impact the interpretation of data (Bochner & Riggs, 2014; Chang, 2016; Ellis et al., 2011; Spry, 2001; Wall, 2008). Reflexivity involves a continual self-awareness and critical examination of the researcher's own perspectives, biases, and assumptions (Pitard, 2017). Acknowledging these aspects is essential for understanding how they may influence the research process and the interpretation of data (Méndez, 2013; Pitard, 2017; Wall, 2008). In autoethnography, the researcher is not an objective outsider but an active participant, and this acknowledgment of subjectivity becomes a strength rather than a limitation. By openly addressing personal biases and reflecting on one's positionality, the researcher enhances the transparency of the study, allowing readers to assess the impact of the researcher's background on the findings.

### *The Impact of Personal Experiences on the Interpretation of Data*

Personal experiences inevitably shape the interpretation of data in autoethnography. The

researcher's unique background and lived experiences serve as a lens through which data is filtered and analyzed (Ellis & Adams, 2014, Méndez, 2013; Muncey, 2005). This subjectivity contributes to the richness of the research by providing insights and perspectives that might be overlooked in more traditional approaches (Méndez, 2013). However, it is crucial for the researcher to balance subjectivity with rigorous analysis. While personal experiences inform the interpretation, they should not overshadow the broader context, or the voices of others involved in the research (Ellis et al., 2011). The intertwining of personal experiences and scholarly analysis requires a delicate equilibrium to ensure the study maintains academic rigor (Bochner & Riggs, 2014; Chang, 2016; Ellis et al., 2011). By acknowledging the complementarity of personal narratives and research findings, we can cultivate a more holistic and empathetic understanding of complex social issues while working towards equitable and transformative change. Understanding the impact of personal experiences on the interpretation of data is part of the transparency autoethnography strives to achieve. By openly discussing the researcher's influences and biases, the study becomes a reflexive journey that invites readers to critically engage with the research process.

**Critical Autoethnography**

Critical autoethnography involves interrogating personal experiences and situating them within the larger social, political, and cultural contexts (Boylorn & Orbe, 2021; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Tilley-Lubbs, 2016). Using a critical lens in autoethnography is crucial for addressing the role of power dynamics and societal structures in the storytelling process (Boylorn & Orbe, 2021; Tilley-Lubbs, 2016; Tilley-Lubbs & Calva, 2016[3]). By critically analyzing personal narratives, researchers can contribute to a deeper understanding of the ways

[3] See Tilley-Lubbs & Calva (2016) for a collection of critical autoethnographies

in which societal expectations, stereotypes, and ableism impact the lives of disabled individuals (Holman Jones, 2018; Sparkes, 2000). Critical autoethnography also encourages reflexivity, prompting researchers to be aware of their biases and limitations by emphasizing power dynamics and social justice, focusing on how systemic power relations affect the researcher and the subject (Boylorn & Orbe, 2021; Chang, 2016). This self-awareness is essential for producing research that contributes to a nuanced understanding of the complex interactions between disability and other social categories.

Critical autoethnography offers a powerful methodological approach for examining the intersections of personal experience, identity, and broader social and cultural structures. This approach is particularly effective for exploring the complexities of whiteness in educational and rhetorical contexts. Pennington and Brock (2012) provide a compelling example of critical autoethnography by examining the experiences of white educators through self-studies. Their work explores the process of constructing critical autoethnographic narratives that confront and critique the educators' own positionalities within the structures of whiteness. By engaging in self-reflective practices, the authors highlight the tensions and challenges white educators face in recognizing and addressing their own complicity in perpetuating racial inequalities. This study underscores the importance of critical self-examination and the role of autoethnography in fostering a deeper understanding of how whiteness operates within educational settings (Pennington & Brock, 2012).

Similarly, Potter (2015) used critical autoethnography to explore the concept of strategic rhetoric within the context of whiteness. In "The Whiteness of Silence," Potter examined the ways in which silence is employed as a rhetorical strategy to maintain and reinforce white privilege. Through a detailed and introspective account, the author revealed how silence can

function as a tool for avoiding uncomfortable discussions about race and perpetuating systemic inequalities. This work highlights the nuanced ways in which whiteness is maintained through everyday interactions and the critical role that autoethnography can play in uncovering and challenging these dynamics (Potter, 2015). These studies demonstrate the effectiveness of critical autoethnography in examining and deconstructing whiteness. By focusing on personal narratives and self-reflection, these works provide valuable insights into the mechanisms of white privilege and the importance of critically engaging with one's own positionality. This approach not only enhances our understanding of racial dynamics but also offers pathways for educators and individuals to actively challenge and transform oppressive structures.

## Autoethnographic Studies on Disability

Previous autoethnographic research on disability provides profound insights into the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities, revealing the intricate interplay of identity, power, advocacy, and educational practices. This section synthesizes autoethnographic studies that explore these dimensions through personal narratives.

### *Disability, Mental Illness, Power, and Advocacy*

Pryer, Davies, and Hislop (2023) explore the interconnected experiences of disability and mental illness, examining how societal power structures influence these experiences. Their autoethnographic accounts highlight the systemic challenges faced by individuals with disabilities and mental illnesses, underscoring the importance of narrative in advocating for change (Pryer et al., 2023). Additionally, White (2019) and Morella (2008) provide complementary perspectives on disability and advocacy. White (2019) narrates her journey through special education as both a student and an educator, emphasizing the critical role of advocacy in navigating educational systems. Her work underscores the personal impact of

special education policies and the necessity of self-advocacy (White, 2019). Morella (2008) focuses on the challenges of living with a non-visible disability, discussing strategies for coping and advocacy. This study brings attention to the often-overlooked experiences of those with non-visible disabilities and the importance of raising awareness (Morella, 2008).

***Educators Learning and Teaching With/In [Dis]ability***

Smith's (2013) edited volume, "Both Sides of the Table," presents a collection of autoethnographies from educators who experience disability personally and professionally. These narratives provide insights into the dual roles of teaching and learning within the context of disability, highlighting the unique challenges and opportunities faced by educators with disabilities (Smith, 2013). Svendby (2021) emphasizes the importance of critical reflection in disability awareness among lecturers. Her autoethnography invites educators to learn from their mistakes and improve their practices to better support disabled students, highlighting the value of reflective practice in promoting inclusive higher education settings (Svendby, 2021).

Connor and Ferri's (2013) "*How Teaching Shapes Our Thinking about Disabilities*" explored the impact of teaching on disability perceptions through autoethnographical memoirs by disabled educators / educators with disabilities. The last section of the book is dedicated to the experiences of educators with disabilities, providing a deeply personal and reflective look at how disability influences their teaching and perceptions. In "Education Is Power: But Only if You Can Get into the Building," April Coughlin (2013) explores the barriers faced by disabled individuals in accessing educational opportunities, highlighting the importance of physical and systemic accessibility. David Hernandez-Saca's "Recovering the Spirit" (2013) reflects on his journey of reclaiming his identity and spirit within the educational system, emphasizing the emotional and psychological aspects of living with disabilities. Saili Kulkarni's "Journey as a

Special Education Teacher of Color with Dis/abilities" (2013) discusses the intersectionality of race and disability, providing a unique perspective on the challenges faced by disabled special education teachers of color. Finally, Suzanna Stolz's "My Disabled Teacher Presence" (2013) offers insights into her experiences as a disabled educator, highlighting how her presence influences her teaching and interactions with students.

### *Meta-Ethnographic Systematic Review*

Gellini and Marczak's (2023) meta-ethnographic systematic review synthesizes qualitative research on the experiences of adults receiving an autism diagnosis. Their review identifies common themes such as relief, identity formation, and the challenges of navigating life post-diagnosis, providing valuable insights into the experiences of late-diagnosed individuals (Gellini & Marczak, 2023).

These studies collectively demonstrate the power of autoethnography in illuminating the nuanced experiences of individuals with disabilities. They highlight the critical intersections of identity, power, advocacy, and educational practices, offering valuable insights for fostering more inclusive and equitable environments. However, despite these contributions, there remain significant gaps in the literature. Specifically, there is a lack of comprehensive understanding of how multiple intersecting identities, such as race, gender, and disability, interact to shape the experiences of disabled individuals. Moreover, the existing research does not sufficiently address the systemic inequities and power dynamics that influence these experiences. This gap underscores the need for a large array of ethnographies and autoethnographies that not only explore the intersectionality of these identities but also critically examine the role of whiteness and other social factors in shaping the lived realities of disabled individuals. This study aims to lessen these gaps by providing a deeper, more nuanced exploration of these complex

intersections, thereby contributing to a more holistic understanding of disability and identity.

**Current Study**

Through a critical autoethnography, this study explores the intersectionality of disability and whiteness, seeking to uncover the complex and often overlooked experiences of individuals who navigate multiple identities, both marginalized and privileged. By focusing on the systemic inequities and power dynamics that shape these experiences, this approach not only enriches our understanding of disability and race but also challenges traditional paradigms in the study of disability. Intersectionality, CDS, and CWS provide a robust framework for examining how whiteness, disability, and other social factors intersect to affect the author's lived realities. This critical perspective paves the way for more inclusive and justice-oriented research and practice. This study is guided by the following research questions:

(1) What can be learned from the subjective personal perspective (autoethnographic research) of a disabled doctoral student's experience with regard to the field of special education?

(2) How did the discourse surrounding disability in special education courses shape the self-perception and identity development of a disabled doctoral student navigating the field for the first time?

(3) In what ways did the gaps in discussions on the lived experiences and perspectives of disabled individuals in special education courses contribute to a disabled doctoral student's personal understanding of disability?

(4) How did the rejection of attempts to shift the special education discourse to a more disability-affirming approach impact a disabled doctoral student's perception of the field of special education?

## My Journey in Special Education: A Personal Analysis

Through the lens of intersectionality, CDS, and CWS, this critical autoethnography analyzes the challenges and insights that have emerged from my journey as a disabled special education doctoral student, highlighting the intersections of my own identity and the broader systemic issues within the field of special education, within academia, and within society that are at play. This autoethnographic analysis aims to contribute to the discourse on disability and education, providing a nuanced understanding of the lived realities of disabled scholars. As the participant in autoethnographic research is the researcher, this situates Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval in an unfamiliar position. After consulting with personnel at my university's IRB office, IRB approval was obtained under the exempt status.

### Disability & Special Education: Who am I to Contribute?

Near the beginning of my time as a doctoral student in the special education program at Michigan State University (MSU), a public land grant/grab[4] institution in the Midwest, a professor asked a question to our class that both led me to reflect on my own response to the question while also paying closer attention to the ways in which others respond. The question was only two words: *why me?* Essentially, this professor was asking the class to reflect on why we [researchers] should be the ones doing the research we are doing. This question originated from what Patel (2015) considers the three core questions: *why me? why this? why now?* Patel notes that answers to *why me?* commonly include claims of exceptionality and how a researcher is trying to help a group or community they are not personally a part of. In other words, they are outsiders doing research *about* or *for* another group. The aim of this question, however, is to encourage researchers to take a step back and critically think about whether they are the

[4] See https://www.landgrabu.org/universities/michigan-state-university

appropriate person to "craft, contribute and even question knowledges" (Patel, 2015, p. 58).

In reflecting on my *why me?,* I think about my own experiences and why I believe I can contribute new knowledge. To answer *why I* should research the intersection between disability studies and special education, I chose to conduct this critical autoethnography. I chose the critical framework because an uncritical autoethnography misses larger cultural issues that exist in the pursuit of objective experiences (Boylorn & Orbe, 2021). Boylorn & Orbe (2021) explain that a critical lens creates space for discussion on the inevitable privileges and marginalizations that exist. I used that lens within special education to examine reflexively through subjective lenses. Through this critical lens, I am putting direct, purposeful attention towards the power imbalances at play that both are embedded in and perpetuated by the white, able-bodied culture of academia and, in particular, special education programs (Connor et al., 2019).

**My Why Me?**

As I research the crossroads of disability studies and special education, my *why me?* revolves around the saying "*nothing about us without us"* (Charlton, 1989). My entrance into this intersection of topics is one to which I feel can bring a unique perspective. I have grown up around many people who are disabled, having been raised around family members who are bipolar, blind, have anxiety, cerebral palsy, depression, and likely additional disabilities of which I am not explicitly aware. For the first six years of my time in higher education (undergraduate and master's degree studies), I unquestionably thought of myself as an able-bodied student who was pursuing degrees to "help" disabled children. To achieve that goal, I first studied psychology and obtained an undergraduate degree in behavioral science with extensive coursework and hands on experiences with autistic children and their families. I then attended a two-year master's degree program, studying behavior analysis with a focus on autism and organizational

behavior management and ultimately achieving certification as a board certified behavior analyst. At no point during those six years of education do I remember participating in or hearing discussion related to the culture of disability nor the savioristic traits that hide under the guise of "helping" (Thorius, 2019).

In 2019, I enrolled in a special education doctoral program. After starting my doctoral studies, I was also engaging with psychiatrists and therapists in an attempt to determine why I felt my own brain seemed to be so different from others. Through this diagnostic process, I was ignored, misdiagnosed, and then finally believed that I had ADHD and subsequently Autism, which together are referred to as AuDHD. When I first sought these diagnoses, I felt completely written off by my psychiatrist, highlighting the broader systemic issue of how medical professionals often dismiss or misdiagnose individuals, especially those who do not fit the stereotypical presentations of certain conditions (Kelley er al., 2020). Within autism specifically, terms like "lost girls" and "hidden in plain sight" have been used to describe the women (and those assigned female at birth) who were never diagnosed, misdiagnosed, or diagnosed significantly later in life (Goldblum, 2021; Mandavilli, 2015). Together, this underscores the need for a more inclusive and understanding medical system that considers the diverse presentations of disabilities.

Despite the struggles I experienced with the medical providers, I also recognize that my whiteness afforded me certain advantages during this process. For instance, my race likely influenced how my persistence was perceived by medical professionals. While women and non-binary individuals often face skepticism, my whiteness may have softened some of the biases, allowing my concerns to be taken more seriously over time compared to BIPOC individuals who might face even greater dismissiveness. This aligns with findings that whiteness can provide

certain privileges in navigating medical systems, where white patients are more likely to receive thorough evaluations and compassionate care (Applebaum, 2016).

When I first sought help, I wondered if I had ADHD. The psychiatrist stated that since I had gotten this far in school, there was "absolutely no way" that I had any disability let alone a "disability that makes progressing through school significantly harder." After that conversation, I told that same doctor a story of me being mildly frustrated which led to his conclusion that I must be bipolar after. Without taking any assessments, any extensive family history data, nor interviewing any of my family, I was prescribed mood stabilizers and sent on my way. When I was prescribed these medications, I voiced hesitancy with the doctor and asked him what effects the medication would have on someone who is not bipolar; I was cursorily told that the medication will not have any impacts on my mood if it does not need stabilizing. Looking back, I have so much skepticism about the validity of his statement. Considering how women's moods have constantly been pathologized in the medical system (Maturo, 2010), I would find it plausible that mood-stabilizing medication could still impact those who are not bipolar (Artiach Hortelano et al., 2023).

After a few months of check-ins, during which I continuously explained that I was still struggling significantly with my schoolwork, having trouble with my short-term memory, and feeling exhausted by having to essentially bribe and trick myself into working, the doctor raised the potential of my having ADHD-- acting as though this was never discussed before. The doctor wrote me a prescription for a stimulant and ended the appointment; again, without any assessments or interviews or discussion on ending the mood stabilizing medication. This experience reflects the broader issue of how medical systems often fail to properly assess and diagnose individuals, particularly when they present in ways that are not immediately obvious

(Kelley et al., 2020; McLeod, 2023). It also highlights the need for more thorough and empathetic approaches to medical diagnoses (Guidi & Traversa, 2021).

The path to finally having a doctor believe I was ADHD was exhausting. The extent to which this doctor dismissed every concern I had and shut down any input I provided through assessments I had taken on my own time and brought to the very first appointment was disheartening. People may think that you go to the doctor so they can figure out what is wrong; but my experience, along with a large collection of non-male and non-white peoples' experiences, demonstrates that to get the help you are seeking, you have to do a lot of footwork educating yourself to figure out what you have and then try to convince your doctor that you are not making up your symptoms (FitzGerald & Hurst, 2017). Yet, my whiteness also played a role in this dynamic. Being white likely contributed to my ability to eventually be heard and receive the ADHD diagnosis, as studies have shown that white patients are often given more credibility and attentiveness by healthcare providers (Applebaum, 2016). This intersection of privilege and marginalization highlights the complexity of navigating the medical system as a white, disabled, queer, nonbinary person. While I faced significant challenges, my race provided an underlying layer of privilege that influenced my overall journey through the medical system (Applebaum, 2016).

Immediately after I began taking ADHD medication, I noticed a change. I honestly wondered if this was what other people's brains were always like—so calm. Everything seemed to be improving. After many attempts at describing how stimulant medication feels to me to people who mostly think of it as a drug for students to get work done, I have come to understand my own experience through an analogy of a barn. I tell people to imagine sitting in an empty barn. This barn is old and has many holes in its roof, and it is a bright sunny day. No matter

where you are in the barn, there are multiple beams of sunlight that are hitting you right in the face, not allowing you to be able to focus on any one thing. Those beams of light are every distraction; a noise in the distance, something that needs to be put away, your phone dinging, any other task than the one at hand trying to pull your attention away, blinding you. Taking stimulant medication would mean tarping the roof with clear plastic. The tarp disperses the light so there are no more direct beams but since it is clear, the barn is still illuminated from the sun. While I am still aware of all of the distractions in my environment, those distractions are no longer glaringly distracting to me.

Through my many attempts at explaining this to people, I have noticed that there is a common jump to assumption when I begin to explain covering the hole that they expect me to explain covering the holes completely. People are confused when I do not go in the direction they were anticipating. I explain that to cover the holes completely, blocking out all light into the barn would be hyperfocus, an experience where nothing other than the task at hand exists, including time. While hyperfocus may sound like an academic's dream—being able to work uninterrupted for hours on end—I explain that it is often misconstrued and romanticized. People see the work accomplished but not the neglect of other responsibilities-- isolation, difficulty with transitions, negative impacts on mental health like anxiety and perfectionism, the inability to control what the hyperfocus is on, and the exhaustion and burnout that comes as a result of hyperfocus. As I continue having these conversations, I have learned better ways to describe my experiences but what has remained the same is a very fundamental misunderstanding of attention regulation difficulties.

After a while of taking the medication, though, I started to notice I was getting (what at the time I thought was) overwhelmed so much sooner and easier than before. Very common

events, like having conversations, writing emails, and navigating new spaces, gradually brought me more anxiety regarding how I should be acting and if what I was doing was "right" or the "correct things." I also seemed to be caught in moments where I was both seeking sensory input while also feeling sensory overloaded and I noticed I was much more aware of the noises and textures every minute of the day.

As I continued to seek out information about ADHD, I kept coming across ADHD + autism content and noticed that a lot of the symptomology and experiences were matching up to my own experiences. It seemed like as my brain was able to slow down, I became much more aware of the experiences my body was having. I came to find out that it is common for the treatment of ADHD to actually bring autistic symptoms to the surface (Rong et al., 2021). For people who are AuDHD, the ADHD symptoms are more likely to be noticed first. Once those symptoms are accommodated for through means like medications or changes in the environment, less noticeable symptoms start to become more apparent, like sensory issues (Rong et al., 2021). Before, I simply thought I would notice sounds as something to pull my attention away, then through conversations about my experiences, I noticed that the sounds that pull my attention away are ones that are rarely even noticed by others, let alone distracting, like the vents blowing air, the electric buzz of lightbulbs and refrigerators, and any creaking or rattling that buildings tend to have. Certain textures, like sherpa fabric, became nearly intolerable and other textures, like waffle-knit, became highly sought after.

It bothers me that even though people are statistically more likely to be AuDHD than singularly ADHD or autistic (Rong et al., 2021), the possibility of me being autistic was never explored by my psychiatrist and after the pushback he gave me about not believing I could have ADHD, I honestly was too afraid to bring it up to him. Sometime later, that doctor abruptly

dropped me as a patient. Initially, no reason was given but after multiple attempts at determining why, he stated that he does not prescribe patients medications for more than two years, something that was never communicated to me. When I asked for a written copy of his reasoning for my records, he stated, "no, I do not do that. I am telling you verbally." This has baffled every doctor I have told this story to, and every doctor has communicated to me that this was no fault of my own. I have since found a new doctor who has been immensely helpful in navigating my AuDHD world.

**My PhD Journey**

Initially, the timing of entering a special education doctoral program and discovering I am AuDHD seemed encouraging, as I was set to take a variety of special education courses and I thought they could help me understand and describe my new identities. I came to realize, however, that the overall demeanor and tone surrounding disability in my special education courses were generally infantilizing and embedded with a significant amount of saviorism without any discussion about the concept(s) and culture(s) of disability. Such approach to teaching special education in doctoral programs is common throughout the field (Thorius, 2019).

Recognizing that my courses lacked a comprehensive exploration of disability culture and identity, I turned to CDS and subsequently intersectionality and CWS to understand how these omissions reflect broader societal biases. CWS highlights how educational environments often perpetuate a white, ableist perspective that marginalizes diverse voices and experiences (Applebaum, 2016). But my whiteness provided me with certain affordances even as I navigated these challenges. For instance, my race likely influenced how my concerns were perceived and addressed by faculty and peers, offering me a level of credibility that might not have been extended to BIPOC students raising similar issues. This intersection of privilege and

marginalization shaped my experiences in complex ways.

Recognizing that my courses were not sufficient to help me learn about my disabled identity, I independently began to research and learn about the culture of disability that was not presented in my PhD-level courses. I began reading disability studies content. Through the disability studies literature, I gained an understanding of what disability is and that different views of disability exist outside a special education's deficit-based medical lens (Connor, 2019). Intersectionality provided a crucial framework for this exploration, revealing how the intersections of race, disability, and other identities shape experiences in complex ways (Crenshaw, 1991).

***My Experience as A Teaching Assistant***

As I was learning more about disability-affirming principles, I was also assigned as a teaching assistant (TA) for a variety of undergraduate special education classes. As a TA, I began voicing my desire to incorporate more disability affirming principles into the special education courses. For example, I made small attempts at making the class policies and content more disability-affirming. Using CWS, I began to critically examine how the language and policies within these courses often reinforced a white, ableist narrative that excluded other perspectives (Leonardo, 2004). All of my suggestions were met with hesitancy and a general concern regarding not changing anything to keep consistency across the program. For example, when I suggested that we take out the existing writing requirement that all assignments use person-first language (e.g., person with a disability) and leave it up to each student if they wanted to use person-first or identity-first language (e.g., disabled person), the response was "we will be leaving person-first language requirements in the syllabus for clarity this semester" citing "how we could make this a teachable moment for our students this semester as we are not in

agreement with only using identity-first language at this point in our program. There are other SE [special education] courses in our program that are also using this person-first language and we will make the changes as a united program when appropriate" (personal communication, 2021). This response illustrates how the program's resistance to change perpetuates outdated norms and practices, hindering progress towards a more equitable and inclusive educational environment (Applebaum, 2016; Yancy, 2017). It also reflects the entrenched nature of social constructions of disability (Applebaum, 2016; Yancy, 2017), as the program prioritized consistency over inclusivity. My whiteness also influenced these interactions. While my suggestions were met with resistance, the fact that I was able to voice these concerns and be taken seriously enough to warrant discussion reflects a level of privilege afforded by my race. BIPOC students might face greater obstacles in having their voices heard and their suggestions considered within such institutional settings (Park & Bahia, 2022).

An additional example is when I attempted to update language in a behavior management course. As I learned more about humanizing disability from books such as *Unmasking Autism: Discovering the New Faces of Neurodiversity* by Devon Price (2022), *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century* edited by Alice Wong (2020), and *Divergent Mind: Thriving in a World That Wasn't Designed for You* by Jenara Nerenberg (2020), I began to strongly question a very common term in special education – "problem behavior." In a course focusing on managing classroom behavior, I discussed with the instructor that I wished for a better term than problem behavior or challenging behavior, asking "*whose* problem is it? *who* is it challenging?" Behaviors described as problem behaviors are not problems for the student doing that behavior. For the student, it is more so a solution behavior and it is more so a problem to the teacher. This critical engagement reflects an intersectional analysis, questioning whose

perspectives are centered in educational practices and whose are marginalized (Crenshaw, 1991). After this conversation, the instructor seemed open to reframing problem behavior and decided to use "inefficient behavior" when discussing with the TAs. Unfortunately, while there was general agreement on the concerns of terminology, no course content was changed, and the terms problem and challenging behavior remained in use throughout the course.

***My Experience as An Instructor***

As I progressed through my doctoral program, I was eventually assigned to teach my own sections of the introduction to special education course as the instructor of record. When reviewing the materials provided to me to teach the course, I noticed a complete absence of discussion about disability identity. In the beginning of the semester, where I was hoping to find a section on the identity of being disabled and conversations about disability in our society, I found history sections detailing the origin of special education, positive narratives on the history of relevant court cases and laws, swiftly followed by class sessions about different types of disabilities and how to teach students with that particular disability. There was no content on topics like how to talk about disability, how disability is viewed in society, or the experiences of disabled people. This format for teaching an introductory course was not novel. The majority of undergraduate programs and special education textbooks are organized using this approach (Rapp & Arndt, 2012).

I felt it was critical to incorporate disability-affirming content, believing it is essential knowledge that should be taught to future special educators. I inquired about adding this content into the introduction to special education course. To my surprise, my inquiries were unanimously met with hesitation and the message that disability studies content does not belong in a special education course because disability studies is not special education. This resistance echoed the

experiences of disability studies scholars. Connor (2019) highlighted that attempts to integrate disability studies into special education have been met with systemic resistance, citing critiques of the social model of disability and the entrenched preference for scientific knowledge within special education. This ongoing tension demonstrates the systemic difficulties faced by those advocating for interdisciplinary approaches and the inclusion of disability studies within special education curricula. The textbook, *Teaching Everyone: An Introduction to Inclusive Education* was developed precisely because existing introductory textbooks lacked content on disability studies, highlighting a significant gap and the need for resources that bridge this divide (Rapp & Arndt, 2012).

Despite this pushback, I tried to find ways to share my own experiences within the class content and discussion throughout my first semester of teaching. I found that the only connections to the existing content were within my experience within school, not my personal journey. This absence of discussions surrounding disability identity within the curriculum highlights the need for recognition of the social constructions of race and ability (Leonardo, 2004). The more that I learned about disability on my own, the more I noticed unspoken and unchallenged theories, models, and frameworks that were present within the special education content. CWS helped me understand how these frameworks often perpetuate a white, ableist perspective that marginalizes disabled students, particularly students of color (Leonardo, 2004). The existing content made no room for discussion on what the identity of disability means, how there are multiple different ways to view disability, like medically and socially, and the ingrained limitations present when a framework is used but never acknowledged. I began to wonder how I was supposed to teach future special educators how to work with disabled students while not including any content or discussion about what *disability* is beyond a single person in a

classroom.

As I continued to be assigned to teach the introduction to special education class throughout each semester of my doctoral program, I decided to use the opportunity to put a significant amount of intentional effort into moving discussion from deficit-driven discourses to disability-affirming. These initial changes were positively received by my students, as evidenced in one student's feedback about what could be done to improve the course, they stated,

> Create a better mix of both definitions and academic knowledge about special education and students/people with disabilities and personal experiences and what life is actually like. I felt as though I didn't really hear a lot of personal experiences until we got to the book report; the class was mainly focused on the definitions and the textbook. In my future career, I will always be able to look up a definition and science behind something, but I won't know what to specifically look for in students or be knowledgeable of someone's experiences and lives with certain disabilities if I do not learn what to look for and what they experience.

Although I had to meet all the class content requirements, I was encouraged by that student's feedback to continue to make adjustments. Every new semester I adjusted the balance of academic knowledge and personal experiences of both disabled students and my personal experiences. I added an additional question to my end of semester survey asking students about their perception of me discussing my own disabilities in class. Overall, students reported it having a positive impact. One student stated, "I thought her personal statements were powerful. I feel like too often people paint disability as something that is a far-fetched idea and not something they have to consider if they do not identify with any disability. To see someone with authority be vulnerable about their disability status really opened eyes to the fact that disability is

not always the extreme cases and that it takes many different forms." Another student stated, "I believe it did impact me for the better. As a person with a learning disability myself, I believe that sharing your story about what you experience with disability is important, and personal experiences help me learn better than a textbook."

I also felt it was important to point out to my students the different schools of thought. Within my first class every semester, I gave what I call my Chapter 0 Lecture. Aside from the regular syllabus walk through, I had a whole class dedicated to talking about the concept of disability. Within this lecture, I discussed the different models of disability, how the field of special education was born out of the medical model and it is how the entire field navigates disability within all their education classes, what person-first and identity-first language are, and how person-first is highly preferred by non-disabled people and required in a lot of their classes whereas identity-first is largely preferred by disabled people yet commonly not allowed in academic spaces (Sharif et al., 2022). We talked about equity versus equality, ableism, and how throughout the whole semester, we would be navigating both the medically deficit-oriented approach that is ingrained within the teaching of special education and how I would be adding in my own experiences, more critical discussions, and disabled voices into our classes, emphasizing that the two perspectives— the textbook and my additional content—tend to be in conflict and antithetical to one another.

By integrating discussions on the social constructions of disability and the material about ableism, I sought to foster a more inclusive and affirming understanding of disability among students. This approach has been advocated for by many scholars, who emphasize the importance of incorporating disability studies into special education to challenge traditional deficit-based perspectives and promote social justice (Baglieri et al., 2011; Goodley, 2016; Ware,

2011). The incorporation of critical disability studies perspectives helps future educators understand the societal and cultural constructs of disability, moving beyond merely medicalized views and fostering an environment that respects and uplifts disabled voices (Naraian, 2021; Taylor, 2006). By creating a curriculum that acknowledges these diverse perspectives, I aimed to prepare my students to become more empathetic and effective educators, capable of advocating for the rights and inclusion of disabled individuals in various educational settings.

The largest course change I made was creating an entirely new course project and removing an existing project. When I was first assigned the introductory special education course, there was a project that involved the students interviewing a special or general education teacher. As the impacts of COVID were present in schools, I felt guilt at the idea of sending a total of roughly 50 students to require unpaid labor from the already overworked and underpaid teachers in the K-12 system (Diliberti et al., 2021; Steiner et al., 2023). I took this as an opportunity to incorporate disabled voices into the course, as there was a complete absence of assigned readings written by disabled authors throughout the existing course syllabus. After confirming that no course requirements would be impacted, I replaced the interview project with a book report project I created. The book I selected was *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century* edited by Alice Wong (2020). The purpose of this project was to add intersectional disabled voices into the course. This approach aligns with intersectionality, emphasizing the importance of incorporating diverse voices and perspectives to challenge the dominant narratives in education (Crenshaw, 1991). Largely the demographics of the students within my courses were white, able-bodied (or potentially non-disclosed disabled), women, reflecting the teaching profession overall, with 77% of teachers being white women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023) and an estimated 94.6% of teachers being able-

bodied (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). This book report sought to bring a different perspective to diversity in disability. Instead of a textbook that had cultural and racial considerations either in a standalone chapter or a small section at the end of a chapter, the intersectionality of race and disability, along with other identities were the forefront of *Disability Visibility*.

This book report has now been assigned in every section I have taught for the introduction to special education course, and over the years has even become used by other section instructors. We discuss the book as a class on the last class session of the semester. Each semester I feel like the student discussion gets richer. A common response has been shared by every class; confusion as to why this content was not already present in a course about special education. Every semester, I assign students to complete an anonymous course feedback survey, much more detailed than the university-provided surveys. My survey asks for detailed feedback on all aspects of the course. This book report has consistently been rated as "very" to "extremely" useful. Additionally, open-ended responses have included "I thought Disability Visibility was a good choice" and "I really liked hearing her experience, the class discussions, and the book report."

Many of the additions I had added to the class were done so independently. My whiteness played a significant role in my ability to make these changes. Being white allowed me to feel I could address these concerns without the additional layer of racial bias that BIPOC colleagues might face. This privilege afforded me the space to push for disability-affirming content and challenge existing norms, even when met with resistance. Yet, because of the previous resistance I had gotten on every other experience, I felt that if I were to ask for permission, I would be told no. This feeling was confirmed after by a faculty supervisor who provided feedback after

observing a class of mine. The class session that was being observed was the autism chapter within the introduction to special education course. I taught the class session with a focus on teaching about what autism is from the perspective of an autistic person, taking a non-deficit view, and discussing how the textbook and common autism stereotypes may misrepresent what autism is. After the observation, the faculty member praised the content and the level of student engagement while also continually questioning where the line was between disability studies and special education. Thus, although the faculty member was open to incorporating *some* disability studies content, the faculty expressed the opinion that there was a limit. This reluctance to integrate disability studies content reflects a broader reluctance of the field of special education to incorporate disabilities studies (Connor, 2019), as well as the reluctance to challenge the dominant white, ableist perspectives entrenched in the educational system (Applebaum, 2016). Any attempts to emphasize that an interdisciplinary approach could be beneficial were met with confirmation that the fields are in fact two separate fields. Within a roughly 30-minute conversation after class, the hypothetical question of "but where is the line" was repeated over and over and over, seemingly within every bit of positive feedback I was provided.

Despite the turbulence and resistance I encountered, the changes I made to my courses and my disability-affirming teaching approach were ultimately recognized and celebrated at both the college and university levels. My dedication to integrating disability-affirming content and discussions in the classroom did not go unnoticed. I was honored with the Michigan State University Excellence-In-Teaching Citation, which acknowledged my impactful teaching methods. Additionally, I received the College of Education Distinguished Graduate Student Award in Justice and Equity Pedagogy, highlighting my commitment to promoting social justice and equity within education. These accolades affirmed the importance and effectiveness of

incorporating disability studies into special education, demonstrating that efforts to challenge traditional perspectives and advocate for a more inclusive curriculum can lead to meaningful recognition and change.

## Reflections and Critical Analysis

### Navigating Disability Through Personal Struggles, Societal Norms, and Critical Reflections on The Special Education System

Societal attitudes and stereotypes about disabilities significantly impacted my perception and acceptance of my own condition. Despite being self-immersed in disability content, the prevailing medical and deficit models shaped my internalized belief that disability equated to being lesser. This internal conflict intensified as I grappled with the discrepancies between my own presentation and stereotypical notions of autism and ADHD. Dually existing within the intersecting identities of white and disabled compounded the internalized stigma I felt (Erevelles & Minear, 2010). I noticed that every time I questioned if something I was doing was connected to either autism or ADHD, a fear of being perceived as seeking attention would creep up and cause me to doubt myself. I can remember being in my home, alone, past the point of overwhelmed sitting on the floor in my kitchen doing nothing for over an hour. During that entire time, something in my brain was telling me I was doing this for attention, despite the fact that I lived alone and had no intention of telling anyone. Even as I reflect on this now, as there is now an audience for this story, I can feel the ever-present voice nagging as if I am doing something for attention.

My struggles contributed to my growing awareness of the unique experiences related to disability. The special education coursework I had studied largely centered around disabled

children, leaving me to navigate this new territory with a later-in-life diagnosis on my own[5]. Stagg and Belcher (2019) discuss the challenges faced by those not identified as disabled in childhood, highlighting the skepticism around later diagnoses and the necessity for self-reflection in understanding one's experiences through a new lens. The process demanded extensive self-reflection, reliving past experiences through a new lens, and critical questioning of the accuracy of my memories. This skepticism is often compounded for individuals from marginalized racial backgrounds, as Crenshaw (1991) and Gillborn (2015) emphasize, noting how the intersection of race and disability can exacerbate disbelief and biases faced in both educational and medical settings. It led me to question prevailing knowledge about disability, especially the skepticism around later diagnoses, and the challenges faced by those not identified as disabled in childhood (Stagg & Belcher, 2019).

Reflecting on the emotional journey is like navigating a rollercoaster of confusion, anger, clarity, and disbelief. It was not just about battling my own doubts; it involved facing skepticism from medical professionals. Learning to stand up for my experiences despite professional skepticism required a significant boost in self-confidence. Though not a constant companion, high self-confidence became a crucial tool during my doctoral program as well. Acceptance involved a delicate dance with feelings of inadequacy, especially in academia, where asking for support felt like raising a red flag over my capabilities. CWS highlights how academic environments often perpetuate whiteness as a norm, which can marginalize the experiences and needs of non-white disabled scholars (Applebaum, 2016). However, my whiteness provided certain affordances that made this process slightly more navigable. My race likely influenced

[5] Scholarship exists on later-in-life diagnoses, they are just not present within the realm of special education as the focus is on pre-k through 12th grade and on school services, not disability identity.

how my requests for support were perceived, possibly granting me more leniency and understanding from faculty compared to my BIPOC peers. This process led me to question my abilities as a student and academic, driven by my internalized ableism. I was afraid of being perceived as incapable of handling the job, due to needing support, which added an extra layer of complexity to the journey. CWS helps explain these added layer of complexities I faced, where my requests for support were not only about disability but also intersected with racial dynamics within the institution (Yancy, 2017). In other words, the challenges I encountered were not solely about disability but were compounded by the racialized structures that influence perceptions and responses to requests for accommodations. In my case, these structures could have manifested in the higher expectations placed on me as a white student. There was an underlying assumption that my struggles were due to personal inadequacies rather than genuine disabilities, which made it harder for me to seek and receive support. This dynamic underscores the complexity of navigating academia as a white, disabled individual, where the intersections of privilege and marginalization uniquely shape the experience.

Navigating the realization of my disabilities came with a host of external obstacles as well, including societal norms and institutional barriers. Society's limited understanding of ADHD and autism, coupled with the associated stigma, created a challenging environment. Even within a special education doctoral program, discussions about disability often reflected broader societal biases and discomfort with addressing these issues intersectionally (Garland-Thomson, 2017). Garland-Thomson (2017) highlights how societal and institutional biases can create additional barriers for disabled individuals, especially when intersecting with other marginalized identities. The intersection of race and disability can further silence individuals, as the fear of being “othered” within an already marginalized group becomes more pronounced (Collins &

Bilge, 2016). Collins and Bilge (2016) emphasize how intersectionality can exacerbate the marginalization experienced by individuals with multiple minority identities. Even within a special education doctoral program, discussions about disability were uncomfortable from an outsider perspective, limiting open dialogue. I felt that if general conversations surrounding disability were very 'othering,' I would be othered too if I spoke up.

Internally, overcoming deep-rooted internalized ableism proved to be a formidable challenge. Despite being well-versed in disability knowledge through academic courses, placing myself within that narrative and believing in my struggles required a paradigm shift. The common student complaints about stress further complicated my internal struggles, making it hard to differentiate my self-othering experiences from typical academic stress. Intersectionality provided a crucial lens to understand that my experiences were not isolated incidents but part of a broader pattern of intersecting oppressions that affected my academic journey (Crenshaw, 1991). This understanding was essential in reframing my narrative and advocating for more inclusive practices within the institution (Leonardo, 2004). Leonardo (2004) supports the notion that understanding and addressing intersecting oppressions are vital for creating inclusive academic environments.

Voicing concerns or disagreements was met with the perception that I lacked understanding, adding an extra layer of societal expectations to navigate. During multiple classes, I felt that when I asked questions, the general demeanor of faculty responses was assumed incompetence. I particularly recall a course that discussed statistical data within special education. Within this class, I expressed to the instructor that I was really struggling wrapping my head around the idea that conclusions could be reached through large statistical measures particularly within special education—as those who receive special education services are

already data outliers within the distribution of the entire school and there are so many different types of disabilities like physical and cognitive—how are there statistical measures that account for the huge degree of variability. I remember extensively trying to explain how functionally I understood statistics and trying to communicate that the question was not rooted in me being incompetent but the answer that was given to me by the faculty roughly translated to me as "I do not understand statistics." This response illustrates how academic environments can reinforce power dynamics that marginalize those who question prevailing norms, particularly when these challenges come from individuals with intersecting marginalized identities (Leonardo, 2004). For a class surrounding critical issues in special education, I found that critical thinking about special education was not encouraged and to a certain extent, discouraged.

My experiences within my Ph.D. program highlighted the societal expectations ingrained in the field of special education. Parallels can be seen within the phrase "white as right" and special education's unnamed pursuit of "able-bodied as right". The phrase "white as right" calls attention to the standard or goal being whiteness, the "goal" is proximity to whiteness. Similarly, within special education, much of the content focuses on identifying how a student is not matching the able-bodied standard (Siuty et al., 2024). The dichotomy of disabled to non-disabled is also demonstrated within the discussion of student and teacher. The hierarchy of the disabled child and able-bodied (or non-disclosed disabled) teacher molded the program, making any challenge to this perception akin to questioning the entire field. The term white saviorism has been a common topic within urban education but the intersection of ability has seemingly been absent from this discussion (Siuty et al., 2024). To address this, Siuty and colleagues conceptualized "white-ability saviorism" to deepen the understanding of how whiteness and ability have an unspoken standard within education (Siuty et al., 2024)

### *Unique Intersectionality of Identity and Experiences*

Being a white, queer, disabled person presented a unique intersectionality. While my whiteness gave me certain affordances, such as easy access to health care and the medical system, the privilege of being white collided with challenges I experienced as a feminine-presenting, queer individual (Salinas et al., 2022). According to Salinas et al. (2022), the intersection of race and gender identity can create compounded challenges in healthcare, with biases influencing medical professionals' perceptions. Despite meticulous preparation for medical appointments, my experiences as a feminine-presenting person were often met with disbelief, gaslighting, and misdiagnosis. These experiences reflect the findings of Fattoracci et al. (2021), who highlight how intersectional microaggressions affect marginalized individuals, particularly in healthcare settings. This intersectionality added layers to the experience of realizing disability as societal expectations and biases intertwined with both race and gender presentation. It raised questions about the validity of my experiences and the impact of societal attitudes on healthcare interactions.

My experiences with the medical field were not unique; when the medical field is analyzed, bias has been documented throughout. The origins of Western medicine involved the exploitation and abuse of non-white people, including unethical experimentation on enslaved African Americans by Dr. J. Marion Sims and the denial of traditional healing practices to Indigenous peoples (Washington, 2006; Smith, 2005). Marginalized groups were often used as research subjects without consent, advancing medical knowledge at their expense as Skloot (2010) details. These practices were justified by racist ideologies, perpetuating mistrust and health disparities that persist today (Wailoo, 2011). Bias continues to impact modern medicine, with studies showing that patients' perceptions of doctors are influenced by the race and gender

of the physician, often rating Black and female doctors lower than their white male counterparts (Champagne-Langabeer, & Hedges, 2021). Medical research has historically focused on straight white males, neglecting the health needs of women, BIPOC, and LGBTQIA+ communities, resulting in misdiagnosis and ineffective treatments (Casanova-Perez et al., 2021). BIPOC patients frequently receive lower quality care, and LGBTQIA+ individuals face discrimination in healthcare settings, leading to disparities in access and outcomes (Casanova-Perez et al., 2021; Kcomt et al., 2020).

Similarly, my journey through the doctoral program has been marked by the complexities of navigating identity and advocacy within an ableist system. Throughout the majority of my doctoral program, I chose not to disclose my disability status. I also still have partially kept that status from my family. Recently, however, I have started to gain my voice specifically in academic settings, through disability advocacy; as I became more vocal calling out ableist notions and ideas, I also became more comfortable sharing my own disability identity. As I continued to advocate, I began to discuss my personal experiences within that advocacy. At the same time, I still have not formally registered with the Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities or requested academic accommodations. Formally disclosing my disability status to the university feels like an insurmountable and stigmatizing task for what I perceive will provide minimal benefit. I also continue to struggle with my own personal battles with impostor syndrome and internalized ableism, which prevent me from formally disclosing.

The societal attitudes and stereotypes that shaped my journey as a disabled Ph.D. student vividly illustrate the complex interplay of privilege and marginalization. Intersectionality reveals how multiple facets of my identity—race, gender expression, disability, and sexuality—interact within broader societal structures to shape my experiences (Crenshaw, 1991). CWS further

highlights how these experiences are influenced by the societal privileging of whiteness and able-bodiedness (Applebaum, 2016). As a white individual, I navigated the healthcare system with certain inherent advantages. However, my queer, nonbinary, and feminine-presenting identity often intersected with these privileges, revealing deep-seated biases and systemic challenges. As a white, disabled, queer, feminine-presenting individual, my whiteness conferred certain privileges such as easier access to certain resources, opportunities, and social acceptance compared to non-white individuals (Park & Bahia, 2022). However, this was limited to that aspect alone. My experiences of disbelief, gaslighting, and misdiagnosis reflect the societal tendency to prioritize and validate the perspectives of white able-bodied men while marginalizing those who do not fit these norms (Erevelles & Minear, 2010).

In the academic environment, the rigid dichotomy between the disabled student and the able-bodied (or non-disclosed disabled) faculty member perpetuated a narrow and exclusionary view of disability. My efforts to question and challenge this perspective were often dismissed, reinforcing the notion that my concerns were rooted in a lack of understanding rather than legitimate critique. This response illustrates how academic environments can reinforce power dynamics that marginalize those who question prevailing norms, particularly when these challenges come from individuals with intersecting marginalized identities (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Moreover, my internal struggle with accepting my disability, exacerbated by societal stereotypes and medical models, highlights the pervasive influence of whiteness and ability as property. My fear of being perceived as lesser underscores an internalized belief that disability equates to being lesser. This belief is deeply rooted in societal constructs that privilege able-bodiedness and whiteness, reinforcing the idea that deviations from these norms are inherently undesirable (Yancy, 2017).

The intersectionality of my identity as a white, disabled, queer, nonbinary individual navigating both academic and medical systems reveals the complexities of privilege and marginalization. While my whiteness afforded certain advantages, my queer, disabled, and nonbinary identity intersected with these privileges, often leading to additional challenges. This dynamic underscores the importance of recognizing how whiteness and ability as property influence the experiences of disabled individuals (Garland-Thomson, 2017). It also highlights the need for a more inclusive and justice-oriented approach to disability research and practice, acknowledging the diverse and intersecting identities that shape these experiences.

### *Critical Analysis of Existing Special Education Systems and Structures*

The historical trajectory of special education reflects a transformative journey marked by evolving policies and practices. The roots of special education can be traced back to the mid-20th century with the establishment of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975, later reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990. These legislative milestones aimed to provide equal educational opportunities for disabled students, emphasizing the importance of inclusive education. Despite these advancements, the field of special education has been deeply intertwined with systemic racism, which continues to influence its structures and practices (Annamma et al., 2016).

The evolution of special education policies also reveals a complex interplay of societal attitudes towards disability (Bolt, 2014; Osgood, 2007; Stiker, 2019). Historically, individuals with disabilities were often marginalized, and their education was neglected or segregated. The advent of special education legislation sought to rectify these disparities, but the journey towards inclusive and equitable education is ongoing. The history of special education is also marked by discriminatory bias that disproportionately affected non-white students, contributing to bias in

disability identification (Perry, 2022), type of disability (Fish, 2019), and the overrepresentation of non-white students in special education programs and underrepresentation in gifted programs (Barbieri & Ferede, 2020).

In the past, disability was often viewed through a medical model, which pathologized and isolated individuals based on their impairments (Retief & Letšosa, 2018). This perspective reinforced stigmas and contributed to the segregation of disabled individuals from mainstream education. Shifting towards a social model of disability, the contemporary discourse challenges these historical perspectives by emphasizing the role of societal barriers in disabling individuals (Retief & Letšosa, 2018). This critical analysis underscores the need for continuous advocacy and policy reform to eradicate ableism, fostering a more inclusive and supportive educational environment. Additionally, the shift to the social model highlights the need to address the intersectionality of disability and race, recognizing that disabled non-white students face compounded disadvantages due to systemic racism (Oliver, 2013).

While progress has been made in the realm of special education, critical analysis reveals persistent systemic issues within existing structures (Ebersold & Meijer, 2016; Morgan, 2020). One of the challenges lies in the identification and placement of students with disabilities. Disproportionate representation in special education programs, particularly among minority students, raises concerns about over-reliance on subjective assessments and the potential for systemic biases (Thorius, 2019). Additionally, the inadequacy of resources and support within special education systems poses a significant barrier to the implementation of inclusive education (Ebersold & Meijer, 2016). The shortage of trained professionals, limited access to assistive technologies, and disparities in funding contribute to an uneven educational landscape for disabled students. Moreover, historical and ongoing inequities in funding and resources continue

to affect schools serving predominantly minority communities, exacerbating the challenges faced by disabled students in these settings (Barbieri & Ferede, 2020).

**The Impact of Ableism in Educational Institutions.** Ableism, or discrimination against individuals with disabilities, has a profound impact on educational institutions. This bias manifests in various forms; even the title "special education" can be seen as problematic because it inherently implies a separation from the norm, which can perpetuate stigma and discrimination against disabled students. This terminology suggests that the education these students receive is fundamentally different and somehow less integrated into the standard educational system. In reality, what is often termed as “special education” is merely a necessary adaptation of the curriculum to meet the diverse needs of all students, ensuring equitable access to learning opportunities. Labeling it as "special" can reinforce the notion that disabled students are an exception rather than a part of the educational community, fostering a sense of exclusion and otherness. Research indicates that inclusive education, where students of all abilities learn together, benefits all students by promoting diversity, understanding, and acceptance (Hehir, 2005; Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013). The focus should be on inclusive practices that accommodate all learners rather than segregating them under the guise of special education.

Ableist bias also includes negative stereotypes, lack of accessibility, and discriminatory practices. Furthermore, ableism can manifest in the attitudes and perceptions of educators, potentially influencing instructional approaches and interactions with students (Friedman & Owen, 2017; Kabe et al., 2021). A critical examination of existing structures is essential to dismantle ableist practices and foster an inclusive educational environment that values the diverse abilities and strengths of all learners.

**Examining My Academic Experiences through the Lens of Disability and Intersectionality**

Discovering my disability at the onset of my Ph.D. program presented a formidable challenge marked by internal skepticism and hesitancy to seek support. The prevailing notion that doctoral candidates should navigate their academic journey independently contributed to self-doubt and reluctance to reach out for assistance. The realization that seeking support was a sign of inadequacy was a pervasive belief made the initial stages of my Ph.D. journey emotionally taxing. This mirrors the experiences detailed by Hernández-Saca (2013), who emphasized the internal conflict and fear of judgment that often accompany students with disabilities when seeking help in academic settings. Additionally, as Morella (2008) discusses, the stigma associated with non-visible disabilities can exacerbate feelings of isolation and reluctance to seek necessary support.

The power dynamics embedded in academic relationships unfolded as a nuanced dance between disclosure and concealment. The decision to disclose a disability, particularly one not visibly apparent, became a strategic choice shaped by the fear of judgment or altered perceptions. Within the program, I felt an undercurrent of ableism persisted, even in a field focused on supporting disabled students. The perception that disability equated to a predetermined set of characteristics clashed with the reality of invisible disabilities, leading to an often-heard internal ableist feeling, "you don't *look* disabled?" Similar to Morella (2008), who explored the challenges of navigating non-visible disabilities in academic settings, I found that the lack of understanding and visibility of such disabilities often exacerbated feelings of isolation and invalidation. The absence of faculty openly discussing their disabilities further reinforced the notion that certain identities fit the mold of disability more comfortably than others.

Power imbalances manifested when interacting with non-disabled peers and faculty. The

need to build walls for self-protection against unintentional yet dismissive comments was a constant, revealing an environment where certain perspectives were not fully understood or acknowledged. This mirrors the experiences detailed by Hernández-Saca (2013), who highlighted the ongoing struggle to assert one's identity in the face of ableist attitudes within educational environments. The dichotomy of being a seemingly able-bodied student in a program dedicated to disability awareness created a paradox that necessitated careful negotiation.

### *Dynamics within Academic Relationships*

The revelation and navigation of my disability have profoundly shaped my approach to interpersonal dynamics within academia. Until recently, I chose to keep my disability identity closely guarded, gradually finding the courage to share this aspect with my students, peers, classmates, and, ultimately, faculty. Sharing my disability status was, and continues to be, an incremental process. First, I shared with my students in an introduction to special education course. The power dynamic in this setting, where students lack authority over my grades or recommendations, made the disclosure feel more manageable. This experience parallels the narrative by Kulkarni (2013), who described similar strategic disclosures within the academic setting to manage power dynamics and protect oneself from potential prejudice. However, with faculty and non-disabled peers, especially those outside the special education department, I continued to feel vulnerable.

In one of the last courses I took as a doctoral student, I only revealed my disability status in the final two sessions, signaling a gradual and cautious process of disclosure. This cautious approach is also reflected in the work of Kewanian et al. (2023), where the authors highlighted the need for careful negotiation of identity disclosure in potentially unsupportive environments. I felt there was a palpable difference in the interpersonal dynamics between disabled and non-

disabled individuals in academic settings, particularly with faculty[6]. The need to establish a protective wall was pronounced, fueled by subtle comments that belittle disabilities. Furthermore, the absence of openly disabled faculty exacerbated this sense of isolation and necessitated the creation of metaphorical shields. The absence of openly disabled faculty members further reinforced a sense of isolation, as noted by Hernández-Saca (2013), who emphasized the importance of representation and open discussions of disability within academic spaces to mitigate feelings of exclusion and isolation.

***Challenges and Opportunities in Building Supportive Networks***

Building supportive networks within the academic community has been marked by distinct challenges, primarily rooted in the lack of representation and understanding. The absence of individuals who share similar experiences compounded my sense of isolation for an extended period. The reluctance to openly discuss my disabilities within academic circles contributed to this pervasive feeling of being alone in my struggles. This mirrors the experiences described by Stolz (2013), who highlighted the significant impact of the lack of visible role models and supportive networks for disabled individuals in academic settings.

Over time, however, I managed to establish a small community of peers who, like me, navigate the academic landscape with invisible disabilities. This community has become a sanctuary, allowing us to share our challenges, stresses, and triumphs without the need for protective walls. In line with the findings of Morella (2008), such supportive networks provide critical emotional and practical support, facilitating a safer space for sharing and mutual understanding. In these essentially closed-door conversations, we know we are safe sharing

[6] No faculty have disclosed any disabilities to me. See Jones (2022) for a discussion about the barriers and facilitators present for autistics working in academia.

negative experiences in classes and with faculty or peers, all without worrying that we will be unsupported, let alone not believed. We are able to share without having to backtrack and educate about terminology like rejection sensitive dysphoria, top-to-bottom vs bottom-up thinking, and time-blindness. Within our conversations, there is no pressure of judgment and absolutely no fear of being perceived as exaggerating and dramatizing.

The consistent thread of explicitly vocalized appreciation for having a space where authenticity can thrive underscores the importance of creating networks that foster understanding and support. Similar to the supportive communities described by Kewanian et al. (2023), our network emphasizes the necessity of safe spaces for authentic interaction and shared understanding among peers with similar experiences. The feeling of being able to share with people who already understand the experiences of a doctoral student, have gone through many of the same classes you have, and neurologically navigate the world in a similar way as you brings about so much internal peace knowing that you are not alone.

***My Coursework***

Certain aspects of my coursework and assignments were particularly challenging[7]. I believed that my preconceived notion that 100% self-sufficiency is a prerequisite for a student working towards their doctoral degree, which created a tough barrier. This thinking-- that asking for help signaled incompetence and that I should be able to do everything on my own with no supports-- continually kept me from asking for help. I struggled with the feeling that the academic environment demanded an unrealistic level of unguided self-sufficiency, which compounded my difficulty of adapting to the demands of coursework and assignments. It was

[7] For any reader who relates to this struggles with task paralysis, I created a list of strategies that I have discovered to help with my own task paralysis. See Appendix.

very hard for me to identify what was an appropriate request or question. I strongly did not want to communicate to my professors that I was not prepared, and I felt that any question I could have would have them jump to the same conclusion. This aligns with the experiences detailed by Hernández-Saca (2013), who emphasized the internal conflict and fear of judgment that often accompany disabled students when seeking help in academic settings. I understand that it is to be expected that doctoral level students should not need explicit directions for everything. As so much was new to me, however, I deeply struggled with determining if requests for help, clarification, or guidance would be met enthusiastically, neutrally, or adversely. The papers due at the end of the semester were the most hated part of my classes. These papers generally had little guidance aside from a general scope, minimal criteria on content expectations, and minimal to no check-ins or progress checks at any point throughout the semester. It was these papers that yielded the most uncertainty, as my questions to instructors just reiterated the flexibility and lack of restrictions intentionally allowed for student creativity and personal interests.

Notably, I feel like my disabilities, more specifically the way my brain understands and navigates the world, left an indelible mark on academic interactions, both formal and informal. Stolz (2013) discusses how neurodiverse individuals often perceive and engage with academic tasks differently, which can lead to misunderstandings and additional challenges. Something that is still hard for me to grapple with is what I think of as the autistic vs allistic perception of the question *why*. In my perspective, why? and related questions are used to further one's understanding of any topic. These questions, especially in an academic atmosphere, seem to be standard as the goal of further knowledge is shared. Through extensive conversations with other autistic people and conversations with trusted allistic people, I have come to understand that there seems to be a hidden meaning of antagonistic confrontation embedded in *why* questions.

Where I would see a why question as a pursuit for information, I have since learned that it is common that allistic people perceive why questions, or any adjacent information-seeking question as antagonistic and are attempts at diminishing the instructor's knowledge, communicating that their initial explanation was not sufficient. This misunderstanding is also noted by Morella (2008), who found that neurodiverse communication styles are often misinterpreted in academic settings, leading to unwarranted negative perceptions. Looking back, I question so many interactions where I was seeking information but was perceived as antagonistic. I think back to early experiences in my education where I was told that I would not need to ask so many questions if I were paying attention. I also think back to my master's program where I was given a 1:1 meeting to tell me to stop asking so many questions in class because I was coming across as a "know-it-all." I left that meeting crushed, as I was told that while it was noticed that I always waited for the appropriate time to ask questions, always waited until all the other students had their questions answered and never ate into class time, my questions- which sought to further understand of the dense material we had less than 24 hours to learn- pegged me as a know-it-all.

For a class that required a 93% grade to progress to the next requirement, a student consistently asking questions during the designated question time was seen as wrong and must be spoken to. I think back to how after sharing about this meeting to the student next to me that student decided, of their own volition, to signal to me when, I can only guess, I was being too much. This student would quietly tell me to "bite it" when I was getting too into a question or topic of discussion. I also started coordinating with the other students in the class. When meeting with my classmates before each class, finishing up homework and memorizing vocabulary, I would give my questions to other students to ask in class, both making sure they received their

participation points and my question got answered. This cooperative approach reflects the strategies highlighted by Kulkarni (2013), who also navigated academic environments by fostering collaboration and peer support to manage perceptions and gain understanding. And while the signals from this student and me outsourcing my questions likely improved the perception of me to the instructor and maybe the class, looking back it is something that eats at me as I still cannot understand why my questions were too much and why all of the behavior monitoring was necessary.

Additionally, as I learned more about my own disabilities and disability identity, I sought out and took several classes in other college departments seeking an intersectional approach to disability, like serving historically marginalized populations and cultural perspectives on learning and development. In these classes, I was the only special education doctoral student and as the semester progressed, it became very apparent to both myself and the instructors that there was an overall absence of disability when talking about marginalized identities. In these classes, it became common for instructors to defer to me when disability came up or after acknowledging the lack of disability in the discussion and they called on me to specifically add disability to the conversation. Kewanian et al. (2023) discussed similar experiences of being the sole representative of disability perspectives, pointing out the extra burden placed on students to educate peers and instructors about disability issues. In these moments, there was a sense of gratification in that the instructors were seeking out my perspective, but in looking back, the rosiness fades in realizing that a student in doctoral level courses about marginalized communities was the sole source of information about disability, the largest minoritized group in the US (Center for Disease Control, 2020).

The only non-special education course I had where disability was already within the

course content was my course on Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education. This course had an entire class dedicated to Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) and had one of the co-creators of DisCrit, Dr. Annamma, virtually visit our class. While I was still the "disability" person in the class, it was nice to not be the only source of that knowledge. Annamma et al. (2013) emphasize the importance of integrating DisCrit into educational curricula to ensure that disability is considered within broader discussions of race and social justice. Positively, I can report that multiple instructors have added disability content into their classes after I took them, and one instructor specifically sought out my input in how this integration could be done. At the suggestion of this instructor, my final paper for their class was essentially my recommendations for how to add a critical perspective on disability into the class, including reading recommendations, where in the existing course structure content could be added and supplemented, and extra recommendations that did not fit neatly into the existing course structure. Additionally, I have since learned that changes have also been made in some of the special education courses after I completed the course, including the addition of DisCrit in one course. This positive change reflects the ongoing influence of integrating disability studies within broader educational frameworks, as discussed by Connor et al. (2016), who advocate for a more inclusive and intersectional approach to education.

***My Research***

My disability catalyzed a profound shift in my approach and research interests. My newfound awareness prompted a heightened sense of critical inquiry and a determination to scrutinize the boundaries of my existing knowledge. I became acutely aware of the limitations of generalizations and struggled with the concept of validity, particularly when opinions were formed by individuals detached from the populations they studied. This is echoed by Erevelles

and Minear (2010), who critique the often superficial engagement with disability in academic research and emphasize the importance of lived experience in shaping valid and meaningful scholarship. I began my program with an interest in studying how to make behavior analytic services more culturally responsive, and during my first year, I created a whole program trajectory around these two topics. Through my experience within my non-special education doctoral classes consistently being seen as the "disability/special education" student, my research focus shifted from how to bring cultural responsiveness into disabled spaces to how to bring intersectionally focused disability awareness into education. This shift aligns with the work of Annamma et al. (2018), who highlight the need for intersectionality in disability studies to address the multiple, overlapping identities of disabled individuals. As I was teaching multiple sections of the introductory special education course across several years, I spent that time highly interested in making each new section more disability-affirming and less deficit-based. This approach is supported by the recommendations of Connor et al. (2016), who advocate for educational practices that affirm disability and challenge deficit-based perspectives. And it was through all that work that this autoethnography came into being.

### *Navigating Positionality and Intersectionality*

In conducting this autoethnography, I acknowledge my personal perspectives and biases through a process of rigorous reflexivity. This involves a continuous and critical self-examination of my own experiences, beliefs, and cultural conditioning that may influence the research process. By actively engaging in reflexivity, I am not only aware of my subjectivity but also use it as a tool to enhance the depth and authenticity of the research. This approach aligns with the principles highlighted by Ellis et al. (2011), who emphasize the importance of reflexivity in autoethnographic research to provide deeper insights and more authentic analysis.

Acknowledging my personal perspectives and biases is a fundamental aspect of conducting this autoethnography. It involves a conscious effort to understand how my identity, experiences, and societal position influence my research while striving to maintain a balance between subjectivity and scholarly rigor. This reflexivity not only enriches the research but also aligns with the ethos of autoethnography, which values the researcher's personal connection to the subject matter as a source of insight and critical analysis.

Being a disabled Ph.D. student within the intersectionality of identity has proven to be a challenging journey. As a white, queer, nonbinary person who socially presents as a cis-gender woman, I strongly feel that doctors initially struggled to recognize, accept, and diagnose my neurodevelopmental disorders. My outward appearance and symptomology not aligning with conventional stereotypical expectations of disability could have had a significant impact on my doctors not believing me. This is similar to how feminine presenting people's appearances can be used against them when a doctor is determining treatment. A review of women's encounters with their doctors found that women reported stress and anxiety figuring out the "subtle balance not to appear too strong or too weak, too healthy or too sick, or too smart or too disarranged" (Werner & Malterud, 2003, p. 1409).

The intersection of my identity with race has also played a significant role in academic experiences. The perception of me as a white individual has, at times, potentially influenced faculty leniency in providing accommodations, leading to my own concerns about being perceived as not "disabled enough." This persistent worry reflects the ongoing challenge of advocating for understanding and support while navigating the complex intersectionality of disability, gender identity, and race, as discussed by Annamma et al. (2018), who explore the compounded effects of multiple marginalized identities within educational contexts.

## Conclusion: Personal Growth and Empowerment through the Autoethnographic Process

This autoethnography, situated within the frameworks of intersectionality, CDS, and CWS, seeks to add new perspectives on how special education navigates disability. Given my professional and personal backgrounds, I believe that I am in a unique position to add context, thoughts, and ideas to the way disability is discussed within special education. I have been taught special education's story of disability and I have my own personal disability story, which enables me to recognize the ableism within the special education content I have been taught and have taught to others. And now I hope to be able to spread knowledge through this chapter.

Reflecting on the journey through academia with newfound self-awareness has revealed intricate intersections of disability, gender, race, and personal identity. The discovery of being disabled during a Ph.D. program sparked critical reflections on coursework, research, and interpersonal dynamics. The complex interplay of societal expectations, power dynamics, and internalized ableism emerged as key themes influencing relationships with peers and faculty. It is imperative to acknowledge these insights to foster a more inclusive academic environment. My work is dedicated to this tenet.

The autoethnographic exploration provided a platform for personal growth and empowerment. Recognizing and embracing the intersectionality of being a disabled, queer, feminine-presenting individual fueled my resilience. The emotional journey, from disbelief to self-advocacy, illuminated the strength inherent in acknowledging my unique experiences. This process of growth underscores the importance of embracing one's identity and advocating for inclusivity.

This journey serves as a call to action for promoting inclusivity in academia. Recommendations include raising awareness of later-in-life diagnoses, fostering open dialogues,

integrating disability-affirming perspectives into curricula, and enhancing support networks. It is imperative to establish inclusive PhD programs that are sensitive to diverse needs and to continually advocate for an academic landscape that recognizes and celebrates the richness brought by varied perspectives and identities. This call to action aims to transform academia into a space where every individual, regardless of their intersectional identity, can thrive and contribute meaningfully. Embracing this mission will ensure that academia reflects the diversity and complexity of the human experience.

Reflecting on this critical autoethnographic journey highlights the systemic barriers and personal challenges faced by disabled individuals in academia. My experiences navigating the intersections of disability, race, gender, and identity reveal the profound need for institutional change. By centering the voices and experiences of disabled scholars, we can challenge ableist norms, promote social justice, and foster a more inclusive academic environment. This work underscores the importance of critical reflexivity, advocacy, and the integration of diverse perspectives in creating equitable educational spaces. As we move forward, it is crucial to continue this dialogue and implement strategies that support and empower all members of the academic community.

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# APPENDIX

## OVERCOMING TASK PARALYSIS AND ENHANCING PRODUCTIVITY

I have spent my entire life trying to find ways to get my work done. While others complained about the complexity of the work or just simply not wanting to do it, my main struggle was the initiation of the tasks. Where others seemed to have no problem starting their work, I would spend hours, days, months, or even years depending on the task internally telling myself to just start it. I would sit in that anxious state and still not get up to start the task. Having experienced this my entire life, I have only recently discovered that this is called task paralysis. Throughout my life, I have been recommended and tried so many strategies that have left me frustrated and feeling like a failure as my work task remained unfinished. Some of these recommended strategies were particularly unhelpful for me. While a schedule/calendar was great to keep my classes and meeting organized, the dopamine from buying a new planner to organize my work faded after about a week. To-do lists sounded great, but I would constantly create detailed to-do lists as a way to avoid the work I needed to be doing. Being told to try harder was especially demoralizing, as it did not offer practical solutions or acknowledge the underlying difficulties I faced. And finally, on top of being told to try harder, I have recently learned that the advice of simply creating habits can and commonly is a fundamentally insurmountable task for me and other AuDHD people. Unlike allistic, non-neurodevelopmentally disabled people, I and other AuDHD people are not able to autopilot. Even tasks I have done every single day of my life require my brain to be fully present and focused. Having learned that it is common for people to “not think” about showering, brushing their teeth, doing laundry, loading the dishwasher has been incredibly frustrating, feeling like I have been lied to my entire life.

**Effective Strategies**

In sharing my experiences and being the resource I wish I had, here are some strategies that were actually helpful.

1. **Being Perceived and Body Doubling**: The knowledge of being observed helps keep me focused. Having another person working alongside me does something in my brain that keeps me on task and prevents distractions such as picking up my phone or going on unproductive tangents on my computer. During the busiest times of online school during COVID, I used a website, https://www.focusmate.com/, that pairs you up with a random person anywhere in the world also using their service. For 25 or 50-minute blocks, we would tell each other what we were going to accomplish, stay on camera, and at the end, report our progress. This website has both a free option which allows three sessions a week, and a paid personal plan, and a paid business account option.
2. **Music:** Having music playing in the background, particularly lo-fi music and immersive writing music from YouTube, was incredibly helpful. Lo-fi music helped create a calming environment conducive to focus. Immersive writing music playlists on YouTube were designed to enhance concentration and creativity, making long writing sessions more manageable and enjoyable.
3. **Metronome:** I learned that the ticking of a metronome also boosted my productivity. I discovered this through a Pomodoro-like desktop app, Be Focused, that times out work and break periods. In this app, you can select a metronome tick during work time and turn it off during breaks. The simple repetitive ticking helped me maintain focus. Even when listening to music while writing, I occasionally play a metronome on top of it.

4. **Visual Timers:** I use a children's visual timer to manage work stretches without getting off task. The simple battery-operated timer I have is circular; where you would spin the wheel to the desired time, and a visual indicator (a solid blue block of color) would appear. As time progressed, the blue block gets smaller. This significantly helped keep me focused and addressed my time blindness. I realized I could be working for 40 minutes straight but would feel like it was only 5-10 minutes.
5. **Keeping Shoes On:** A unique productivity aid I learned was keeping my shoes on at home/having house shoes. This advice came from tips from people who work from home. With COVID moving much of my program online, I did everything at home, which can be challenging. The advice was to fully dress in clothes you would wear to work or school, including putting on shoes. The logic is that it tricks your brain into being more productive. While I commonly had comfortable house closed on, I did commonly put shoes on. The same advice applies if you come home and still want to be productive; keep your shoes on or change into house shoes.
6. **Non-Distracting and Comfortable Clothing and Hairstyles:** Ensuring that I was in non-distracting and comfortable clothing and hairstyle was crucial for maintaining focus. Wearing comfortable clothes that did not cause irritation or discomfort helped keep my attention on the task at hand. Similarly, having a simple, non-distracting hairstyle prevented me from fidgeting or adjusting my hair constantly.
7. **Alternative Desk Setups:** Alternative desk setups also played a significant role in my productivity. Using chairs that allowed me to sit with my legs up and crossed helped create a more comfortable and conducive working environment. Working from a couch-desk setup provided a cozy and relaxed setting that boosted my productivity. A standing

desk allowed me to alternate between sitting and standing, which helped reduce fatigue and maintain focus. I even wrote at least half of this dissertation from an egg chair suspended from the ceiling in my home. These unique setups provided a comfortable and inspiring environment that significantly enhanced my writing productivity.

# CHAPTER 3

# REIMAGINING SPECIAL EDUCATION TRAINING: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF DISABILITY STUDIES INTEGRATION

Although the study of disability is the cornerstone of both the fields of special education and disability studies, the approach to how each field centers the concept of disability differs. The field of special education prepares pre-service teachers with the skills, knowledge, and expertise to provide specialized instruction and support to disabled students so that they may access and succeed in the general education curriculum (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014). The field of special education centers the concept of disability through the scientific and medical model which views disability as an individual's impairment or condition that is diagnosed and treated (Kauffman et al., 2017). Special education curriculum emphasizes the identification of specific disabilities and the provision of interventions, supports, and services to address the unique needs of disabled students, fostering their academic, social, and emotional growth while ensuring they have equal access to educational opportunities (Kauffman et al., 2017).

Disability studies, on the other hand, is an interdisciplinary field based in the humanities and social sciences that emerged in response to the limitations of the medical model (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014). Disability studies challenges traditional notions of disability, navigating the concept of disability through the addition of non-scientific lenses including the social, cultural, historical, and political models (Connor et al., 2019). Whereas special education operates from the stance that the disability lies within the individual person, disability studies focuses on society as the source of the disability (Gallagher et al., 2014).

Although special education and disability studies are two separate fields, it seems plausible that scholars from the two fields would collaborate and that instructors of pre-service

special educators would incorporate disability studies content into their special education courses. Indeed, incorporating disability studies content into special education teacher preparation classes has been shown to foster a more inclusive and empathetic learning environment (Baglieri et al., 2011; Golloher et al., 2022). Through disability studies, pre-service special educators can learn about the historical and societal context of disability, enhancing their ability to interact with disabled people in a more informed and sensitive manner (Lukins et al., 2023). By exposing pre-service special educators to the rich tapestry of disability experiences, rather than focusing only on the medical model of disability, pre-service special educators can develop a deeper understanding of the diverse needs and challenges faced by disabled people. This awareness not only promotes acceptance and respect but also helps break down stereotypes and biases that can perpetuate discrimination.

Additionally, integrating disability studies into special education teacher preparation curricula can ensure special educators adopt a more holistic approach to teaching (Freedman et al., 2019). Disability studies content encourages special educators to move beyond a focus on remediation and accommodations and instead promotes a strengths-based perspective to educating disabled students (Freedman et al., 2019). By recognizing the unique talents and abilities of disabled people, special educators can better tailor their instructional strategies and support systems, ultimately empowering their disabled students to reach their full potential.

Finally, the inclusion of disability studies in special education teacher preparation courses prepares pre-service special educators to work and live in a more inclusive society (Ashby, 2012). As the world becomes more diverse and inclusive, pre-service special educators should be equipped with the knowledge and skills to navigate a world that values and respects the contributions of disabled people. By exposing them to disability studies content, special

education teacher preparation programs can help future special educators to become advocates for change, promoting equity and accessibility in their communities and beyond. In essence, disability studies in special education is not just about academic enrichment; it is about fostering a more compassionate, informed, and inclusive society.

**Disability Studies in Education Integration**

To support the integration of disability studies into special education, several prominent Disability Studies in Education (DSE) scholars have contributed journal articles, textbooks, and other publications providing suggestions for the direct implementation of DSE within the special education courses. Susan Baglieri's work, particularly her book "*Disability Studies and the Inclusive Classroom*," comprehensive frameworks for educators, including pre-service and in-service teachers, as well as school administrators and policymakers to embed DSE principles into special education classrooms. Baglieri's third edition (2022) offers updated methodologies for inclusive education, whereas earlier editions focus on embracing diversity and fostering least restrictive environments (Baglieri, 2012, 2017). Another cornerstone of this integration is Baglieri and Lalvani's (2019) "*Undoing Ableism: Teaching About Disability in K-12 Classrooms*." This work explores strategies for addressing and dismantling ableism in educational settings, offering practical insights for K-12 educators. These foundational texts underscore the necessity of incorporating DSE principles to foster inclusive and equitable learning environments.

Valle and Connor have also made substantial contributions through their book "*Rethinking Disability: A Disability Studies Approach to Inclusive Practices*." The second edition (2019) provides a comprehensive approach to inclusive education, while the first edition offers practical strategies grounded in disability studies (Valle & Connor, 2011). Their work is

pivotal in advocating for a shift from traditional special education paradigms to those informed by DSE. Similarly, the edited volume "*Practicing Disability Studies in Education: Acting Toward Social Change*," edited by Connor, Valle, and Hale (2015), includes various contributions that highlight the practical application of DSE in educational contexts. This collection illustrates how DSE can foster social change by challenging entrenched ableist practices and promoting inclusive pedagogies.

In the realm of teacher education, Srikala Naraian's (2021) "*Making Inclusion Matter: Critical Disability Studies and Teacher Education*" focuses on the application of critical disability studies to enhance teacher preparation programs. This work emphasizes the importance of equipping future educators with the knowledge and skills to support inclusive practices. Similarly, Scot Danforth's (2014) "*Becoming a Great Inclusive Educator*" provides practical guidance on becoming an effective inclusive educator, drawing insights from disability studies.

Finally, Connor has specifically explored the integration of DSE into special education courses. In his article "*Practicing What We Teach: The Benefits of Using Disability Studies in an Inclusion Course*," Connor discusses the advantages of incorporating DSE principles into inclusion courses within general and special education programs (Connor, 2015). Furthermore, his 2022 article, "*Revamping a Graduate Course to (In)fuse Disability Studies: The Politics of Representation in 'The Study of Learning Disabilities in Children and Adolescents*,'" directly addresses the integration of DSE into a course on learning disabilities, emphasizing the importance of representation and critical perspectives.

These resources collectively underscore the significant contributions DSE scholars have made to support the integration of disability studies. Unfortunately, a decades long divide exists between the fields of special education and disability studies (Connor, 2019), in which special

education scholars are not receptive to incorporating disability studies content into their coursework (Baglieri et al., 2011; Chapter 2; Connor, 2014; Connor, 2019; Connor et al., 2019; Wilson, 2017). Connor (2019) examined the negative attitudes toward disability studies within special education discourse and found that prominent special education scholars believe the field of special education should indisputably be framed as only scientific. He reported that instead of engaging with other perspectives openly, the general response within special education publications is to undermine and discredit non-scientific approaches, if acknowledged at all (Connor, 2019).

## Current Study

Given this divide and negative discourse by prominent special education scholars, disability studies content may not be incorporated into special education teacher preparation courses, despite the considerable efforts and contributions offered by DSE scholars. The absence of disability studies perspectives can lead to teacher preparation students learning about disability through a solely medical view of disability, which can be significantly limiting to the diverse experiences of disabled students (Golloher et al., 2022).

The current study was conducted to determine the extent to which disability studies content is incorporated into current special education teacher preparation programs. The inquiry for this study was informed through critical curriculum studies. Critical curriculum studies focuses directly on politics and power (Au, 2012). Through critical curriculum studies, the authors are concerned (1) Who has the power?; (2) What knowledge is deemed important?; and (3) Who is benefiting from this knowledge? (Au, 2012) within the context of the teaching of special education to preservice special education teachers. Combining disability studies and critical curriculum studies, which both strive for a curriculum that is more equitable and

inclusive of diverse perspectives (Au, 2012; Baglieri et al., 2011), the extent to which non-deficit and non-medical views of disability exist within current special education teacher preparation programs was examined. The syllabi of 10 of the top 12 special education undergraduate programs were analyzed to answer the following research questions:

**Research Questions**

1. To what extent are disability studies concepts taught in undergraduate introductory special education teacher preparation courses?
2. If disability studies concepts are included within introductory special education teacher preparation coursework, in which courses are disability studies concepts most often included and which concepts are most often included?

## Method

### Research Design

A transformative content analysis was conducted of the course syllabi from special education courses at the undergraduate level. Quantitative coding methods were used to gather the overall frequency of specific disability studies concepts that were included in each course and to determine the depth to which disability studies concepts are incorporated within the courses.

### Procedures

#### *Program Selection and Course Inclusion Criteria*

The special education course syllabi from 10 of the top 12 ranked undergraduate special education programs were reviewed[8]. Undergraduate programs were selected for this study because a bachelor's degree is the minimum degree required to be certified as a special education

[8] Initial attempts were made to obtain the syllabi from the top 10 programs; due to material acquisition difficulties, the search was expanded to the top 12.

teacher. Although students are able to pursue higher degrees in special education, graduate degrees are not necessary to become a certified special education teacher. The ranking for undergraduate special education programs were obtained from collegefactual.com. To obtain their rankings, College Factual compares accreditation, student body caliber, the extent of educational resources (e.g., average faculty compensation and expenditures per student), degree completion, and post-graduate earnings.

After identifying the programs, the university and program websites were examined to identify all special education courses that were offered at the undergraduate level. The course lists and descriptions for each program were analyzed to determine if they met the following inclusion criteria: (1) must be from an undergraduate special education teacher preparation program; (2) the focus of the course related to introduction, foundations, inclusion, or perspectives within special education, and (3) the course had been offered within the last five academic years. Courses were excluded if they focused on teaching academic subjects (e.g. math, English, science), field experiences, and assessment.

***Data Acquisition***

Initially, requests for syllabi were sent to both the office assistant (or equivalent position) and program director for each of the top 10 special education programs through emails and then follow-up phone calls for those programs that were not responsive through email. The initial email (sent 11/28/2023) contained a description of the study and its purpose and requested access to all of the program's undergraduate special education syllabi. A follow up email was then sent on 1/16/2024. To reduce the task demand requested of the schools, the follow up email included a list of the specific course syllabi that were being requested.

Four programs responded to the first follow up email. Two programs sent all requested

syllabi (University #7 and University #9), one program responded that they would need to get permission (University #8), and one program declined to share their syllabi (University #2). A second follow up email was sent on 1/30/2024; five programs responded. One program sent the requested syllabi (University #6), one program indicated they were still seeking permission to share syllabi (University #8), and three schools declined to share their syllabi (University #1, University #5, and University #10). After the second follow up email, the remaining programs (University #3 and University #4) were contacted by phone on 2/6/2024. Both programs stated that they were awaiting answers on if they had permission to share the documents. A third follow up email was sent between 2/6/2024 and 2/20/2024 to the three schools that had indicated they were seeking permission to share materials (University #8, University #3, and University #4). Following this communication, University #8 shared all requested syllabi; University #4 and University #3 provided no formal response and further attempts were ceased.

Alternative methods were then taken to obtain course syllabi from the 6 programs that declined to participate or failed to respond (University #1, University #2, University #3, The University #4, University #5, and University #10). After consulting with an attorney regarding the legality of obtaining syllabi online or from current or former students, it was determined that course syllabi are public domain and are able to be shared. Additionally, the lawyer advised that if the course syllabi were protected by privacy laws, the Fair Use Doctrine within the U.S. Copyright Law allows for the use of copyrighted work without permission for purposes such as commentary, criticism, news reporting, and scholarly reports (Limitations on Exclusive Rights: Fair Use, 2018). Thus, multiple modalities, including internet searches, contacts with former students, and requests made through social media sites, were used to obtain the course syllabi. The syllabi for University #2, University #4, University #5, and University #10 were obtained

through these methods but the syllabi for University #1 and University #3 were unable to be obtained. As a result, the decision was made to seek the syllabi from the next two highest ranked undergraduate special education programs, University #11 and University #12. Both of these programs had their syllabi available on their websites and did not require any outreach efforts.

Overall, 4 programs' syllabi were shared directly from program personnel, 2 programs' syllabi were obtained from the program's website, 3 programs' syllabi were obtained from social media or other online outlets, and 1 program's syllabi were obtained from students. Two 2 programs' syllabi were unable to be obtained for the current study (see Figure 1 for a flow chart of communication and how syllabi were obtained).

***Data Extraction and Analysis***

Data from five categories were extracted from each course syllabus: (1) course information, (2) course description, (3) course content, (4) teaching methods, and (5) resources. These data categories were determined prior to coding as the content was expected to be available within all course syllabi (see Appendix for the list of categories and subcategories on the data extraction sheet). After the initial round of data extraction, syllabi were categorized into the type of course, including introduction to special education, disability/area specific course, critical perspectives course, diversity-oriented course, and miscellaneous. These labels were initially determined by the researcher after an initial review of the course syllabi. The researcher reviewed these categorizations with the secondary coder until agreement was reached.

**Figure 1**

*Flow Chart of Communication with Universities and Colleges and Syllabi Source*

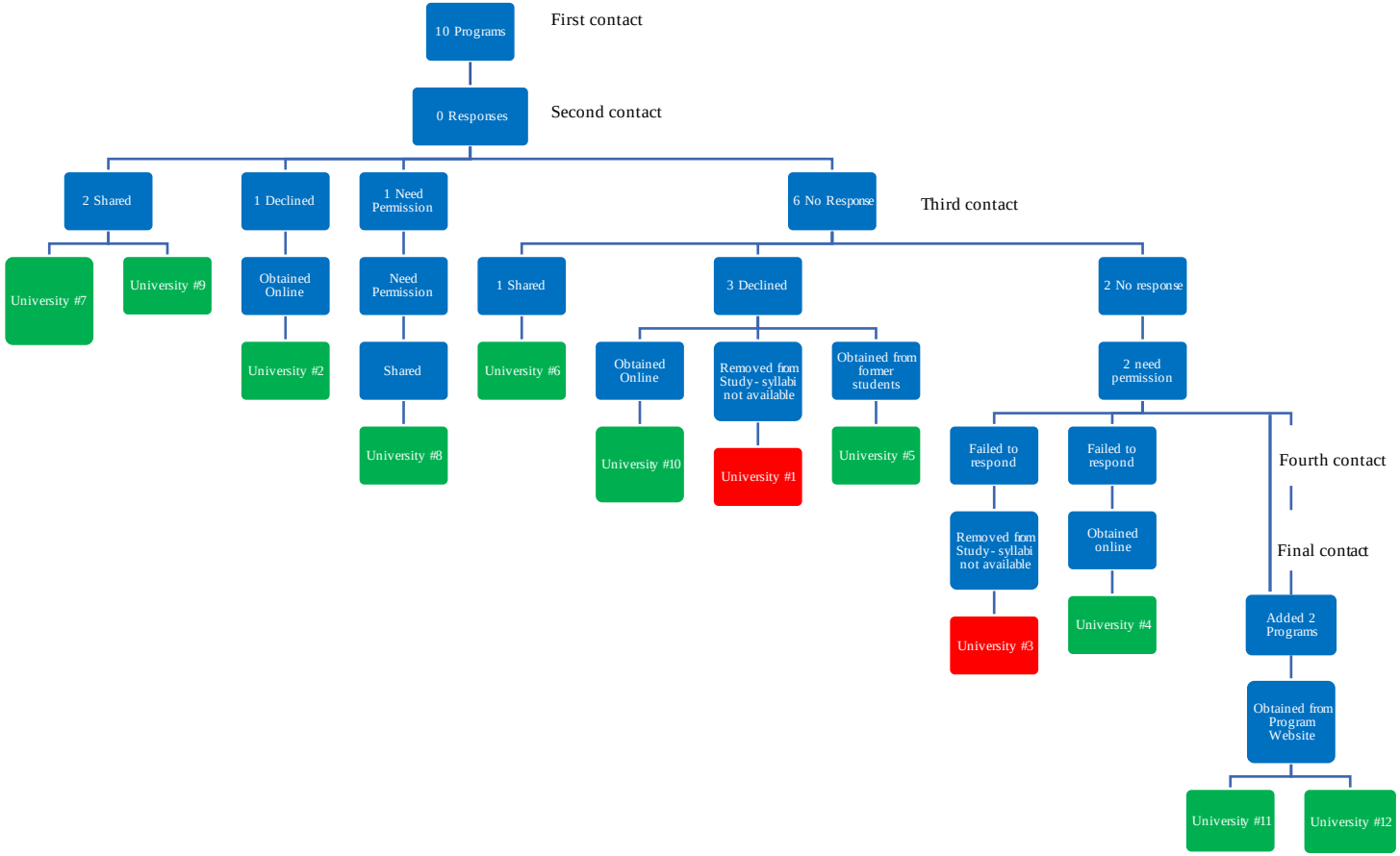


**Table 1**

*School Rankings, Courses, and Sources*

| Ranking | Course Number | Type of Course | Source for Syllabi |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | | | |
| 2 | 2.1 | Introduction to Special Education | Internet |
| 3 | | | |
| 4 | 4.1 | Introduction to Special Education | Internet |
| | 4.2 | Misc. | |
| | 4.3 | Critical Perspectives | |
| 5 | 5.1 | Critical Perspectives | Students |
| | 5.2 | Diversity | |
| | 5.3 | Introduction to Special Education | |
| 6 | 6.1 | Introduction to Special Education | Program Personnel |
| | 6.2 | Misc. | |
| | 6.3 | Diversity | |
| | 6.4 | Disability/Area Specific | |
| | 6.5 | Disability/Area Specific | |
| 7 | 7.1 | Introduction to Special Education | Program Personnel |
| 8 | 8.1 | Introduction to Special Education | Program Personnel |
| | 8.2 | Disability/Area Specific | |
| | 8.3 | Misc. | |
| | 8.4 | Diversity | |
| | 8.5 | Disability/Area Specific | |
| 9 | 9.1 | Introduction to Special Education | Program Personnel |
| 10 | 10.1 | Introduction to Special Education | Internet |
| | 10.2 | Disability/Area Specific | |
| | 10.3 | Disability/Area Specific | |
| 11 | 11.1 | Critical Perspectives | Program Website |
| | 11.2 | Critical Perspectives | |
| | 11.3 | Critical Perspectives | |
| | 11.4 | Critical Perspectives | |
| | 11.5 | Introduction to Special Education | |
| | 11.6 | Diversity | |
| 12 | 12.1 | Critical Perspectives | Program Website |
| | 12.2 | Introduction to Special Education | |

*Note:* Course numbers in column three were created by the researcher to note which school and which number each course was. The courses listed in column four were ranked by course number lowest to highest and department.

After data extraction was completed, a content analysis was conducted to determine the presence of disability studies terms within each syllabi. First, a content analysis rubric was created that included 15 disability studies terms that are considered foundational and relevant concepts within the field of disability studies (Table 2). After the initial list of terms was

compiled, the list was reviewed and discussed with the secondary coder to gain consensus on the inclusion of each term and to identify any additional terms to be included. Once consensus was reached, the researcher coded all syllabi for their inclusion of each of the 15 terms. During this review, it was determined that an additional term, *critical perspectives*, should be added and all syllabi were recoded for this term as well. The secondary coder independently coded 10 of the 30 syllabi to ensure accuracy.

**Table 2**

*Disability Studies Terms*

| Topic | Description |
|---|---|
| Intersectionality | Examining how disability intersects with other aspects of identity, such as race, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status, and understanding the unique experiences of individuals with multiple marginalized identities. |
| Ableism | Analyzing how disabled individuals are treated different solely on the basis of their disability |
| Disability Rights and Advocacy | The history and current status of disability rights movements, the fight for accessible infrastructure, and the role of advocacy in improving the lives of people with disabilities. |
| Access and Accessibility | Discussions around physical accessibility, including wheelchair ramps and accessible restrooms, as well as digital accessibility, making websites and technologies usable for individuals with disabilities. |
| Identity and Disability | How individuals with disabilities perceive their own identities and how society's perception of disability affects self-identity and self-esteem. |
| Use of Identity First Language | Analyzing if there is any course content that discusses the difference between person-first language and identity-first language or if students are required to use one or the other. |
| Social Model of Disability | This perspective argues that disability is not primarily a result of an individual's impairment but is largely shaped by societal attitudes, barriers, and norms. It emphasizes the need for social and structural change to create an inclusive society. |
| Policy and Legislation | Discussing disability-related laws and policies, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in the United States, and their impact on disability rights. |
| Inclusive Education | Examining the inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream educational settings and the impact on their learning and social development. |

**Table 2 (cont'd)**

| | |
|---|---|
| Global Perspectives | Comparing disability rights and experiences across different countries and regions, including the challenges and successes of disability inclusion worldwide. |
| Critical Disability Studies | Engaging in critical analyses of disability, challenging traditional paradigms, and promoting new ways of thinking about and addressing disability issues. |
| Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) | Engaging in critical analyses of disability, challenging traditional paradigms, and promoting new ways of thinking about and addressing disability issues. |
| Critical Perspectives* | Critical perspectives are analytical approaches that challenge established norms and power structures, aiming to uncover underlying assumptions and advocate for social justice and equality. |
| Medicalization | Critiquing the medical model of disability that views disability as a problem to be fixed or cured and discussing the implications of medical interventions. |
| Bioethics | Exploring ethical issues related to disability, including topics such as assisted suicide, prenatal testing, and the ethics of disability research. |
| Employment and Workforce Inclusion | Analyzing employment opportunities, discrimination in the workplace, and strategies for promoting inclusivity and diversity. |

*Note:* * = added during coding

During the initial analysis, syllabi were simply coded for whether each of the 16 terms was mentioned anywhere in the syllabus. This initial data analysis was determined to be insufficient for capturing the depth to which a term was included within a course. For example, some courses included the terms within the state standards listed for their course without any additional mention (which conflated the actual presence of the term within the course); whereas other courses dedicated an entire class session to a certain disability studies topic. To better identify and document the difference of depth of inclusion of each disability studies term, a second round of analysis was conducted to document whether each term was *fully present*: the topic was either included in the course schedule as a topic of discussion, in course assignments/readings, or as a focus within the course objectives or description; *limited mention*: the term was present in a limited capacity or similar terms were used but not the exact term (e.g.,

a course project included "inclusive education" within a list of potential ideas that a student could select, Disability Critical Race Theory was listed under optional course readings); or *standard only:* the course only included terms within the listed state or professional standards. This analysis resulted in four levels of codes: *fully present, limited mention, standard only*, and *not present.*

Finally, the researchers then conducted a systematic categorization of the 16 disability studies terms into three distinct priority levels: *high*, *middle*, and *low*. This categorization process involved a thorough discussion of each term, assessing its relative importance and relevance to introductory special education courses. Terms considered most critical to be discussed in an introductory special education course were classified as high priority, whereas those considered less essential but still valuable were categorized as middle priority. Terms that could be deferred or included only if additional time permitted were allocated to the low priority category. This structured approach ensured a clear and rational prioritization of the terms based on their significance and the constraints of the curriculum. Once the terms were categorized, the data were analyzed again to determine if the frequency within any of the categories were higher than the other groups.

**Intercoder Reliability**

An undergraduate teacher preparation student served as the secondary coder. This student was trained on all stages of coding in 1:1 meetings. During the initial training, written instructions were provided, all codes were explained, and each step was demonstrated to the student. After going through a syllabus together, the student was asked if they would like a practice round of coding or if they felt confident. The student expressed confidence in their understanding and declined a practice round. Intercoder reliability was calculated for 30% of

syllabi. During coding for the course information, 10 syllabi were randomly selected and independently coded by the secondary coder. Intercoder reliability across the 5 categories was 100%. Intercoder reliability for the disability studies terms also included 10 randomly selected syllabi independently coded by the secondary observer. Intercoder reliability across the 16 terms was also 100%. The determination of term priority was made collaboratively after coding was completed.

### Positionality

This study centers the marginalized identity of disability and how its concept is taught in special education. The author, a disabled individual and academic in special education, brings a unique perspective shaped by their 25-year journey of believing they were able-bodied to discovering their disability. This experience has fueled their interest in integrating disability studies into special education. Aware of the potential for personal bias, the author implemented measures to mitigate bias, such as using a secondary coder to ensure reliability and objectivity in coding and data analysis. Their positionality enables a critical examination of power dynamics in disability education, aiming to dismantle ableism and promote positive change. However, the author acknowledges that their perspective does not represent all disabled individuals, emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of the diverse and intersectional nature of disability.

## Results

### The Extent to Which Disability Studies Terms are Included in Course Syllabi

First, a systematic analysis was conducted with thirty class syllabi to determine the frequency in which sixteen specific terms occurred across courses. Table 3 and Figure 2 display the frequency in which terms were included in the course syllabi.

### *Number of Courses to Include Disability Studies Terms*

First, the number of courses to include each of the 16 disability studies terms was analyzed. All 30 courses included at least 1 disability studies term in some capacity (fully present, limited mention, or standards only). Three courses (School #11, Course #4 [11.4], 11.6, 12.1) included the most disability studies terms in any capacity ($n$ = 10; 62.5%). One of the 3 courses (12.1) had all 10 terms fully present. On the other hand, 7 (23%) courses (4.2, 6.2, 8.3, 8.5, 10.1, 10.2, 11.5) only had 1 term present in any capacity, with 3 of those 7 having only the 1 term present in standards only (4.2, 8.3, 8.5).

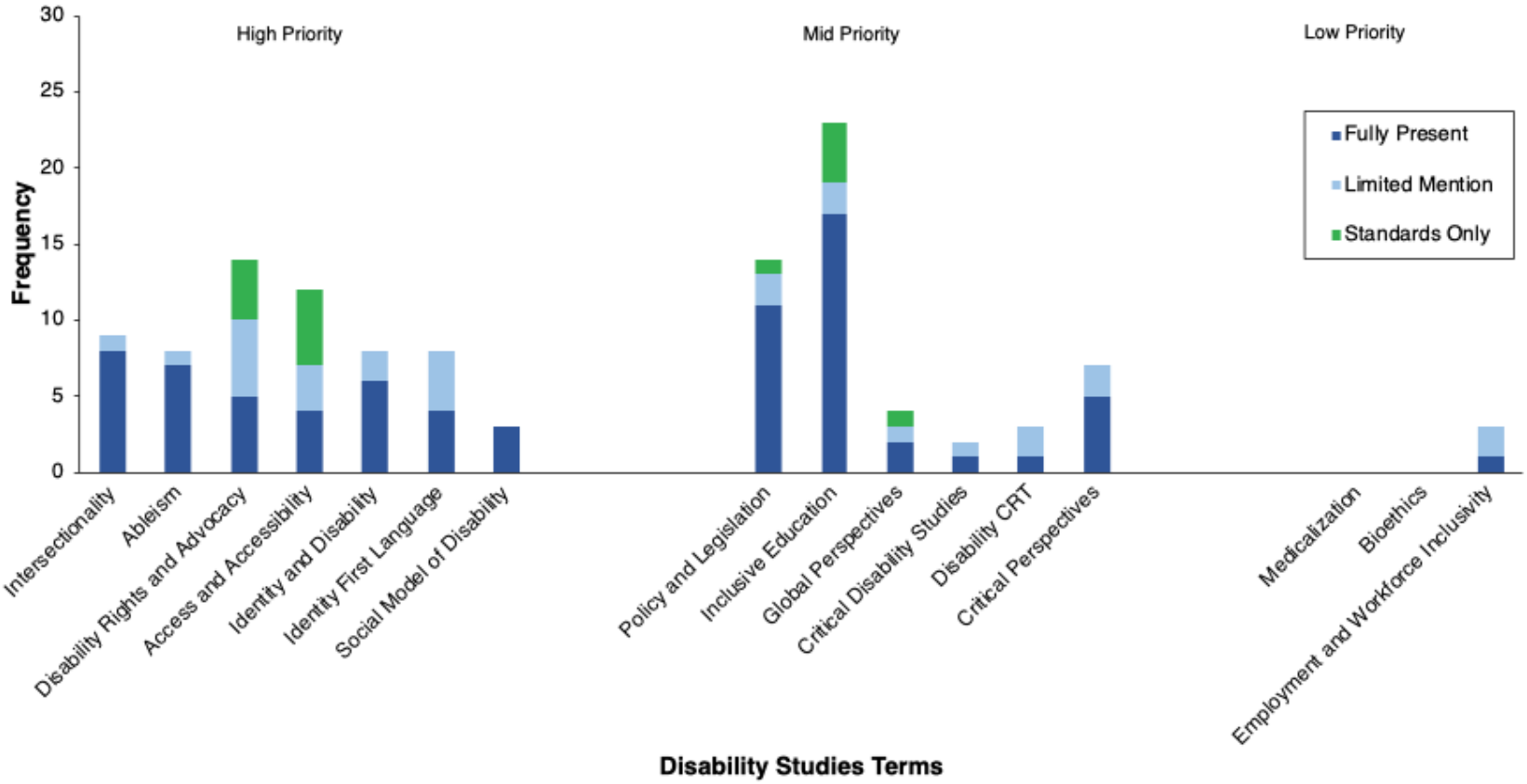
**Table 3**

*Frequency of Disability Studies Terms By Level of Presence and Priority of Area*

| Disability Studies Terminology | Fully Present | Limited Mention | Standards Only |
|---|---|---|---|
| **High Priority** | | | |
| Intersectionality | 8 | 1 | 0 |
| Ableism | 7 | 1 | 0 |
| Disability Rights and Advocacy | 5 | 5 | 4 |
| Access and Accessibility | 4 | 3 | 5 |
| Identity and Disability | 6 | 2 | 0 |
| Identity First Language | 4 | 4 | 0 |
| Social Model of Disability | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| **Middle Priority** | | | |
| Policy and Legislation | 11 | 2 | 1 |
| Inclusive Education | 17 | 2 | 4 |
| Global Perspectives | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| Critical Disability Studies | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Disability CRT | 1 | 2 | 0 |
| Critical Perspectives | 5 | 2 | 0 |
| **Low Priority** | | | |
| Medicalization | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Bioethics | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Employment and Workforce Inclusivity | 1 | 2 | 0 |

**Figure 2**

*Disability Studies Content Presence by Term*




*Note: Frequency of disability studies terminology present across top 12 special education schools. Figure shows classes from 10 of the 12 schools. Materials were unable to be obtained from two schools, numbers one and three. Frequency notes presence of terms across 30 class syllabi. Fully present notes the term being present in the syllabus in ways such as a class topic, within course descriptions or outcomes, within reading titles. Limited mention notes that the term was present but in a small capacity including optional readings and departmental goals. Standards only notes when terms were solely present within standards listed in the syllabus like state or field specific standards but not present in any other capacity in the syllabus.*

**Fully Present Terms.** The range of amount of any of the 16 terms being fully present was zero (0%) to 10 (62.5%) across the 30 syllabi. Seven courses had zero (0%) disability studies terms fully present (4.2, 6.2, 8.2, 8.3, 8.5, 10.1, 11.2). Seven courses had only one (6.3%) term fully present (2.1, 6.4, 8.4, 10.2, 10.3, 11.5, 12.2). Four courses had two (12.5%) terms fully present (4.1, 6.1, 6.3, 8.1). Five courses had three (18.5%) terms fully present (4.3, 5.3, 6.5, 7.1, 9.1). One course had four (25%) terms fully present (5.1). One course had five (31.5%) terms fully present (5.2). Two courses had six (37.5%) terms fully present (11.1, 11.4). Two courses had seven (48.3%) terms fully present (11.3, 11.6). Lastly, one course had 10 (62.5%) terms fully present (12.1).

**Limited Mention of the Terms.** The range of amount of any of the 16 terms with limited mention was zero (0%) to four (25%) across the 30 classes. Fifteen courses had zero (0%) disability studies terms with limited mention (4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 6.3, 6.4, 6.5, 7.1, 8.1, 8.3, 8.5, 9.1, 10.2, 10.3, 11.5, 12.1), eight courses had one (6.3%) term with limited mention (5.2, 6.1, 6.2, 8.2, 8.4, 10.1, 11.3, 12.2). Three courses had two (12.5%) terms with limited mention (2.1, 5.1, 11.1). Two courses had three (18.8%) terms with limited mention (5.3, 11.6). Lastly, two course had four (25%) terms with limited mention (11.2, 11.4).

**Standards Only.** The range of amount of any of the 16 terms being present in standards only was zero (0%) to three (6.3%) across the 30 classes. Nineteen courses had zero (0%) disability studies terms in the standards only (2.1, 5.1, 5.3, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 7.1, 8.1, 9.1, 10.1, 10.2, 11.1, 11.2, 11.3, 11.4, 11.5, 11.6, 12.1, 12.2). Eight courses had one (6.3%) term in the standards only (4.2, 4.3, 5.2, 8.2, 8.3, 8.4, 8.5, 10.3). Two courses had two (12.5%) terms in the standards only (4.1, 6.4). Lastly, one course had three (18.8%) terms in the standards only (6.5).

### *Extent of Presence of Disability Studies Terms*

Thirteen of the 16 (81.3%) terms were included in at least one course syllabus. The most frequently occurring term, "inclusive education," was included in 23 course syllabi. Of the 23 courses to include "inclusive education," 17 were rated to have the term *fully present* within their syllabus; the term "inclusive education" was either included in the course schedule as a topic of discussion, in course assignments/readings, or as a focus within the course objectives or description. "Disability rights and advocacy" and "Policy and legislation" were the next most frequent terms to be included in the syllabi, with 14 courses each including these terms. Two terms, "medicalization" and "bioethics" were not found within any of the 30 syllabi.

### *Presence of Terms By Priority*

The seven high priority terms were analyzed to determine in the number of courses in which each term was *fully present* or at least had *limited mention*. The number of courses in which a high priority term was *fully present* ranged from 3 ("social model of disability" 10%) to 8 ("intersectionality" 26.7%) courses. No high priority term was *fully present* in more than 50% of courses. The number of courses in which a high priority term had *limited mention* ranged from 0 ("social model of disability" 0%) to 5 ("disability rights and advocacy" 16.7%).

When combining *fully present* and *limited mention*, there were still no high priority terms to occur in more than 50% of courses. "Disability rights and advocacy" (33.3%) was the most frequent term to be rated either *fully present* (5 courses) or *limited mention* (5 courses), for a total of 10 courses. "Intersectionality" (30%) was the next most frequent term to be rated as either *fully present* (8) or *limited mention* (1), followed by "Ableism", "identity and disability," and "identity first language" (26.7% each).

When combining *fully present* and *limited mention*, only one middle priority term

occurred in more than 50% of courses. “Inclusive education” (63.3%) was the most frequent term to be rated either *fully present* (17 courses) or *limited mention* (2 courses), in a total of 19 courses. “Policy and legislation” (43.3%) was the next most frequent term to be rated as either *fully present* (11) or *limited mention* (2), followed by “critical disability studies” (26.7%), “critical perspectives” (23.3%), “global perspectives” (10%), and “DisCrit” (10%).

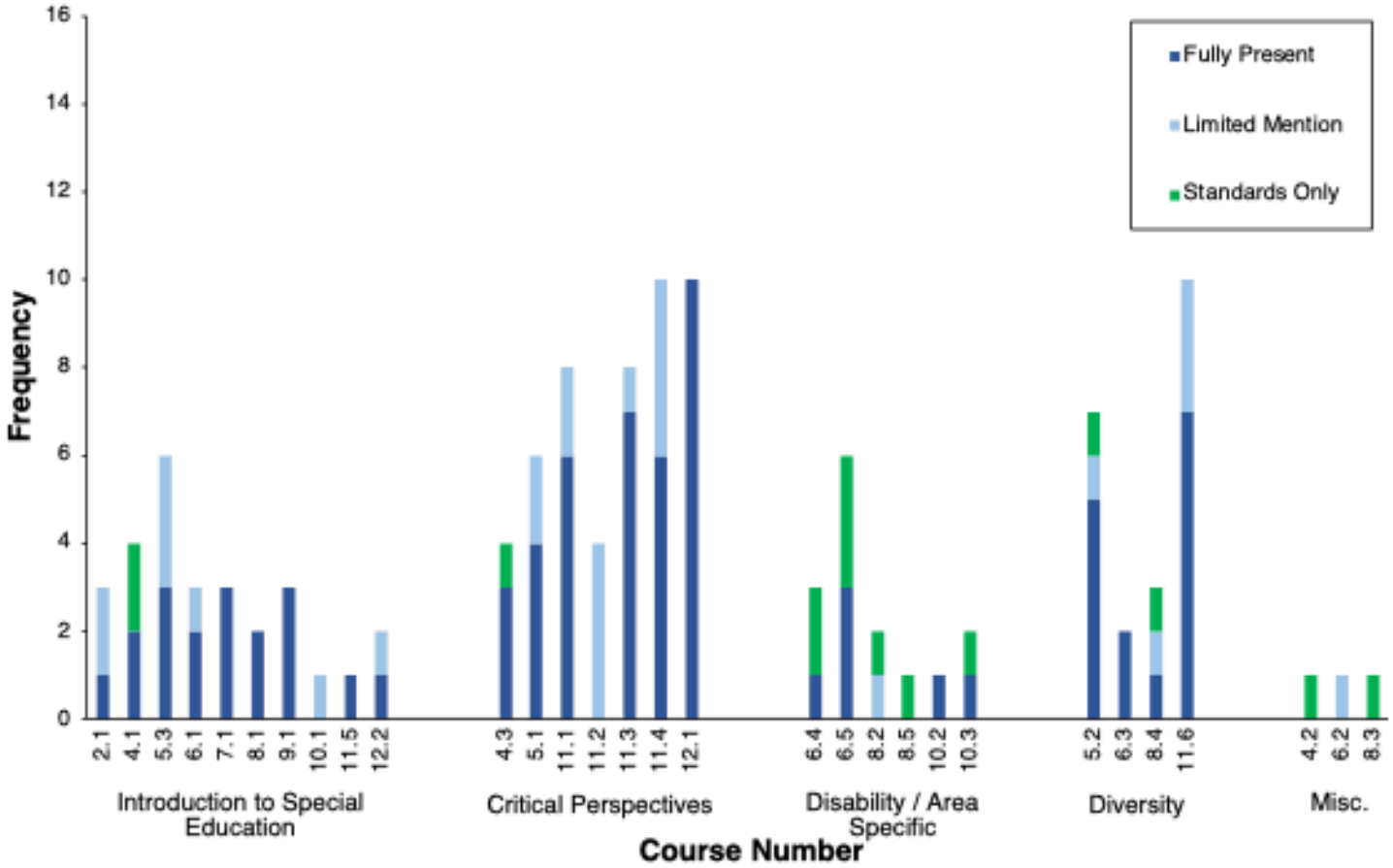
When combining *fully present* and *limited mention*, no low priority terms occurred in more than 10% of courses. “Employment and workforce inclusivity” (10%) was the most frequent term to be rated either *fully present* (1 course) or *limited mention* (0 courses). “Bioethics” (0%) and “medicalization” (0%) were not present in any courses.

**The Types of Courses in Which Disability Studies Terms were Present**

Next, the 30 courses were categorized into five types of courses (introduction to special education, critical perspectives, disability/area specific, diversity, and miscellaneous) and then analyzed to determine in which types of courses disability studies terms were most often included in the syllabus. Figure 3 displays the frequency of disability studies terms present within each type of course. Overall, the critical perspectives courses contained the highest frequency of disability studies terms in any capacity, ranging from 25% to 62.5% present within a course, followed by the diversity courses (range 12.5% to 62.6%), the introductory courses (range 6.3% to 37.5%), the disability/area specific courses (range from 6.3% to 37.5%), and the miscellaneous courses (all 6.3%).

**Figure 3**

*Disability Studies Content Presence by Course*




*Note: Frequency of disability studies terminology present across 30 special education courses. Figure shows classes from 10 of the 12 schools. Materials were unable to be obtained from two schools, numbers one and three. Frequency notes presence of terms from list of 16 terms. Fully present notes the term being present in the syllabus in ways such as a class topic, within course descriptions or outcomes, within reading titles. Limited mention notes that the term was present but in a small capacity including optional readings and departmental goals. Standards only notes when terms were solely present within standards listed in the syllabus like state or field specific standards but not present in any other capacity in the syllabus*

### *Introduction to Special Education Courses*

Ten courses were categorized as introduction to special education courses. All courses introduce the field of special education, covering characteristics of disability, legal policies, and evidence-based instructional strategies. For the high priority terms, "disability rights and advocacy" and "identity first language" were the most frequent terms to be included in introductory course syllabi, appearing in any capacity both in three courses. "Access and accessibility" and "identity and disability" both were present in any capacity in two courses. "Ableism" was present in one course. Lastly "intersectionality" and "social model of disability" not present in any course syllabi. For the middle priority terms, "inclusive education" was the most frequent term to be included, appearing in eight syllabi. "Policy and legislation" were present in seven classes. "Critical disability studies" and "critical perspectives" were both present in one class. "Global perspectives" and "DisCrit" were not included in any introductory courses. Not low priority terms were present in the introductory courses.

### *Critical Perspectives Courses*

Seven courses were categorized as critical perspectives in education. These courses collectively explore critical perspectives on education, challenge perceptions, delve into disability history, and aim to equip students with the knowledge and skills needed to understand and support individuals with disabilities in various contexts. For the high priority terms, "Disability rights and advocacy" and "intersectionality" were the most frequently occurring terms, appearing in any capacity in six courses. "Access and accessibility" and "ableism" both occurring in any capacity in five courses. "Identity and disability" and "identity first language" were present in four courses each. Lastly "social model of disability" was present in three courses. For the middle priority terms, "inclusive education" was the most frequently occurring

term, appearing in any capacity in five classes. “Policy and legislation” and “critical perspectives” were present in three courses. “Global perspectives” was present in two courses. “DisCrit” was present in one course. And “critical disability studies” was not present. For the low priority terms, “employment and workforce inclusivity” was present in three courses and “medicalization” and “bioethics” were not present.

***Disability / Area Specific Courses***

Six courses were categorized as disability-specific courses. The majority of these courses (n= 4) were specifically focused on teaching students with extensive support needs (also referred to as students with moderate to severe disabilities or low-incidence disabilities). Two other courses specifically focused on transition-age individuals with disabilities. For the high priority terms, “access and accessibility” was the most frequently occurring term, appearing in any capacity in three courses. “Disability rights and advocacy” was present in any capacity in two courses. “Identity first language” was present in one course. “Intersectionality,” “ableism,” “identity and disability,” and “social model of disability” were not present in any courses. For the middle priority terms, “inclusive education” was the most frequent term, appearing in any capacity in five classes. “Policy and legislation” was present in two courses. “Global perspectives” and “critical perspectives” were present in one course. “DisCrit” and “critical disability studies” were not present in any classes. For the low priority terms, “medicalization,” “bioethics,” and “employment and workforce inclusivity” were not present in any courses.

***Diversity in Education Courses***

Four courses were categorized as focusing on diversity in education. These courses collectively highlight the importance of cultural diversity in special education, provide an interdisciplinary approach to understanding and addressing the needs of culturally diverse

learners with disabilities, and emphasize the integration of culturally responsive teaching principles in educational settings. For the high priority terms, “intersectionality” was the most frequently occurring term, appearing in any capacity in three courses. "Ableism,” “disability rights and advocacy,” “access and accessibility,” and “identity and disability” were present in two courses. “Identity first language” and “social model of disability” were not present in any courses. For the middle priority terms, “inclusive education” was the most frequent term, appearing in any capacity in three classes. “Policy and legislation,” “DisCrit,” and “critical perspectives” were present in two courses. “Global perspectives” and “critical disability studies” were present in one course. For the low priority terms, “medicalization,” “bioethics,” and “employment and workforce inclusivity” were not present in any courses.

### *Miscellaneous Courses*

Three courses were categorized as miscellaneous courses. These courses included topics such as collaboration with family and trauma-informed approaches. For the high priority terms, only “disability rights and advocacy” was present, appearing in one course. For the middle priority terms, “inclusive education” occurred most frequently, appearing in any capacity in two classes. “Policy and legislation,” “Global perspectives,” “critical disability studies,” “DisCrit,” and “critical perspectives” were not present. No low priority terms were present.

## Discussion

The current study was conducted to examine the syllabi of special education undergraduate programs for their inclusion of disability studies terms. Findings offer a multifaceted view of the integration of disability studies content, revealing a varied landscape across various types of courses. From foundational aspects to specialized topics, the inclusion of disability studies concepts varies significantly, reflecting both progress and challenges within the

field. While some courses demonstrate progress towards comprehensive integration (e.g., critical perspectives, diversity focused courses), others show limited exposure to disability studies (e.g., disability/area specific, miscellaneous), indicating disparities in students' engagement with critical frameworks and perspectives offered by disability studies.

The findings illuminate broader debates within the field regarding the conceptualization and approach to disability. The presence of disability studies content across a range of courses signifies a growing recognition of the importance of adopting a holistic and inclusive approach to disability (Kofke & Morrison, 2021). However, the variability and uneven distribution of disability studies content confirms ongoing tensions between traditional deficit-oriented models of special education and more inclusive, rights-based perspectives advocated for by disability studies scholars (Connor, 2019, Kofke & Morrison, 2021; Naraian, 2021). The presence of disability studies content signals a willingness for special education instructors to engage with alternative frameworks; yet the lack of consistency underscores potential resistance or ambivalence within certain sectors of the field.

In those courses categorized as introductory to special education, this analysis found that categorization of disabilities, foundational knowledge, and legal frameworks are emphasized, indicating a continued reliance on traditional models of special education. While these courses provide essential background information, they overlook critical perspectives offered by disability studies, perpetuating deficit-oriented paradigms (Parker-Katz & Passi, 2021). Conversely, courses focused on critical perspectives and diversity highlight the importance of challenging prevailing norms and adopting inclusive practices. These courses delve into the historical and societal context of disability, fostering a deeper understanding of the systemic barriers faced by disabled individuals.

In this analysis, each disability studies term had the potential to be present up to thirty times. No term appeared in all syllabi and only one term "inclusive education," appeared in over 50% of the course syllabi. All other terms appeared a much lower rates, indicating that the integration of disability studies terminology within these special education classes is markedly limited. This limited presence across the board—despite the capacity for more widespread inclusion—indicates that disability studies concepts are not as deeply embedded in the curriculum as they could be. The data highlights a significant gap between the potential for these terms to be featured in educational materials and their actual application, pointing towards a need for a more consistent and thorough incorporation of disability studies within the classroom. For example, the "social model of disability" is a critical term that would signify courses are teaching students to understand the concept of disability beyond the medical model. Surprisingly, only three courses contained this term in any capacity and none of those courses were introductory courses. The omission of this term signals that 10 of the top 12 special education programs continue to support a medical-only view of disability.

**Implications**

The implications of these findings extend to various stakeholders within the field of special education. For special education teacher preparation programs, there is a clear need to reevaluate and enhance curriculum structures to ensure more consistent and comprehensive integration of disability studies content. Collaborative efforts between special education and disability studies scholars are essential to develop guidelines and standards prioritizing critical perspectives and inclusive practices. Furthermore, ongoing professional development for current educators is crucial to deepen their understanding of disability studies concepts and principles. Continuous learning and reflection are great tools for educators to adapt their practices in

alignment with evolving understandings of disability and inclusion (Naraian, 2021; Sandoval Gomez & McKee, 2020).

Incorporating disability studies content into special education teacher preparation programs presents several challenges and barriers that vary across different institutions and programs. One fundamental challenge arises from the distinct disciplinary backgrounds of special education and disability studies (Connor, 2019). Special education traditionally focuses on providing specialized instruction and support to disabled students within the framework of educational psychology and pedagogy (Bateman & Cline, 2016). In contrast, disability studies emerged as an interdisciplinary field challenging traditional notions of disability and exploring its social, cultural, historical, and political dimensions (Chander, 2020). The differing epistemological and methodological approaches of these fields can pose challenges in integrating their content seamlessly.

Moreover, the goal of incorporating disability studies content should not entail burdening special education students with the equivalent of two degrees' worth of information. Instead, it requires a thoughtful integration that complements and enriches existing special education curricula (Freedman, J. (2018). Achieving this balance, however, is no simple task. Special education programs often have established structures, curricular requirements, and accreditation standards that may limit flexibility in incorporating additional content. Additionally, there may be resistance or skepticism among faculty members or stakeholders regarding the relevance or feasibility of integrating disability studies into existing programs (Kofke & Morrison, 2021).

Furthermore, the logistics of adding new courses or content into preexisting programs can be complex and resource-intensive. Special education teacher preparation programs typically follow a prescribed sequence of courses designed to meet certification requirements and prepare

students for licensure or endorsement. Introducing new courses or modifying existing ones to accommodate disability studies content may require extensive curriculum review, faculty training, and administrative approvals. This process can be time-consuming and may encounter institutional barriers such as budget constraints, faculty workload considerations, or conflicts with existing course schedules. Additionally, the integration of disability studies content may face variability across different institutions and programs due to factors such as institutional culture, faculty expertise, and available resources. Institutions with a strong commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion may be more receptive to incorporating disability studies into their special education programs. Conversely, programs with limited resources or entrenched disciplinary boundaries may struggle to prioritize or implement such changes effectively.

Addressing these barriers and challenges requires collaborative efforts among stakeholders, including faculty, administrators, practitioners, and advocates. It entails fostering dialogue, raising awareness, and promoting buy-in regarding the importance and value of integrating disability studies into special education teacher preparation. Furthermore, it necessitates strategic planning, capacity-building, and investment in faculty development to ensure that educators are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and pedagogical approaches needed to effectively teach disability studies content.

Ultimately, while the integration of disability studies into special education teacher preparation programs may encounter obstacles and complexities, it also offers opportunities for innovation, growth, and transformative change (Golloher et al., 2022). By addressing these challenges thoughtfully and collaboratively, institutions can move towards creating more inclusive, equitable, and empowering learning environments for future special education teachers and the diverse students they serve.

On a broader scale, the integration of disability studies content has implications for policy-making and advocacy efforts in education. By promoting a more nuanced understanding of disability, policymakers can enact legislation and initiatives fostering greater equity, accessibility, and inclusivity within educational systems.

**Limitations**

Despite the insights provided by this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the analysis focused exclusively on undergraduate special education programs in the United States, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other contexts or educational levels and other countries. Second, as a syllabus is only a document, reliance on syllabi as the primary source of data may not fully capture the actual content and delivery of courses. The inclusion or absence of any terms within the syllabus does not guarantee the experience within the classroom matches.

Third, the study did not assess the effectiveness of disability studies integration in enhancing student learning outcomes or pedagogical practices. Future research should explore the impact of disability studies content on teacher preparation and classroom practices to provide a more comprehensive understanding of its benefits and challenges. Fourth, the study did not incorporate the perspectives and experiences of students within these classes. Their voices could provide crucial feedback in evaluating the relevance and effectiveness of disability studies integration in special education programs.

Finally, while the study sought to gather syllabi directly from special education programs, several challenges were encountered in obtaining documents from all eligible institutions. As a result, alternative methods were used to obtain syllabi, including accessing documents online. While efforts were made to ensure the authenticity and accuracy of the obtained syllabi, there

remains a potential risk associated with documents obtained from sources outside of the program. It is possible there were inaccuracies or discrepancies in the online documents compared to those used in recent courses. While it is unlikely that individuals would deliberately alter syllabi, the potential cannot be entirely discounted. Without direct verification from the programs, the study relied on the assumption of document integrity, introducing a degree of uncertainty regarding the reliability of the data collected. Despite these limitations, it is essential to acknowledge the pragmatic necessity of utilizing online sources to supplement data collection efforts. The availability of syllabi online facilitates broader access to educational materials, enabling researchers to conduct comprehensive analyses across multiple institutions. Researchers should also exercise caution and transparency when relying on online documents, acknowledging the inherent limitations and potential risks associated with their use in research. In future studies, additional efforts to obtain syllabi directly from institutions should be prioritized to mitigate concerns regarding document accuracy and reliability. Establishing direct communication channels with program administrators or faculty members can enhance data authenticity and provide opportunities for clarifications or additional information.

**Future Directions**

Building on the findings and limitations of this study, several recommendations emerge for future research and practice. While the integration of disability studies content into special education teacher preparation holds promise for fostering more equitable and inclusive educational practices, ongoing research, collaboration, and reflection are essential to realize its full potential in promoting positive outcomes for students with disabilities and advancing social justice in education. Longitudinal studies are needed to track the implementation and outcomes of disability studies integration over time, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of its

impact on teacher preparation and student learning. Additionally, collaboration between special education and disability studies scholars should be prioritized to develop standardized guidelines and frameworks for disability studies integration in teacher preparation programs. This collaborative approach ensures diverse perspectives and expertise are incorporated into curriculum design and implementation (Golloher et al., 2022). Efforts should also be made to amplify the voices and experiences of disabled students in shaping teacher preparation programs. Their insights can inform the development of more inclusive and responsive pedagogical practices that center the needs and experiences of disabled learners.

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## APPENDIX

## CODEBOOK FOR COURSE SYLLABI ANALYSIS

Coding Instructions:

- Carefully review each syllabus and assign the appropriate code(s) based on the content found in the syllabus.
- Use the "Comments" section to provide additional context or notes if necessary.

Note: Use "N/P for content that is not present in the course syllabi

1. Course Information
    1) Course Title
    2) Course Code/Number
    3) Department
    4) School/College
    5) University
    6) Semester/Year
2. Course Description
    1) Course Type
    2) Course Overview/Description
    3) Learning Objectives/Outcomes
    4) Education Standards Present
    5) Course Format (e.g., lecture, in person, online, synchronous, asynchronous, hybrid)
3. Course Content
    1) Topics Covered
    2) Textbooks and Learning Materials
    3) Assignments and Projects
4. Teaching Methods
    1) Teaching Techniques/Strategies (lecture- or discussion- based)
    2) Use of Technology
    3) Group Activities
    4) Assessment Methods (e.g., quizzes, exams, presentations)
5. Resources
    1) Recommended/Additional Reading

# CHAPTER 4

# EMPOWERING DISABILITY-INCLUSIVE EDUCATORS: A PATHWAY TO DISABILITY-AFFIRMING PEDAGOGY

The relationship between disability studies and special education has been marked by a complex and, at times, contentious history. While both fields share the overarching goal of improving the lives of disabled people, the disciplines have often found themselves at odds with each other due to fundamental differences in perspective, approach, and ideology (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014). This tension has evolved over time, reflecting shifts in societal attitudes towards disability and a growing recognition of the need for inclusive practices in education.

## The Emergence of Special Education

The roots of special education can be traced back to the early 19th century when institutions for disabled people began to emerge in Europe and North America (Massoumeh & Leila, 2012). These institutions aimed to provide care and education for disabled people, but their approach was often marked by segregation, paternalism, and a focus on fixing or curing deficits and impairments (Berghs et al., 2016; Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014). As the field of special education continued to develop, it became increasingly professionalized, with educators and researchers working to create standardized approaches to teaching and supporting disabled people (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014). This professionalization laid the foundation for special education to emerge as a distinct field of study and practice, separate from general education.

## The Rise of Disability Studies

Disability studies was formed as a distinct academic field in the late 20th century (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014). With its roots in the disability rights movement, disability studies challenged the traditional view that disability was something to be cured or fixed and

instead adopted a view that disability is a result of social, cultural, and environmental barriers (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014). According to this perspective, disability is not an inherent deficit but a product of society's failure to accommodate and include individuals with diverse abilities (Berghs et al., 2016). This shift in perspective marked a fundamental departure from the ideology of special education, which continued to emphasize the individual's need for specialized services and interventions (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014).

**Key Tensions between Special Education and Disability Studies**

As both fields evolved, the tension between disability studies and special education became increasingly evident. Although both fields exclusively center around the concept of disability, their foundational principles and core ideas are mutually exclusive and contradict each other, leading to different pedagogies and philosophical approaches. The most significant difference lies in the framing of disability (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014). The field of special education frames disability within the medical model using a positivist paradigm, which leads researchers and educators to use a deficit-based approach to education and intervention (Hernández-Saca et al., 2022). Disability studies, on the other hand, critically analyzes the many ways that disability can be oriented, including medically, socially, historically, and systemically, and leads researchers and teachers to use strength-based approaches (Mankoff et al., 2010).

In addition to the differences to how disability is oriented (i.e., medical vs. social model of disability), several other tensions exist between the two fields, including topics like: inclusion vs. segregation, issues with power and control, and identity and language (see Table 4 for a description of each key tension).

**Table 4**

*Key Tensions between the Fields of Special Education and Disability Studies*

| Key Tension | Special Education | Disability Studies |
|---|---|---|
| Medical Model vs. Social Model | Relies on a medicalized approach, focusing on diagnosing and addressing individual impairments. | Criticize the medical model of disability as pathologizing and stigmatizing. |
| Inclusion vs. Segregation | Segregated settings, such as separate classrooms or schools are common for disabled students. | Advocates argue for inclusive education, where disabled students are educated alongside their non-disabled peers in general education classrooms. |
| Power and Control | Often places parents and professionals in positions of authority over disabled people. | Argues for greater autonomy and self-determination for disabled people. |
| Identity and Language | Hesitant to adopt linguistic and identity-related shifts, encouraging person-first language. | Emphasizes the importance of language and identity, advocating for identity-first language (e.g., "disabled person") and recognizing disability as a source of pride and identity. |

## Pushing Special Education Forward

Despite these tensions, disability studies scholars have continuously made efforts to update special education practices and ideology to better serve disabled students (Hernández-Saca et al., 2022). These scholars argue that future special educators must learn about disability studies for several reasons. First, highlighting the perspectives and experiences of disabled individuals challenges the traditional, often paternalistic approaches of special education (Thomas & Loxley, 2022) and instead emphasizes the empowerment of disabled voices (Valente & Danforth, 2016). This shift promotes respect and recognition of disabled people as experts of their own lives. Second, disability studies aligns with broader social justice movements, such as

Black Lives Matter, by advocating for the rights and inclusion of marginalized groups. Educators who understand the connection to other social justice movements are better equipped to advocate for all students (Sandoval Gomez & McKee, 2020). Third, by learning about the societal and cultural factors that influence disability, special educators can develop a more holistic understanding and ability to create inclusive and supportive educational practices where all students can thrive (Valente & Danforth, 2016).

The integration of Disability Studies in Education (DSE) into special education courses has garnered scholarly attention, with DSE scholars advocating for a shift from traditional special education paradigms towards more inclusive and equitable educational practices. Susan Baglieri's works, particularly in her series "Disability Studies and the Inclusive Classroom," provide a robust framework for embedding DSE principles into educational settings. Her third edition emphasizes updated methodologies that enhance inclusive education, while the second and first editions focus on embracing diversity and creating least restrictive environments (Baglieri, 2012, 2017, 2022).

The collaboration between Baglieri and Priya Lalvani in "Undoing Ableism: Teaching About Disability in K-12 Classrooms" offers practical strategies to dismantle ableism in educational contexts, further advocating for the inclusion of DSE in teacher education (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019). This text underscores the need for educators to critically engage with and challenge ableist practices, promoting a more inclusive curriculum.

Jan W. Valle and David J. Connor's "Rethinking Disability" complements Baglieri's work by providing comprehensive and practical approaches to inclusive practices. Their second edition elaborates on the theoretical underpinnings of DSE, while the first edition offers tangible

strategies for educators (Valle & Connor, 2011, 2019). The continuity in their work highlights the evolving nature of DSE and its application in real-world educational settings.

The edited volume "Practicing Disability Studies in Education: Acting Toward Social Change," edited by Connor, Valle, and Chris Hale, integrates various contributions that demonstrate the practical implementation of DSE in fostering social change within educational contexts (Connor et al., 2015). This collection illustrates the multifaceted applications of DSE, emphasizing its role in challenging traditional educational paradigms and promoting inclusivity.

Srikala Naraian's "Making Inclusion Matter" and Scot Danforth's "Becoming a Great Inclusive Educator" further emphasize the application of critical disability studies in teacher education, advocating for the preparation of educators who are well-versed in inclusive practices (Danforth, 2014; Naraian, 2017). These works collectively argue for a transformative approach to teacher education that incorporates DSE principles.

Finally, Connor's specific exploration of DSE integration in his articles "Practicing what we teach" and "Revamping a graduate course to (in)fuse disability studies" provides concrete examples of how DSE can be infused into special education curricula, highlighting the benefits and challenges of such integration (Connor, 2015, 2022).

The collective body of work from these scholars underscores the importance of integrating DSE into special education courses. Their research and practical examples provide a comprehensive roadmap for educators and institutions aiming to adopt and implement DSE principles, ultimately fostering more inclusive and equitable educational environments.

**Continuing the Push Forward**

Unfortunately, efforts toward collaboration have been continuously met with dissent from special education scholars, who do not wish to include disability studies in special education

(Annamma et al., 2013; Baglieri et al., 2011; Connor 2019, Connor et al., 2019; Freedman et al., 2019; Ware, 2005). In fact, a recent review of 10 of the top-ranked undergraduate special education teacher preparation programs identified that minimal disability studies content is currently taught to future special educators (Chapter 3). The authors highlighted that a field that exclusively exists to improve the lives and education of disabled people does not adequately address the identity of disability; the inclusion of critical perspectives on *what* disability is are currently missing from the instruction of preservice special education teachers.

To address the absence of disability studies content within special education teacher preparation programs, this paper seeks to 1) describe important concepts from the field of disabilities studies with which all instructors[9] within special education teacher preparation programs should be familiar, and 2) provide guidance and recommendations on integrating disability studies content within special education teacher preparation courses for preservice special education teachers[10]. To do this, we first describe important knowledge and skills instructors need to ensure they are prepared teach and lead discussions on disability studies concepts, while also describing ways to incorporate these concepts into introductory special education courses. We then discuss the potential barriers and challenges instructors may face when incorporating disability studies content into special education teacher preparation programs. And lastly, we provide explicit guidance on how an introductory special education course could be designed to teach about special education through a disability studies lens.

[9] The term instructor is used throughout to refer to those who are teaching at a college and university level (e.g. tenure-stream faculty, non-tenure stream faculty, adjunct faculty, lecturers, graduate students, etc.).
[10] The term preservice special education teachers is used throughout to describe the college and university students within special education teacher preparation programs.

**What Instructors Need to Know to Effectively Lead a Disability Studies-Informed Introduction to Special Education Course**

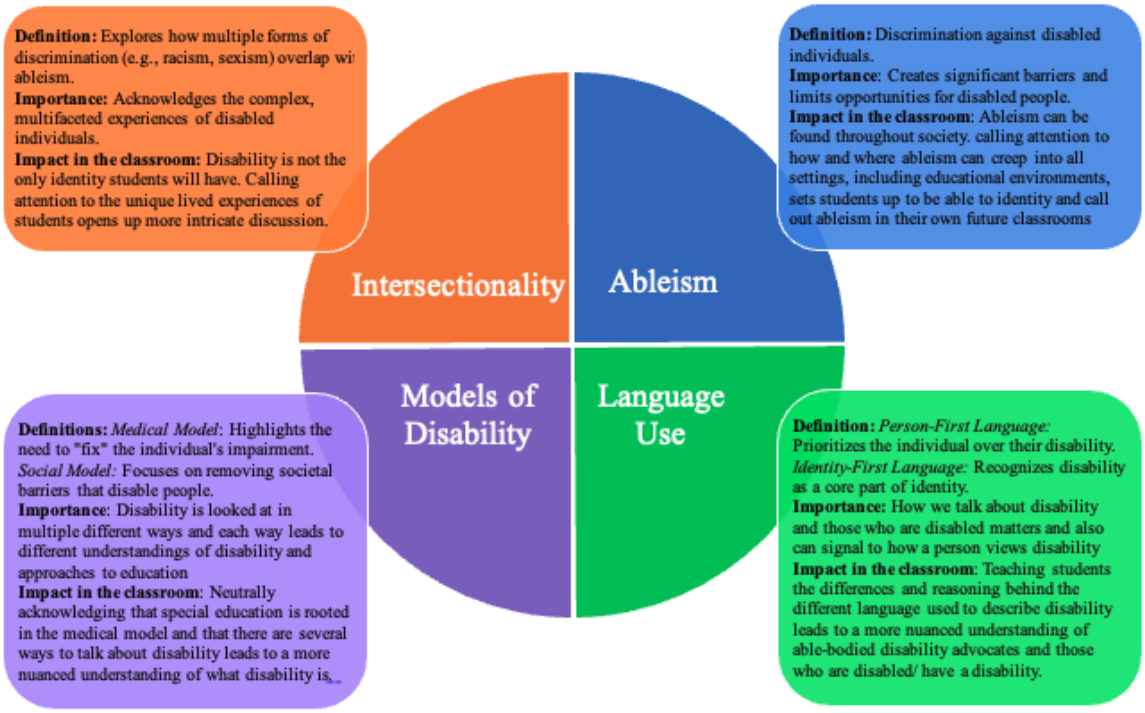
A danger exists in the space between bringing disability studies perspectives into class discussions and an instructor's ability to properly lead these discussions. When disability studies content is taught by an instructor who lacks thorough knowledge of the topics and how to navigate them respectfully, the risk of reinforcing ableist ideologies and perpetuating harmful stereotypes increases significantly. According to Baglieri and Lalvani in *Undoing Ableism: Teaching About Disability in K-12 Classrooms* (2019), educators who are not well-versed in disability studies perspectives may offer a superficial treatment of disability issues, failing to challenge the deeper societal structures that perpetuate discrimination and exclusion. This superficial engagement can result in the continuation of negative stereotypes and a lack of genuine inclusion within the classroom. The authors emphasize the importance of educators understanding the social constructions of disability and the historical and cultural contexts that shape these constructions to avoid perpetuating these harms (Anderson, 2021; Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019). By critically engaging with the material and facilitating authentic dialogues about disability, belonging, and inclusion, educators can create a more inclusive educational experience that respects and values disabled perspectives.

As disability studies is an entire field of study, however, it would be excessive to recommend that instructors should be fluent two degrees worth of content. Thus, we have identified four topics—1) models of disability; 2) language and terminology; 3) ableism; and 4) intersectionality— in which instructors of introduction to special education courses should be aware to effectively teach and advocate for a more inclusive and equitable educational environment for all students. Figure 4 displays the four topics, briefly describing each topic, its

overall importance, and the potential impact of including the topic in introductory special education courses.

**Figure 4**

*Foundational Knowledge for Instructors of Introductory Special Education Courses*




*Note*. This figure displays the four topics that are foundational knowledge for instructors, briefly describing each topic, its overall importance, and the impact of including the topic in introductory special education courses.

### *Understanding and Importance of Teaching Different Models of Disability*

The concept of disability is very complex. Several models of disability were developed to navigate talking about the concept and identity of disability, including the medical, religious/moral, social, and human rights models (Retief & Letšosa, 2018; See Table 5 for a description of each model). Within this non-exhaustive list, the most prominent models are the medical model and the social model of disability (Retief & Letšosa, 2018). A recent review found that course sessions or assigned readings related to the different models of disability are

rarely included within introductory special education courses (Chapter 3).

**Table 5**

*Descriptions of the Models of Disability*

| Model of Disability | Description |
|---|---|
| Medical Model | Views disability as a medical condition that needs to be treated or cured, often leading to the perception of disabled individuals as deficient and in need of special accommodations to fit into mainstream society (Retief & Letšosa, 2018). |
| Religious/Moral Model | Attributes disability to moral or spiritual reasons, often viewing it as a test, punishment, or blessing, perpetuating stigma and discrimination (Retief & Letšosa, 2018). |
| Social Model | Argues that disability arises from societal barriers and lack of accessibility, advocating for environmental and attitudinal changes (Retief & Letšosa, 2018). |
| Human Rights Model | An extension of the social model, the human rights model emphasizes that disabled people have the same rights and freedoms as others, promoting equality and inclusion by focusing on the rights and dignity of disabled individuals (Retief & Letšosa, 2018). |

Understanding these models helps preservice special education teachers critically analyze how different perspectives of disability influence educational practices and policies (Retief & Letšosa, 2018). Educators familiar with the social and human rights models are better equipped to advocate for systemic changes that support all students, rather than just accommodating individual needs (Heroux & Peters, 2020). Learning about the limitations of the medical and religious models and the potential of the social and human rights models fosters empathy and a deeper understanding of the challenges disabled individuals face (Retief & Letšosa, 2018) and will allow instructors to better engage in class discussions with their students about these models.

### *Understanding and Importance of Teaching Language Use*

The language used to describe disability has profound implications, as this language signals to the ways in which the speaker views disability (Sharif et al., 2022). Generally, when an instructor uses deficit-based language to discuss disability (e.g., “the student is incapable of working independently”), this language indirectly communicates that disability is a bad thing (Elder et al., 2018). When an instructor prioritizes the able-bodied parents’ perspectives over the disabled child’s perspective, this indirectly communicates that the needs, wants, and desires of disabled people are second to what the parents want. The words we use and the approach we take in discussing disability matter. Alternatively, when an instructor uses strengths-based language (e.g., “the student can complete their work with the support of a paraprofessional”) or includes the perspectives and priorities of the disabled individual it conveys respect and recognition of their inherent value (Elder et al., 2018). This approach fosters an environment where disabled individuals feel empowered and understood, ultimately promoting a more inclusive and supportive community.

Additionally, the debate of whether to use person-first or identify-first language has steadily been gaining attention over the years (Sharif et al., 2022). Person-first language (e.g., "person with autism") emphasizes the individual before their disability, whereas identity-first language (e.g., "Autistic person") emphasizes that disability is an integral part of an individual’s identity (Sharif et al., 2022). The decision to use person-first versus identity-first language can shape how society views disability, and emphasizing the preferred language of the disability community can help combat stigma and promote more positive perceptions. In academic settings within the US, the use of person-first language has been a standard since the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990 (Ziegler, 2020), but this has been

shifting in recent years (Brown & Ramlackhan, 2022). Additionally, individuals with certain disability identities, such as autism, have developed a culture and sense of pride around their disability identity and have indicated a preference for the identity-first language of "autistic" over "has autism" (Brown & Ramlackhan, 2022). Still, because there is no clear consensus on which terminology to use when referring to disabled individuals, it is best to ask the individual about their language preference[11]. Most importantly, we should avoid using euphemisms that are condescending or which imply the individual is a victim of their disability (e.g., victim of, suffers from, differently abled, or special needs). Preservice special education teachers who understand and address these language nuances can create a more inclusive and empowering environment for their students, helping them feel seen, respected, and valued.

Instructors of special education courses must be knowledgeable about the implications of language use when discussing disability before teaching it to their pre-service special education teachers. This foundational understanding is essential to avoid reinforcing harmful stereotypes and to ensure that they can effectively communicate the complexities of these issues. Without this knowledge, instructors risk perpetuating misunderstandings and biases, which can hinder the creation of an inclusive learning environment. Well-informed instructors can model respectful and inclusive language practices, challenge discriminatory behaviors, and foster a classroom environment that values all students. Therefore, it is crucial for instructors to be well-prepared to provide preservice teachers with the tools they need to use language thoughtfully and inclusively. This preparation helps future special educators advocate for and implement policies and practices that promote equity and respect, ultimately contributing to more supportive and equitable

[11] The author recognizes that the personal preference with whom you are speaking or about whom you are referring should be used but when that preference cannot be obtained, the author prescribes to the narrative that a disability is an integral part of one's identity. See Sharif et al. (2022)

learning environments for all students.

### *Understanding and Importance of Teaching Ableism*

Ableism is the discrimination and social prejudice against disabled people, rooted in the belief that the abilities of non-disabled people are superior (Kattari, 2015). Ableism manifests in various forms, from subtle microaggressions to overt discrimination and systemic barriers. Preservice special education teachers who recognize ableism in its various forms can become more sensitive to the experiences of disabled students and work to create a more inclusive environment (Kattari, 2015). Preservice special education teachers equipped with knowledge about ableism can actively challenge discriminatory practices and policies within their schools and communities. By addressing ableism in introduction to special education courses, instructors can educate future teachers on the importance of inclusivity and sensitivity towards disabled students.

Instructors of special education courses must be deeply knowledgeable about ableism and other disability-related topics before teaching them. This understanding ensures they can effectively communicate the complexities of these issues. Without it, they risk reinforcing ableist ideologies and harmful stereotypes (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019). Well-informed instructors can model inclusive practices, challenge discriminatory behaviors, and foster a respectful classroom environment. Therefore, it is helpful for instructors to be well-prepared to provide preservice teachers with the tools needed to create truly inclusive educational settings. This preparation helps future educators recognize and dismantle ableism, contributing to more equitable and supportive learning environments for all students.

### *Understanding and Importance of Teaching Intersectionality*

Intersectionality, a concept introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, examines how various

social identities (e.g., race, gender, disability) intersect to create unique experiences of discrimination and privilege (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality highlights the complex and cumulative way in which different forms of discrimination overlap. Teaching intersectionality can help preservice special education teachers understand the multifaceted nature of identity and how overlapping identities affect students' experiences and opportunities (Varsik & Gorochovskij, 2023). Recognizing intersectionality allows instructors to address the unique challenges faced by students who belong to multiple marginalized groups, promoting a more equitable and inclusive educational environment (Bešić, 2020). Special educators who understand intersectionality are better equipped to advocate for policies and practices that consider the diverse needs and experiences of all students.

Instructors of special education courses must be knowledgeable about intersectionality before teaching it. This foundational understanding is crucial to effectively communicate the complexities of this issue and avoid reinforcing harmful stereotypes or oversimplifications. Without this knowledge, instructors risk perpetuating misunderstandings and biases, which can hinder the creation of an inclusive learning environment (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019). Well-informed instructors can model inclusive practices, challenge discriminatory behaviors, and foster a classroom environment that respects and values all students. Therefore, it is essential for educators to be well-prepared to provide preservice special education teachers with the tools they need to recognize and address the diverse needs of their students. This preparation helps ensure that future educators can advocate for and implement policies and practices that promote equity and inclusion, ultimately contributing to more supportive and equitable learning environments for all students.

## Incorporating Disability Studies Content into Special Education Courses

Once instructors have the foundational knowledge to incorporate this disability studies content into their courses, several pedagogical strategies can be used to ensure preservice special education teachers develop a comprehensive understanding of disability studies perspectives. Intentionally integrating these topics ensures they are seen as fundamental components of a well-rounded education rather than supplementary material. Assigning readings from key texts in disability studies and including discussions on how these perspectives intersect with traditional special education methods is a vital part of this process. Providing opportunities for preservice special education teachers to engage directly with disabled communities through service-learning projects, internships, or partnerships with local organizations is another effective strategy. Such experiences help preservice teachers gain practical insights and empathy, reinforcing theoretical knowledge with real-world applications (Mergler et al., 2017).

An interdisciplinary approach is also beneficial, encouraging preservice special education teachers to explore disability studies through various disciplinary lenses such as sociology, psychology, and law. This approach highlights the multifaceted nature of disability and underscores the importance of understanding it from multiple perspectives. Furthermore, fostering a classroom environment that encourages critical reflection on personal biases and societal norms is important. Reflective journals, group discussions, and peer feedback sessions can help preservice teachers process their learning and challenge their preconceptions about disability (Ashton & Arlington, 2019).

### *Assessing Competency*

It is not simply enough to incorporate disabilities studies; it is also important assess for competency and understanding to ensure that future special educators are not only

knowledgeable about disability studies but also capable of applying these perspectives in their professional practice. Assessing preservice special education teacher's competency in understanding and applying disability studies perspectives requires a combination of formative and summative assessment methods. Reflective essays and journals are effective tools for this purpose (Alt at al., 2022), prompting preservice teachers to articulate their understanding of disability studies concepts and how these have influenced their perspectives on disability and education. These reflections should be assessed for depth of insight, critical thinking, and the ability to connect theoretical knowledge with personal and professional experiences.

Case study analyses are another valuable assessment method, allowing preservice special education teachers to apply disability studies principles to real-world scenarios (Lee et al., 2023). These analyses can be evaluated based on how well preservice teachers identify and address issues of ableism, intersectionality, and the application of different models of disability. Case studies can be found from a variety of different resources including: professional organizations and websites like *The National Center for Learning Disabilities* and *Disability Studies Quarterly*, academic journals and databases, and are often included within textbooks.

Group projects and presentations also provide opportunities for assessment. Preservice special education teachers can be assigned to research, develop, and present solutions to problems related to disability in educational settings. These projects should be assessed on the quality of research, the feasibility of proposed solutions, and the effectiveness of the presentation, with peer evaluations incorporated to assess collaboration and individual contributions.

Examinations and quizzes should include questions on disability studies to ensure that preservice special education teachers have retained key concepts, covering definitions, historical

developments, and the application of different models and theories. Practical assessments, such as creating inclusive lesson plans, modifying classroom environments, or conducting accessibility audits, are also important. These assessments should be evaluated based on preservice teachers' ability to incorporate disability studies perspectives and promote inclusive practices.

Finally, requiring a project that synthesizes preservice special education teachers' learning across their coursework is an excellent way to assess competency. This project could involve comprehensive research, policy analysis, or the development of an educational intervention that incorporates disability studies principles. The project should be assessed on its originality, rigor, and potential impact. An example of potential project is to assign preservice special education teachers to read and write a reflection paper about the book *Disability Visibility: First Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Alice Wong (2020). This book is a short story anthology of disabled peoples' experiences and provides the opportunity for preservice teachers to relate the experiences to what they learned about disability through the lens of other stakeholders (e.g., teachers, the medical system, and families). The last class of the semester can be used as a "book club" in which students discuss the book and connections to the course. A full description of the assignment and sample grading rubric can be found in Appendix A.

**Barriers and Challenges to Incorporating Disability Studies Content into Special Education Teacher Preparation Courses**

We acknowledge that instructors may experience several barriers and challenges when incorporating disability studies content into special education teacher preparation courses, and these barriers may vary significantly across different institutions and programs. The variation in

challenges across different institutions and programs can be attributed to factors such as institutional culture, resources, and faculty expertise (Pritchard et al., 2021). One major barrier is the entrenched traditional focus of special education programs, which often emphasize medical and deficit models of disability over social and human rights perspectives (Connor et al., 2019). This historical focus can make it difficult to introduce and integrate the broader, more inclusive concepts from disability studies. Special education faculty members may also lack training or familiarity with disability studies, leading to resistance or reluctance to adopt new curricula that challenge these established paradigms. Student resistance may also be a challenge. Preservice special education teachers who have been socialized to view disability through a medical or deficit-based lens may struggle to adopt the more inclusive and rights-based perspectives offered by disability studies.

Institutional constraints also play a significant role. Universities and colleges often have established curricula that require lengthy approval processes for any changes, making it challenging to introduce new courses or revise existing courses to include disability studies content. Additionally, there may be limited resources and funding available to support such curricular changes, including hiring new faculty with expertise in disability studies or providing professional development for existing faculty. External accreditation and certification requirements can also impose constraints on the content and structure of teacher preparation programs. These requirements may not yet fully recognize or value the integration of disability studies, posing another layer of difficulty for programs attempting to incorporate these perspectives.

Overall, addressing these barriers requires a multifaceted approach, including advocacy for curricular change, professional development for faculty, and efforts to align accreditation

standards with contemporary understandings of disability. Bridging this gap requires a concerted effort to demonstrate how disability studies perspectives can enhance and complement special education practices, rather than being seen as irrelevant or in opposition. Resistance can be mitigated through thoughtful curriculum design that gradually introduces disability studies concepts and provides opportunities for critical reflection and engagement with disabled communities.

## Recommendations for Special Education Programs

To begin to break down barriers and to support instructors in offering a more comprehensive and inclusive special education teacher preparation program, we have developed several key recommendations for incorporating disability studies concepts. These recommendations aim to move beyond traditional approaches to teaching special education and to incorporate disability studies perspectives that better reflect the diverse experiences and needs of disabled individuals. We offer two options to address this need: 1) a complete overall of the special education program; or 2) a redesign on the introduction to special education course.

### *A Complete Overhaul: Program Redesign*

Our primary but most resource intensive recommendation is that programs should redesign their special education teacher preparation program (Golloher et al., 2022). Within this redesign, we recommend separating the introduction to special education course into two distinct courses. Both courses should be required for students, ensuring a balanced and thorough understanding of the field. One course could focus on disability studies content, reviewing the different models of disability, including the social, cultural, and political aspects of disability, along with the lived experiences and advocacy of disabled individuals. The other course could then concentrate on special education services, including individualized education programs

(IEPs), 504 plans, specific accommodations, and services. This separation of courses would allow for a deeper exploration of each area, ensuring that special educators are well-prepared to address both the systemic and individual aspects of supporting disabled students. Changing the structure of a program can be an intensive undertaking but can be accomplished.

Redesigning an entire program is an intensive undertaking but can have exponential impacts. Recently, Golloher and colleagues (2022) redesigned their university's special education program with the goals of "centering anti-racism and anti-ableism to inspire the next generation of [special education teachers] to adopt a transformative vision for public education" (p. 18). Noting that textbooks overwhelmingly take a medicalized approach, the faculty extended intentional effort to "include supplementary materials through additional readings by disabled authors, first-person narratives, non-traditional media materials, and assignments that included disability representation" (Golloher et al., 2022, p. 25). Additionally, to move away from ableist and deficit language, all course titles and descriptions were examined and improved. For example, the course "Methodologies for English Learners with and without Disabilities" was renamed to "Promoting Access: Teaching for Social Justice at the Intersections of Language and Disability;" and the course titled "Curriculum and Instruction for Mild and Moderate Disabilities" was changed to "Inclusive Pedagogy for Students with Mild/ Moderate Support Needs" (p. 25). Aside from the main goal of redesigning the program to better promote inclusive education, this program-wide approach created a more "streamlined program, allowing candidates to complete their credentials in one calendar year" (p. 28). This redesign demonstrates that, although redesigning a program takes work, it can be accomplished and have benefits beyond pedagogy.

### *When an Overhaul is Not Feasible: Course Redesign*

Recognizing that a complete program overhaul and redesign may be unachievable for some, or may not be an immediate enough change for other programs, we recommend that instructors at least redesign their introductory special education courses that may be otherwise situated with a program that operates under the traditional medicalized approach to special education. In addition to the following recommendations, we have created a sample syllabus (see Appendix B) in which we incorporate each recommendation into an introductory special education course and provide additional resources for instructors.

First, we recommend shifting away from the commonly used "disability of the day" teaching method (Chapter 3; Lunkins et al., 2023) in which the introduction to special education course and accompanying textbook is organized by specific disability categories. Though this approach allows for deep detailed instruction on each of the 13 federally recognized disability categories within IDEA, it often leads to a fragmented understanding of disability (Rapp & Arndt, 2012; see Table 6 for a discussion of the pros and cons of the disability of the day approach). Instead, an introductory course should focus on broader themes and principles that cut across different types of disabilities. This shift encourages a more holistic understanding of disability, emphasizing common experiences, rights, and the social and cultural contexts of disability, rather than compartmentalizing students based on their specific conditions.

Unfortunately, shifting from a “disability of the day” approach will lead to misalignment with many of the currently available textbooks designed for introduction to special education courses. We were able to identify only one introduction to special education textbook that does not use the “disability of the day” approach, *Teaching Everyone: An Introduction to Inclusive Education* by Rapp and Arndt (2012). Because “no textbook on the market had a noncategorical

structure" (Rapp & Arndt, 2012, p. xxiii), this textbook was specifically designed to provide a noncategorical approach to teaching introduction to special education. The textbook is structured into three sections: 1) the history of special education; 2) the educator's role; and 3) instructional strategies by content area. Despite this shift from categorical instruction, the textbook still aligns with the Council for Exceptional Children's (CEC) Initial Content Standards and the online companion materials indicate the standards that are covered within each chapter, along with easy documentation of alignment to provide to curriculum committees.

**Table 6**

*Pros and Cons of the "Disability of the Day" Structure in Special Education Pedagogy*

| Pros | Cons |
|---|---|
| **Depth of Understanding** | **Limited Contextualization** |
| Facilitates a profound understanding of each disability category. | Restricts students' understanding of disability within broader social, cultural, and historical contexts. |
| Engages deeply with the nuances and complexities of each condition. | Requires extensive amounts of time to teacher each disability in depth |
| **Targeted Instruction** | **Fragmented Understanding** |
| Allows for targeted instruction tailored to the specific needs and characteristics of each disability. | Risks fostering a fragmented understanding of disability among students. |
| Addresses unique challenges, intervention strategies, and accommodations. | Isolates disabilities into distinct sessions, hindering holistic perspectives. |
| **Enhanced Engagement** | **Overemphasis on Labeling** |
| May enhance student engagement and participation through structured and focused content. | Reinforces a deficit-based view of disability by centering on diagnostic labels and impairments. |
| Increases retention of information and fosters a dynamic classroom environment. | May perpetuate stereotypes and stigmatization, overshadowing individuals' strengths and diverse identities. |
| **Clear Organization** | **Lack of Holistic Perspective** |
| Provides a clear and organized framework for instructors and students. | Limits engagement with broader interdisciplinary perspectives, overlooking social, cultural, and policy dimensions. |

Second, course resources should intentionally include content created by disabled individuals from multiple backgrounds (Golloher et al., 2022; Lukins et al., 2023). This inclusion ensures that preservice special education teachers learn directly from those who experience disability, providing authentic perspectives that challenge stereotypes and broaden understanding. Texts, videos, guest lectures, and other materials should feature diverse voices within the disabled community, highlighting intersections with race, gender, sexuality, and other identities.

Third, a deliberate comparison between traditional special education teaching methods and approaches that incorporate disability studies content should be included in the curriculum (Golloher et al., 2022; Lukins et al., 2023). Traditional special education often lacks a critical examination of the societal and cultural dimensions of disability. By integrating disability studies, instructors can address these gaps, providing a more comprehensive framework that includes social justice, advocacy, and the lived experiences of disabled individuals. This comparison should be an explicit part of the curriculum, helping students understand the limitations of conventional methods and the benefits of a more inclusive approach. See Golloher et al., 2022 and Lukins et al., 2023 for additional recommendations for disability representation.

**Conclusion**

Implementing these recommendations will require thoughtful planning and collaboration among faculty, administrators, and disabled community members. However, these changes are key for preparing preservice special education teachers to create inclusive, equitable, and empowering educational environments (Golloher et al., 2022; Jordan, 2018; Lukins et al., 2023). By moving beyond traditional methods and incorporating diverse perspectives, special education

teacher preparation programs can better equip future special educators to support all students, advocate for their rights, and promote social justice within the education system.

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## APPENDIX A:

## DESCRIPTION AND RUBRIC FOR DISABILITY VISIBILITY BOOK REPORT

Disability Visibility Book Report

Purpose: Reading the book *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century* offers an invaluable opportunity for you as future educators to gain deep insights into the lived experiences of disabled individuals. This collection of first-person narratives provides a powerful platform for understanding the unique challenges, triumphs, and aspirations of disabled people, in their own words.

By delving into the personal stories within this book, students gain the opportunity to develop empathy and awareness that transcends academic knowledge. These firsthand perspectives seek to not only foster a deeper understanding of the diverse needs and strengths of disabled individuals but also promote a more inclusive approach to education. This book encourages educators to move beyond stereotypes and preconceived notions, ultimately empowering them to create more meaningful and effective learning environments that caters to the individual needs of each student. In an era where inclusivity and diversity are at the forefront of educational practices, *Disability Visibility* equips everyone with the essential tools to advocate for, support, and amplify the voices of disabled individuals, fostering a more compassionate and inclusive future in education.

**Instructions:** Using the attached rubric, write a 1.5-2.5 page book report.

Rubric

| | | Points Available | Points Received |
|---|---|---|---|
| Title Page | -Title page includes name and book title | 5 | |
| Book Summary | -Provide a brief summary of the book. | 15 | |
| Book Reflection | -Discuss your thoughts on the book and the stories that are within.<br>-Discuss the importance of prioritizing disabled voices when discussing disability. | 25 | |
| Class Reflection | -Discuss how the book connects to our class.<br>-Discuss how you can take topics learned in our class and promote disability justice in your future classes and in your work as a teacher. | 25 | |
| Formatting | -Template was used.<br>-Times New Roman size 12 font<br>-Double spaced<br>-Page Requirement-1.5 - 2.5 pages | 5 | |
| TOTAL POINTS | | ____/75 | |

## APPENDIX B:

## MOCK SYLLABUS FOR INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL EDUCATION COURSE

**SPED 101: Special Education for All**
**[Semester Year]**
[DAY(S)], [TIME] [LOCATION]

**Instructor Information** **Email:**

**[Name]** **Office Hours:**

**[Department]**

### Course Information

**Course Description:**
This course has a strong emphasis on the examination of the social construction of ability, as well as the resulting beliefs and attitudes that shape public policy and educational practice for all students. Issues of citizenship and marginalization in the classroom, advocacy, community services, and transition to adulthood are addressed. This course includes study of the disability rights movement, legislation affecting students with disabilities, characteristics of the disabilities identified in the IDEA, and experiences of students with disability labels in school. Inclusive classroom practices are introduced.

**Course Objectives**

[Insert]

**School / Department Conceptual Framework**

[Insert]

**Relevant Professional Standards**

[list all professional standards the course meets for the program, state, and certification]

**Required Technology:**

[list all technology/accounts needed for course]

**Required Text:**

- Rapp, W. & Arndt, K. (2012). *Teaching Everyone: An Introduction to Special Education.* Brookes Publishing.
- Wong, A. (Ed.). (2020). *Disability visibility: First-person stories from the twenty-first century*. Vintage. ISBN 9781984899422

## Grading

[Insert department grading scale]

## Assignments

**Mini-Project on Cases/Legislation:**

The Mini-Project on Cases/Legislation is designed to deepen your understanding of the historical and current legal framework governing special education. You will select a landmark case or piece of legislation related to special education, research its background, development, and impact, and present your findings to the class. This project will help you explore how legal decisions and policies shape educational practices and influence the lives of students with disabilities.

This mini-project aims to develop a thorough understanding of significant legal cases and legislation in special education. Students will analyze the historical context and implications of these legal frameworks, enhancing their research, presentation, and critical thinking skills. Additionally, the project will foster a comprehensive understanding of the rights and advocacy efforts for individuals with disabilities.

**Disability in Society Presentation:**

Once during the semester, you will find an event or topic that connects to our class and present on it. The event or topic can be a wide variety of things including a news article/video, magazine article, cartoon, advertisement, tv show/movie, book, and many more. The event or topic must address issues of disability or be relevant to the topics in this course. Examples include the movie CODA (Children of Deaf Adults), a clothing company creating an adaptive line, a lawsuit or court case relevant to class. In addition, **the event or topic must have occurred/been published within the past four years (20XX-20XX).** If you are unsure if your topic is relevant/appropriate for the project, email the instructor.

You will lead a brief discussion (around 5 minutes) of your event or topic, including a description of what it is, how it relates to the class, and **at least two discussion questions for the class**. If you use a video (such as a news segment), you must supplement it with additional information (other than what is provided in the video).

**Book Report**

The last project of the semester will be a book report. This project will consist of reading the book *Disability Visibility* and reflecting on the book in relation to the information presented in class throughout the semester. Purpose: Reading the book 'Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century' offers an invaluable opportunity for you as future special educators to gain deep insights into the lived experiences of disabled individuals. This collection of first-person narratives provides a powerful platform for understanding the unique challenges, triumphs, and aspirations of disabled people, in their own words. By delving into the personal stories within this book, students gain the opportunity to develop empathy and awareness that

transcends academic knowledge. This firsthand perspective not only fosters a deeper understanding of the diverse needs and strengths of disabled individuals but also promotes a more inclusive and person-centered approach to education. The book encourages educators to move beyond stereotypes and preconceived notions, ultimately empowering them to create more meaningful and effective learning environments that cater to the individual needs of each student. In an era where inclusivity and diversity are at the forefront of educational practices, 'Disability Visibility' equips special educators with the essential tools to advocate for, support, and amplify the voices of disabled individuals, fostering a more compassionate and inclusive future in special education.

## Policies

[Insert all required/ relevant policies]

**Late Work:**

[Insert policy]

**Attendance:**

[Insert policy]

**Accommodations for Disabilities**

[Insert school/university's policy]

**Academic Honesty Policy**

[Insert school/university's policy]

**Use of Artificial Intelligence**

[Insert school/university's policy]

## Other Important University Policies, Resources, and Support

[Insert relevant school/university's policies, resources, and supports]

**Student Resources**
[Insert relevant school/university's student resources]

**Limits to Confidentiality**
[Insert school/university's policy]

**Grief Absence Policy:**
[Insert school/university's policy]

**Weekly Schedule**: [Given class meets once a week]

| Week | Topics | Read for the Week | Possible In Class Activities |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Week 1** Introduction to Special Education | • Syllabus<br>• *Intersectionality* Disability throughout history<br>• *Ableism*<br>• *Inclusive Education* | • **Syllabus** | • Syllabus review<br>• Community building |
| **Possible Instructor Resources and Additional Content:** | • Young (2014). I'm not your inspiration, thank you very much.<br>• Staff (2013). A life defined not by disability, but love.<br>• Mingus (2022). Feeling the weight: Some beginning notes on disability, access and love.<br>• Gomez & McKee (2020). When special education and disability studies intertwine. | | |
| **Week 2** Social Construction of Disability | • *Critical Disability Studies*<br>• *DisCrit*<br>• *Identity and Disability*<br>• *Use of Identity First Language*<br>• *Social Model of Disability* | • **Teaching Everyone Ch. 1** | • Case studies<br>• Class discussion |
| **Possible Instructor Resources and Additional Content:** | • Vice (2018). How to treat a person with disabilities, according to people with disabilities.<br>• Connor (2019). Why is special education so afraid of disability studies? Analyzing attacks of disdain and distortion from leaders in the field. | | |
| **Week 3** History of Special Education | • Education in the United States<br>• The development of special education<br>• What we want to see | • **Teaching Everyone Ch. 2** | • Group presentations |
| **Possible Instructor Resources and Additional Content:** | • Crenshaw (2016). The urgency of intersectionality.<br>• Hatt (n.d.). Smartness as a cultural practice in schools.<br>• Dumas (2013). 'Losing an arm': Schooling as a site of black suffering. Race, Ethnicity and Education.<br>• Ford Foundation (2020). Intersectionality & disability, featuring Keri Gray, the Keri Gray Group.<br>• Teachings in Education (2019). The history special education | | |

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| **Week 4**<br>Special Education Law and Legislation | • The road traveled<br>• Where we stand<br>• Current context and issues<br>• The trip ahead<br>• *Disability Rights and Advocacy*<br>• *Policy and Legislation* | • **Teaching Everyone Ch. 3** | • Video analysis<br>• Group discussion<br>• Mini-Project on Cases/Legislation |
| **Possible Instructor Resources and Additional Content:** | • Elliott (2008). Body & soul: Diana & Kathy: Disability advocates model a grand experiment in independent living.<br>• Heumann (2017). Our fight for disability rights -- and why we're not done yet.<br>• Iris (2018). What women with autism want you to know.<br>• Olympics (2021, August 23). "What does blind look like?" ft. Blind para-swimmer Anastasia Pagonis.<br>• Deaf Culture & Community (n.d.). Hands & voices.<br>• Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Fact Sheet (2020) | | |
| **Week 5**<br>Early Intervention and Child and Adolescent Development | • Development of policy and practices of early intervention<br>• Inclusive early childhood education<br>• Major principles in early intervention and early childhood special education<br>• Theories of child and adolescent development<br>• Impact of developmental theories in the context of school | • **Teaching Everyone Ch. 4**<br>• **Teaching Everyone Ch. 5** | • Role-playing<br>• Collaborative activities |
| **Possible Instructor Resources and Additional Content:** | • Case & Taylor (2005). Language difference or learning disability? Answers from a linguistic perspective<br>• Understood. (2018). LeDerick Horne on Growing up<br>• Love & Beneke (2021). Pursuing justice-driven inclusive education research: Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) in early childhood. | | |
| **Week 6**<br>Classroom Management | • Building community<br>• Classroom management<br>• Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) | • **Teaching Everyone Ch. 6** | • Workshop on creating classroom management plans |

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| **Possible Instructor Resources and Additional Content:** | • Rubin & Noguera (2004). Tracking detracking: Sorting through the dilemmas and possibilities of detracking in practice.<br>• Shevidi (2024). Embracing neurodiversity: Exploring inclusive education practices in neurodiverse-focused schools | | |
| **Week 7** Differentiation and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) | • Differentiation of instruction<br>• UDL<br>• Assistive Technology (AT) | • **Teaching Everyone Ch. 7**<br>• **Teaching Everyone Ch. 8** | • Designing UDL activities<br>• Case study analysis |
| **Possible Instructor Resources and Additional Content:** | • Brady, T. (2017). Universal design for learning—A paradigm for maximum inclusion.<br>• Mauldin (2022). Care tactics: Hacking an ableist world. | | |
| **Week 8** Midterm | • **Midterm Exam** | | Course feedback |
| | | | |
| **Week 9** Assessment | • Assessment in the classroom<br>• Evaluation for special education<br>• Placement and the Individual Education Plan (IEP)<br>• Response to Intervention (RTI) | • **Teaching Everyone Ch. 9** | • Assessment tool development<br>• Group discussion |
| **Possible Instructor Resources and Additional Content:** | • Institute of Education Sciences. (n.d.) Culturally responsive assessment: Goals, challenges, and implications.<br>• Scott, et al. (2017). An evaluation of culturally responsive practices in Special Education program for preservice educators. | | |
| **Week 10** Collaboration | • Collaboration best practices: Home, School, and agencies<br>• Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) | • **Teaching Everyone Ch. 10** | • Panel discussion<br>• Collaboration project planning |
| **Possible Instructor Resources and** | • Buren et al. (2020). Meta-synthesis on the experiences of families from nondominant communities and special education collaboration.<br>• Leask (n.d.). Practical advice for cross-cultural collaboration in education. | | |

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| **Additional Content:** | | | |
| **Week 11** Transition from High School to Adult Life | • Issues,<br>• Legislation and processes<br>• Community connections<br>• *Transition Services*<br>• *Employment and Workforce Inclusion* | • **Teaching Everyone Ch. 11** | • Case study transition planning<br>• Group discussion |
| **Possible Instructor Resources and Additional Content:** | • Connor, (2012). Actively navigating the transition into college: narratives of students with learning disabilities.<br>• Eimer (2007). Through the same door: Inclusion includes college. | | |
| **Week 12** Strategies by Content Area - Part I | • Management strategies for all students<br>• Reading strategies for all students<br>• Writing strategies for all students<br>• Social studies strategies for all students | • **Teaching Everyone Ch. 12**<br>***pick 1 chapter to read**<br>• **Teaching Everyone Chs. 13, 14, 15** | • Strategy development workshops |
| **Possible Instructor Resources and Additional Content:** | | | |
| **Week 13** Strategies by Content Area - Part II | • Math strategies for all students<br>• Science strategies for all students<br>• Social and communication strategies for all students<br>• Working with special area teachers<br>• Collaboration with related service professionals | • **Teaching Everyone Ch. 19**<br>***pick 1 chapter to read**<br>• **Teaching Everyone Chs. 16, 17, 18** | • Strategy development workshops |

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| **Possible Instructor Resources and Additional Content:** | | | |
| **Week 14** Book Report Project Presentations and Course Wrap-up | • Debrief Course: Teaching for Change | • ***Disability Visibility*** | • Book report discussion<br>• Course evaluation and feedback |
| **Possible Instructor Resources and Additional Content:** | • Wong (n.d.). Disability Visibility resources and videos. | | |
| **Week 15 Finals Week** | • **Final exam** | | |

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# CHAPTER 5

# CONCLUSION

Historically, disability studies has not been an integral part of special education content (Kauffman et al., 2017). This dissertation focused on the integration of disability studies within the teaching of special education, examining both personal and systemic perspectives. The primary goal was to illustrate a path for inclusion of disability studies to enhance the teaching of special education, promoting more inclusive and effective educational experiences for teaching future special educators about disability. To accomplish this goal, three studies were conducted. The first study (Chapter 2) was a critical autoethnography of my experience navigating a special education doctoral program with the newly discovered AuDHD identity. It discusses my experiences as a researcher navigating my newly discovered disabled identity, the dissonance in my understanding of disability identity and the presentation of disability within special education courses, attempts at integrating disability studies content into my courses, and analyzing my experiences within intersectionality and CWS.

The findings from Chapter 2 (Study 1) highlighted that the way that my special education department navigates the concept of disability can be othering and alienating to those who discover later in life that they are disabled. Expanding on this finding, Study 2 (Chapter 3) examined whether my experience was systemic within the field of special education through an analysis of 10 of the top 12 undergraduate special education program's introductory special education classes. Thirty syllabi were analyzed for the inclusion of 16 disability studies terms. Findings indicated that disability studies content is limitedly included within 10 of the top 12 special education undergraduate programs.

Informed by the findings from Chapter 3 (Study 2), Study 3 (Chapter 4) provides

rationale and a roadmap for undergraduate introduction to special education courses to include disability studies content, transitioning from the commonly used practice of "disability of the day," categorical approach to special education to a more humanistic approach.

**Chapter 1**

Chapter One provided a comprehensive overview of disability studies and special education, setting the stage for the dissertation's exploration of their integration. This chapter discussed the historical context and foundational principles of both fields, highlighting the critical need for incorporating disability studies into the teaching of special education. By examining the social and cultural constructs of disability, this chapter laid the path for a more informed and inclusive approach to the teaching of special education

**Chapter 2 (Study 1)**

Chapter Two employed a critical autoethnography approach, offering a personal and reflective analysis of the researcher's experiences within the higher education system. Diverging from the narrative of able-bodied academic expert on disability, this chapter discusses the lived realities of navigating both disability identity and special education student and instructor from a unique perspective. Through this narrative, the researcher provided insights into the systemic challenges of navigating higher education while navigating a newly identified disabled identity. Additionally, it describes attempts at integrating more disability-affirming narratives into educational practice, underscoring the importance of personal experience in understanding broader educational dynamics.

**Chapter 3 (Study 2)**

Chapter Three presented a critical analysis of special education programs, analyzing the special education syllabi from 10 of the top twelve undergraduate special education programs in

the US. This chapter identified the extent to which disability studies content is currently incorporated into introductory special education courses at the undergraduate level. The findings revealed significant gaps and inconsistencies in the inclusion of disability studies content, highlighting the need for a more systematic and comprehensive integration. The analysis provided a clear picture of the current landscape and identified areas for improvement in curriculum design.

**Chapter 4 (Study 3)**

Chapter Four served as a practical guide for integrating disability studies content into introductory special education classes for future special educators at the college level. This chapter offered specific strategies and resources for instructors to incorporate disability studies principles into their teaching. By providing detailed examples and practical applications, this chapter aimed to bridge the gap between theory and practice, equipping instructors of special education courses with the tools they need to create more inclusive and effective educational environments.

**Significance of the Results**

By integrating these two fields of special education and disability studies, instructors can develop more nuanced and effective approaches to teaching future special education teachers about disability (Freedman et al., 2019). Unfortunately, current courses within the top special education programs were found to have limited disability studies content integrated into their introductory special education courses (Chapter 3). Within Chapter 2, the process, and successes of integrating disability studies into an introduction to special education course were described. Chapter 4 expands on this process, providing future direction and lays out how introduction to special education courses can have disability studies content integrated, including a sample

syllabus using a textbook that takes a non-categorical approach to teaching about disability. This integration not only benefits the students by fostering a more inclusive learning environment but also enriches the educational practices and perspectives of educators.

**Implications and Future Directions**

The implications of this research extend well beyond the classroom. Policymakers and educational leaders should consider the findings when developing and implementing special education teacher preparation programs. There is a clear need for policies that support the integration of disability studies into special education, including funding for training programs and resources to support educators. Future research should continue to explore the practical applications of disability studies in various educational settings and examine the long-term outcomes of such integrations.

Looking ahead, several key areas for future research and development emerge. One significant area is curriculum development. Further research should focus on developing and testing specific curricula that integrate disability studies into special education teacher preparation programs. These curricula should be designed to equip educators with the knowledge and skills needed to implement inclusive practices effectively.

Another important area is the need for longitudinal studies. Conducting longitudinal studies to track the outcomes of students and educators involved in integrated programs will provide deeper insights into the long-term benefits and challenges of integrating disability studies into special education. Such studies can help to identify best practices and inform future educational policies and practices.

**Concluding Thoughts**

This dissertation underscores the transformative potential of integrating disability studies

into the teaching of special education to future special educators. The findings call for continued research, policy support, and practical implementation to ensure that all students receive the inclusive and effective education they deserve.

The integration of disability studies into special education represents a crucial step towards creating a more inclusive and equitable educational system. This research has demonstrated that such integration is not only necessary to move past the categorical and deficit-lens inherent within common approaches to special education (Chapter 3, Study 2), it is feasible through the researcher's own experience (Chapter 2, Study 1) and replicable across all introduction to special education courses (Chapter 4, Study 3). The central thesis of this research is that incorporating disability studies into special education curricula and practice can significantly improve the discourse around disability. Improving the discourse can have a cascading benefit. If preservice teachers are taught a more disability-affirming approach to special education, their teaching practices in their future classrooms will be impacted. These disability-affirming practices can impact countless students each year and can have even more branching impacts far beyond the classroom. This integration is situated to foster a more inclusive educational environment that recognizes and addresses the diverse experiences of disabled students, thereby enriching the educational landscape as a whole. By adopting the principles of disability studies, educators can move beyond traditional approaches and create more responsive and inclusive educational environments.

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