Infusing Disability Justice in General Education Teacher Preparation Settings: An Imperative for Inclusion

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Abstract: Without intentional integration of disability justice principles, teacher preparation programs (TPPs) may perpetuate the appearance of inclusion without the structural transformation needed to center students' agency, perspectives, and rights (Freedman et al., 2019). While some special education programs have started this integration (Ko et al., 2023), there are still limitations in general education programs. Inspired by the Salamanca Statement's vision for inclusion, we explored how infusing disability justice principles in the context of a general

education literacy methods course contributed to dismantling traditional inclusion barriers, while priming teacher candidates (TCs) for work in inclusive settings. Our study was framed by the principles of disability justice (Berne et al., 2018), complemented by Kafer's (2013) and Mingus's (2011) lens. Gathering data from class discussions and journals of undergraduate teacher candidates ($n = 78$), we highlighted the transformative, positive impact of incorporating disability justice in general education. TCs celebrated disability as an identity and critically questioned the role of ableism in education and their professional lives. Becoming more confident, TCs felt more prepared and committed to working in inclusive settings. Recommendations were provided for general education faculty and programs to consider incorporating disability justice principles as a first step toward meaningful work with diverse populations.
Keywords: teacher preparation; teacher preparation policies; general education; disability justice

La justicia para la discapacidad en la formación docente de educación general: Un imperativo para la inclusión
Resume: Sin una integración intencional de los principios de justicia para la discapacidad, los programas de formación docente (TPP) corren el riesgo de perpetuar una inclusión meramente superficial, sin generar la transformación estructural necesaria para centrar la agencia, las perspectivas y los derechos de los estudiantes (Freedman et al., 2019). Si bien algunos programas de educación especial han iniciado esta integración (Ko et al., 2023), aún persisten limitaciones en los programas de educación general. Inspirados en la visión de la Declaración de Salamanca para la inclusión, exploramos cómo la incorporación de los principios de justicia para la discapacidad en el contexto de un curso de métodos de lectura en educación general contribuyó a desmantelar las barreras tradicionales a la inclusión, al mismo tiempo que preparaba a los candidatos a docentes (CTs) para trabajar en entornos inclusivos. Nuestro estudio se enmarcó en los principios de justicia para la discapacidad (Berne et al., 2018), complementados con las perspectivas de Kafer (2013) y Mingus (2011). A partir de la recopilación de datos provenientes de discusiones en clase y de diarios reflexivos de los CTs ($n = 78$), destacamos el impacto transformador y positivo de esta incorporación en la educación general. Los participantes celebraron la discapacidad como identidad y cuestionaron críticamente el papel del capacitismo en la educación y en su vida profesional. A medida que adquirieron mayor confianza, se sintieron más preparados y comprometidos con el trabajo en entornos inclusivos. Finalmente, ofrecemos recomendaciones al profesorado y a los programas de educación general para que consideren la integración de los principios de justicia para la discapacidad como un primer paso hacia un trabajo más significativo con poblaciones diversas.
Palabras clave: formación docente; políticas de formación docente; educación general; justicia para la discapacidad

A justiça para a deficiência na formação docente da educação geral: Um imperativo para a inclusão
Resumo: Sem uma integração intencional dos princípios da justiça para a deficiência, os programas de formação docente (TPP) correm o risco de perpetuar uma inclusão meramente superficial, sem promover a transformação estrutural necessária para centralizar a agência, as perspectivas e os direitos dos estudantes (Freedman et al., 2019). Embora alguns programas de educação especial já tenham iniciado essa integração (Ko et al., 2023), ainda persistem limitações nos programas de educação geral. Inspirados na visão da Declaração de Salamanca para a inclusão, exploramos como a incorporação dos princípios da justiça para a deficiência no contexto de um curso de métodos de leitura em educação geral contribuiu para desmantelar barreiras tradicionais à

inclusão, ao mesmo tempo em que preparava candidatos/as a docentes (CTs) para atuar em ambientes inclusivos. Nosso estudo foi fundamentado nos princípios da justiça para a deficiência (Berne et al., 2018), complementados pelas perspectivas de Kafer (2013) e Mingus (2011). A partir da análise de dados provenientes de discussões em sala de aula e de diários reflexivos dos CTs (*n* = 78), destacamos o impacto transformador e positivo da incorporação da justiça para a deficiência na educação geral. Os/as participantes celebraram a deficiência como identidade e questionaram criticamente o papel do capacitismo na educação e em sua vida profissional. À medida que adquiriram maior confiança, sentiram-se mais preparados/as e comprometidos/as com o trabalho em contextos inclusivos.Por fim, oferecemos recomendações ao corpo docente e aos programas de educação geral para que considerem a integração dos princípios da justiça para a deficiência como um primeiro passo rumo a um trabalho mais significativo com populações diversas.

Palavras-chave: formação docente; políticas de formação docente; educação geral; justiça para a deficiência

Infusing Disability Justice in General Education Teacher Preparation Settings: An Imperative for Inclusion

Teacher training is fundamental to advancing inclusion in education, as outlined by the Salamanca Statement (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1994; Wehmeyer et al., 2021). In particular, this statement called for teacher education programs to equip educators with the skills necessary to adapt curricula and teaching methods to meet diverse students' needs. Unfortunately, in the United States and many other nations, initial certification policies continue to separate general education teacher preparation programs (TPPs) from their special education counterparts, limiting the ability of general education teacher candidates (TCs) to learn what their special education counterparts do to be effective inclusion practitioners (Kraska & Boyle, 2014; Sharma & Loreman, 2017). Countries such as Germany and Japan continue to maintain rigid dual certification systems that hinder inclusive education (Powell, 2016), while South Africa and Italy face ongoing efforts to align legacy structures with inclusive reform (D'Alessio, 2011; Walton, 2011). Kurth and Foley (2014) argued that TPPs must shift from traditional models that often segregate special education from general education to a more integrated approach that equips TCs with the skills necessary to work effectively in inclusive settings. Similarly, Allday et al. (2013) emphasized the importance of incorporating coursework on inclusive practices within preservice general teacher education, because such training is vital for developing the competencies required to support students with disabilities in general education classrooms. Furthermore, research has shown that the lack of relevant coursework in special education affects the attitudes of general educators toward inclusion (Hernandez et al., 2016; NCLD, 2019), which in turn may create resistance or negative attitudes toward children with disabilities.

While we recognize that many special education TPPs still fall short of fully centering disability justice in their practices, this issue is even more pronounced within general education programs (Ko et al., 2023). The ongoing divide between special education and general education demonstrates the need to address this gap explicitly, particularly because general education programs often fail to incorporate disability justice completely. Our study focuses on the general education context, where it is essential to promote an understanding of inclusion through a disability justice lens as a core component of teaching, rather than as an optional or supplemental aspect of the curriculum.

The Reality of Initial Teacher Preparation Programs in the United States

In the last 20 years, some teacher educators have intentionally worked to dismantle the structural separation between general and special education preparation, aligning their efforts with disability studies perspectives and disability justice principles. For example, Cosier and Ashby (2016) contended that maintaining distinct teacher education tracks reinforces a medicalized framework that positions ability and disability as opposing categories rather than as part of a continuum. This binary thinking contributes to the ongoing separation of educational settings, making TCs, both in special and general education, less likely to be prepared to support all students.

Despite these emergent efforts, an examination of the structure of teacher education programs in the United States revealed a significant trend in the separation of general education and special education training (Special Education Resource Project, n.d.). In the United States, although over 95% of all students with an identified disability attend general education or inclusive classrooms (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024), most initial TPPs are still segregated, offering general education programs separate from special education programs. Only seven U.S. states require general education teachers to take special education courses (NCLD, 2019). Blanton et al. (2016) reviewed the variability in initial licensure policies across states, noting that some states require a general education license before obtaining a special education license, while others offer a stand-alone special education license. Some states require specific coursework, while others do not specify how knowledge and skills in this area should be developed (Burdette & Smith, 2013). This inconsistency can lead to disparities in the preparedness of general education teachers across different states (Burdette & Smith, 2013). Furthermore, the artificial distinction between general and special education programs can create barriers to collaboration between teacher candidates, as general educators may not receive adequate training in special education strategies (Blanton et al., 2018). Perceptions of inclusion also differ significantly between special and general education teachers, with special education teachers having a higher level of agreement with inclusive education. (Lubin & Fernal, 2022; Saloviita, 2020; Zhang et al., 2024).

Given that this study is heavily centered around disability justice infusion, it is important to point out that while special education programs have been criticized for not centering disability justice, often reinforcing a medical view of disability (Allan, 2006; Keifer-Boyd et al., 2018), there are a few programs that incorporate disability justice as a foundational aspect of their coursework (Ashby, 2012; Naraian & Schlesinger, 2017; Oyler, 2011). However, these courses are generally intended for students pursuing programs in special or inclusive education, limiting the opportunity for general education TCs to get exposure to disability justice concepts as part of their program (Ko et al., 2023). Research has shown that exposure to disability justice prepares TCs for the hard work of inclusion (Freedman et al., 2019).

In response to the need for better preparation for inclusive education, dual certification programs are becoming more common. These programs enable teacher candidates to earn both general and special education licenses simultaneously (Pugach & Blanton, 2012). However, the implementation of such programs also varies widely across states, reflecting the decentralized nature of the U.S. education system (Pugach & Blanton, 2012). Furthermore, the effectiveness of those programs has been mixed.

On the one hand, Gilmour and Wehby (2020) demonstrated that dual-certification teachers may experience higher turnover rates than their special education counterparts, particularly in classrooms with neurotypical students or children with more complex disabilities. This may indicate a flaw in dual-certification programs, which often condense both general and special education training into shorter timelines, potentially sacrificing depth in both areas. This perspective was confirmed by Gomez-Najarro et al. (2023), who contended that many dual certification programs

are structurally siloed, combining two separate tracks rather than reimagining a unified pedagogy of inclusion. As a result, dual-certified teachers may feel underprepared for the demands of inclusive education. On the other hand, Kirksey and Lloydhauser (2022) found that dual certification is associated with positive outcomes for children with disabilities and their teachers. Gomez-Najarro et al. (2023) also proposed that teachers prepared in integrated dual certification programs may redefine their professional identity as educators responsible for *all* students, not just those in general or special education.

Nonetheless, dual certification pathways remain onerous for teacher candidates in terms of credits, time, and financial commitments; hence, they are not an option for many TCs. Given these limitations, the minimal state requirements for general education candidates regarding exposure to skills and dispositions toward diverse learners are of great concern. Since many states do not mandate comprehensive coursework in special education for general education teachers, this can lead to TCs' gaps in knowledge and preparedness (Bateman et al., 2019).

Reinforcing this dilemma is Clausen et al.'s (2022) report demonstrating that while most TPPs require preservice teachers to take an introductory special education course, this is often the only course devoted to special education. This introductory course, often referred to as SPED 101, typically provides only basic information about special education and may not cover the complexities of teaching students with diverse needs (Clausen et al., 2022), particularly in the context of disability justice. As a result, 60% of general education teachers feel only somewhat prepared, 17% feel well prepared, and 30% feel strongly prepared (NCLD, 2019). More worrisome, the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD, 2019) reported that "only 50% of surveyed teachers feel strongly that the 1 in 5 [children with learning disabilities] can achieve at grade-level standards" (p. 13) and "only 56% of [general education] teachers surveyed believe IEPs provide value to students, and just 38% believe IEPs help them be better teachers" (p.14). These findings suggest a common lack of confidence in students' potential and in the tools designed to support their learning among general education teachers. This lack of trust may hurt inclusive practices and limit educational results for students with disabilities.

As a counterpoint to this lack of preparatory programs, McCray and Alvarez McHatton (2011) revealed that general education teachers who completed special education courses exhibited significantly more positive attitudes toward inclusion compared to those who had not received such training. Despite this, however, the lack of interdepartmental/inter-program (general vs. special education) training remains an issue of research focus since the early years of inclusive education (Smith & Edelen-Smith, 2002). Based on their results, Smith and Edelen-Smith (2002) envisioned continuing difficulty implementing transdepartmental teacher training programs. Harvey et al. (2010) confirmed that perception as well, given that training preservice teachers more effectively in collaboration and inclusion would require important changes to preservice teacher-education programs and majors, namely, a shared vision of program practice and philosophy, the establishment of an integrated program, opportunities for special education and general education collaboration on preservice training activities and opportunities, and a newly designed, comprehensive training program for teaching majors.

As demonstrated, policy frameworks are embedded in the ways teacher preparation is conceptualized in the United States. However, the first step to breaking silos and enacting collaboration, we argue, is not simply adding more special education coursework to general education programs but, more importantly, introducing all TCs, particularly general education preservice teachers, to an understanding of disability justice and how it shapes their interactions with children with disabilities.

Why Disability Justice for General Education TCs?

The integration of disability justice across *all* teacher preparation programs, both in special and general education, is critical and should not be overlooked. Ko et al. (2023) further emphasized that when programs are grounded in disability justice frameworks, they experience a paradigmatic shift, both at the programmatic and course levels, toward more equitable and inclusive educational practices. As noted earlier, special education programs vary in the extent to which they incorporate the foundational principles of disability justice; sadly, this gap is even more pronounced in general education TPPs. In a systematic literature review, Ko et al. (2023) found that most examples of TPPs integrating disability justice were situated within inclusion or special tracks.

For general education teacher educators, who are the focus of this study, the infusion of disability justice principles (DJPs), as defined by Berne et al. (2018), is a step on the way to promoting inclusion. These principles were developed by activists focused on disability rights to highlight the importance of collective work in achieving liberation. Including DJPs is essential for fostering inclusive educational environments that recognize and address the systemic inequities facing individuals with disabilities. The DJPs framework prepares educators to advocate for and implement inclusive practices in a meaningful way, moving beyond surface-level inclusion because it readies TCs to recognize that ableism is intimately connected with other oppressions, such as racism, sexism, and heterosexism. It allows TCs to visualize how systemic problems, like capitalism and disparate access to healthcare, affect students' lives both inside and outside the classroom. Crucial to this understanding is the leadership and representation of individuals with disabilities, which can significantly influence how preservice teachers think about and perceive their future students with disabilities. One primary reason for integrating DJPs into teacher preparation is to challenge and reshape underlying beliefs about disability. Lee-Rambharose et al. (2024) argued that traditional inclusion models often overlook larger structural issues of inequity, positioning "exclusion" as the primary problem. Moreover, understanding the historical context of disability education underpins the recognition that structural changes are needed in TPPs.

Koutsovasili et al. (2024) demonstrated that integrating social justice principles related to disability into teacher education curricula enhanced teachers' self-efficacy, positive attitudes towards children with disabilities, and ability to implement inclusive practices. These findings emphasized the urgency to incorporate disability justice into all teacher preparation, but especially in general education, where not only TCs will not have the exposure to special education coursework (including DJP) but their credential in *itself* otherizes children with disabilities (Wexler & Derby, 2015). The need for social justice in education is becoming more widely acknowledged for its broader implications. Öngel and Tabancali (2022) argued that TPPs must challenge power-knowledge hierarchies by giving educators the tools to address ethical dilemmas related to social justice.

By embedding DJPs into general education programs, colleges can empower future general educators to advocate for equitable practices and challenge systemic inequities within the educational system. Genol et al. (2022) and Bialka and Morro (2018) emphasized the importance of enhancing teacher training to prioritize social justice and inclusive education. In these troubling political times in the United States, preservice teachers must develop empathy and a critical understanding of the ongoing challenges that individuals with disabilities encounter. This is particularly important for general education educators, as research indicates they often hold less favorable attitudes toward the inclusion of students with disabilities compared to their special education counterparts (Hernandez et al., 2016).

The Current Study

Before learning skills to support children with disabilities through special education coursework, we propose that general education TCs, who have limited exposure to inclusion principles and practices, would benefit from the infusion of DJPs in their general education coursework. While we acknowledge that special education programs would also benefit from this infusion, given the scope of this study, we will focus on general education programs. This approach encourages general education teachers to view inclusion not only as a legal obligation but also as a "moral imperative" (Tracy-Bronson, 2024) that benefits all learners.

Purpose

While this study did not attempt to directly resolve structural policy, it presents a step toward addressing the fragmentation in teacher education and advocating for transformative change. There is an urgent need for a new approach to bridge the divide between general and truly inclusive special education teacher preparation. Previous literature has addressed this issue through larger systemic changes (i.e., dual certification programs or additional special education courses). We propose a more sustainable and reachable approach by incorporating DJPs into methods courses. This study critically engaged with the systemic policy divisions that artificially separate general and special education teacher preparation, highlighting how these divisions contribute to entrenched notions of "otherness" in education. By exploring how integrating DJPs within a literacy methods course challenges these separations and promotes a disability justice lens, we hoped to illuminate both ideological and structural barriers that hinder inclusive teacher preparation. As such, the research questions guiding this study were:

RQ1. How do TCs perceive children with disabilities before and after engaging with disability justice and representation in a literacy methods course?

RQ2. How do TCs describe their preparedness to work with children with disabilities after completing a literacy methods course that incorporates disability justice principles, and how do these perceptions reflect broader tensions in teacher education policy?

Conceptual Framing

This study was framed by the tenets of disability justice, as conceptualized by the activist organization Sins Invalid (Berne et al., 2018) and enriched by other scholars of the disability movement: Kafer's (2013) political and relational model of disability and Mingus's (2011) access intimacy conceptualizations. See Table 1 for a summary of these principles. Love and Beneke (2021) argued that justice-driven inclusive education research is necessary to challenge the racialized and ableist notions of normalcy that permeate education. While many studies draw on DisCrit (Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory; Annamma et al., 2012) to reflect these values, this study found DJPs to be a more fitting framework, as they offer a more expansive, intersectional approach that explicitly integrates activism and community-driven transformation within existing educational structures.

By centering the voices of marginalized communities, both DJPs and DisCrit advocate for systemic change that prioritizes equity and inclusion. Despite the intersection, DJPs have distinctive features that make them an ideal framework for our analysis. Specifically, DJPs, written by Sins Invalid, were informed by the experiences and activism of individuals and communities with disabilities, particularly BIPOC (Black Indigenous, People of Color), linguistically diverse, and queer/trans individuals. These tenets are often articulated through grassroots movements and community organizing that honor their foundation. Furthermore, DJPs are used in many areas,

including healthcare, social services, and community organizing. They promote change that meets the needs of people with disabilities in all areas of life. Community engagement and collective action, as well as economic justice for individuals with disabilities, are essential components of the framework. Justice must include universal access to healthcare, housing, and income that is not linked to employment status or medical compliance.

While this study is grounded in the tenets of Sins Invalid's disability justice framework, their principles are further strengthened through the work of Kafer (2013) and Mingus (2011). For instance, Kafer's political/relational model intersects and extends Sins Invalid's DJPs, recognizing wholeness and resisting curative narratives, encouraging teacher candidates to reimagine inclusion beyond individual 'fixes' toward systemic transformation. Mingus's (2011) concept of access intimacy offers a powerful expansion of Sins Invalid tenets of collective access and interdependence, inviting educators to understand inclusion not only as a technical task but as a relational and emotional practice rooted in trust, sustainability, and accountability. We integrated these broad principles and ecological views into our methods, guiding our analysis and findings. While one may note that the focus of our research questions and findings should be on how our students conceptualize disability justice within the educational context, we argue that these conceptualizations are not separate from the community impacts of ableism and bias.

Table 1

Disability Justice Principles

Principle	Sins Invalid Framing	Expansion
1. Intersectionality	Recognizes that individuals experience multiple, overlapping forms of oppression, and that disability cannot be understood in isolation from other identities such as race, gender, and class.	Kafer (2013) proposes disability as a relational and intrinsically political identity mediated by social and medical structures, race, gender, sexuality, and time.
2. Collective Access	Emphasizes the importance of creating environments that are accessible to all, rather than focusing solely on individual accommodations.	Mingus (2011) suggests that access should be based on trust, relationship care, and emotional understanding (access intimacy) rather than solely on physical or procedural changes.
3. Interdependence	Acknowledges that all individuals rely on one another. Society should foster relationships that support mutual aid and cooperation.	Mingus (2011) supports the idea of interdependence as a political and ethical choice vs. neoliberal individualism.
4. Social Model of Disability	Advocates for understanding disability as a social construct, shaped by societal barriers.	Kafer (2013) enriches the binary of medical vs. social models with a relational/political model. Disability must also be viewed in relation to power, time, and futurity.

Principle	Sins Invalid Framing	Expansion
5. Dismantling Ableism	Calls for the active challenge of ableist structures and ideologies that marginalize disabled individuals.	Similarly, Kafer (2013) links ableism with other systems of domination.
6. Recognition of Historical Context	Emphasizes the importance of understanding the historical and cultural contexts of disability, including the legacies of oppression and resistance.	Kafer's (2013) work encourages thinking historically and futuristically; imagining new futures as a critical act of resistance.
7. Value of Disabled Lives	Asserts that disabled individuals have inherent worth and should be valued for their contributions to society. Explicitly rejects capitalist definitions of value that privilege productivity, individualism, and self-sufficiency. Economic justice is part of this principle.	Kafer (2013) and Mingus (2011) both reject capitalist productivity metrics.
8. Community and Belonging	Promotes the idea that disabled individuals should have a sense of belonging within their communities, and that their needs should be prioritized in community planning.	Mingus (2011) reframes belonging as both political and emotional. True inclusion requires building relationships grounded in trust, shared responsibility, and care.
9. Sustainability	Highlights the need for sustainable practices that support the well-being of disabled individuals and their communities.	Mingus (2011) clarifies how sustainability should be based on collective care practices.
10. Joy and Celebration	Encourages the celebration of disabled lives and the recognition of the joy that can be found in diverse experiences.	Kafer (2013) and Mingus (2011) also frame care, access, and joy as fundamental parts of justice.

(Berne et al., 2018; Kafer, 2013; Mingus, 2011)

Methodology

Utilizing discourse analysis, we highlighted the lived experiences and perceptions of TCs as they explored and critically reflected upon disability justice throughout a literacy methods course. Specifically, we employed critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine the underlying dynamics of power, social inequality, (re)production of dominance, and construction of identities as reflected in the analyzed texts. Lester et al. (2016) confirmed that "it is through language that one goes about constructing their identity, ascribing identities to others, positioning others, etc" (p. 3). This approach enabled us to investigate everyday language interactions within the broader sociopolitical context of education, ableism, and inclusion.

Positionality

The principal investigator (PI) came into this work as the Latina mother of a child with a physical disability who often did not see herself represented in children's literature or found reductionist (if not insulting) notions of how children with disabilities were portrayed in literature. When placed in general education classrooms, the PI's child often encountered teachers who lacked any understanding of her complex identity, often seeing her only as the "special education student" rather than as an individual with a rich intersectional identity. As a teacher educator who teaches TCs in their first year in an undergraduate program, the PI noticed a lack of interest, understanding, and awareness of disability identity among the TCs. Given that most early childhood classrooms in New York City have a large percentage of children with an identified or not identified disability, the PI found this preconception troubling. Thus, this was the impetus behind intentionally infusing DJPs in a course that previously focused solely on skills and methods for emergent literacy. This study focused on this organic project born out of a deeply personal struggle.

Participants and Context

Participants (*n* = 78, mean = 16 per semester) included early childhood undergraduate TCs from an urban public university enrolled in the semester-long introductory early childhood literacy methods class. This class explored crucial concepts of emergent literacy applicable from Birth to Pre-kindergarten. Cohorts attending this course spanned from Fall 2019 to Spring 2023. Interwoven with the content of selected method lessons were discussions about equity and policy, as well as how to apply specific skills using works of literature. In addition, TCs engaged in critical readings of disability justice texts, reviewed social media content from activists, and explored works of literature with positive disability representation within the context of learning specific strategies to teach emergent literacy. TCs were required to enroll in a companion fieldwork course to practice the different content learned in the methods literacy course. As one assignment in the course, TCs completed the Culturally Responsive Scorecard (CRSC; Bryan-Gooden et al., 2023[1]) to assess the diversity of representation in the classroom where they are placed as interns. Deliverables included deep written reflections, one basis of this study's analysis. All data were collected as part of the course and subsequently used for this research, following Institutional Board Review approval.

Data Sources

Two data sources were analyzed to gain both a group and an individual perspective on the impact of infusing DJPs: transcripts of class discussions and document analysis of students' journal entries completed each week as part of their companion fieldwork course.

Transcripts of Class Discussions

A portion of the study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. This facilitated data collection, as class discussions were recorded during that time frame. Zoom room meetings were conducted as part of either a fully remote course or a hyflex modality. We collected these meeting transcripts and analyzed the discussions from each session for instances when DJPs were introduced, explained, or discussed. A total of 35 transcripts were analyzed across the data-gathering timeline, with an average of five transcripts per semester.

Journal Entries

As part of the companion fieldwork course, TCs completed 10 fieldwork reflections per semester. Four of those reflections had specific prompts. The remaining journal entries stemmed

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[1] Older versions were available from 2019 on.

from the TCs' experience in the field and the connections they made with course material, including our class discussions surrounding disability justice. We gathered all journal entries that included terms like disability, representation, justice, and inclusion, or that reflected upon the DJPs discussed in class (*n* = 103).

Data Analysis

Transcripts and journal entries were uploaded to Dedoose, a qualitative coding software, which facilitated data organization and thematic development. The initial phase of coding included the 10 principles of disability justice. The second and third rounds of coding incorporated inductive in-vivo coding, allowing themes to emerge organically from the data. Two coders independently analyzed the transcripts and produced 36 codes, agreeing through an iterative process before collapsing and consolidating codes into five salient themes: ableism, identity, awareness, commitment/advocacy, and structural issues (Figure 1). Discrepancies between coders were resolved through discussion until a consensus was reached.

Figure 1

Themes and Codes
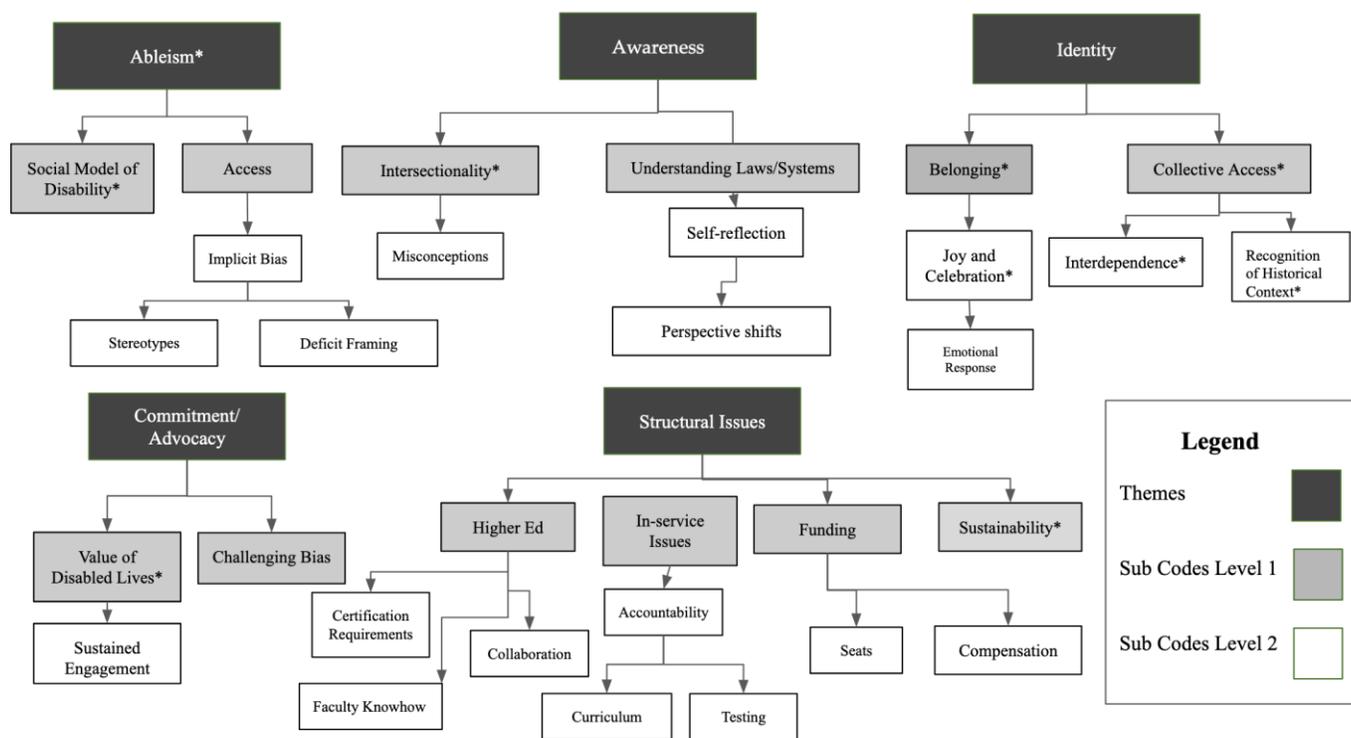
*DJPs

To enhance the validity of the findings, we used several strategies. Researcher triangulation helped ensure that multiple viewpoints shaped the coding process (Patton, 1999). Peer debriefing sessions allowed us to critically examine emerging themes, reduce bias, and refine the analysis (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Reflexivity was also a key consideration throughout the analysis. Given

the interpretative nature of qualitative research, we remained mindful of our own positionalities as researchers and engaged in ongoing reflection to mitigate potential biases (Berger, 2013).

Limitations

While we investigated the perspectives of TCs as they engaged in disability justice discussions and readings as part of their literacy course, we acknowledge that our data sources (journals and class discussions) may signal self-censorship and social desirability bias. TCs may have wanted to align with what they believed the instructor wanted to hear rather than expressing their genuine thoughts. Additionally, the way the material was taught, including the instructor's personal biases and methods, may have influenced student responses and reflections, making it challenging to isolate the effects of the curriculum itself. Nonetheless, since the journals did not include required prompts and students were not asked to incorporate aspects of disability justice into their reflections, we believe they provided an authentic snapshot of what students considered relevant and impactful in their courses.

We acknowledge that the findings may not be widely applicable beyond the specific class, institution, or demographic being studied. However, we believe that the sample size was representative of undergraduate students working in a large urban environment in the United States. Different student populations might respond differently based on prior exposure to disability justice concepts.

Finally, we would be remiss not to point out that a portion of the study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, a mass disabling event. While this facilitated data gathering, as class discussions were recorded during that time frame, it may also have influenced how the TCs understood and applied the concepts learned in class.

Findings

RQ1. How do teacher candidates (TCs) perceive children with disabilities before and after engaging with disability justice and representation in a literacy methods course?

Ableism and Identity

The study revealed that TCs enter general education programs lacking foundational knowledge of disability justice and its connection to teachers' collective responsibility for disability representation. At best, only a few students per semester had ever heard of the terms "disability justice" or "disability identity." This was concerning, given that students were placed in centers or schools that care for and educate children from birth to 5 years old, many of whom are very young, not verbal, and have not been formally diagnosed or received an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Without a foundational understanding of disability as an identity, students may inadvertently reinforce ableist assumptions, overlook early signs of disability, over-refer black and brown children for special education evaluations, or struggle to create inclusive and supportive learning environments. Furthermore, the disability justice lens demands a more critical interrogation, not only of how disability identity is understood but also of how special education systems have historically functioned as sites of racialized, classed, and gendered sorting and segregation (Kafer, 2013). Acknowledging the contradictions and tension of how the system has utilized disability was critical: aspiring educators must learn to recognize and affirm disability as a valued identity while also being equipped to challenge and transform the systemic inequities embedded in traditional special education practices. These foundational concepts could impact TCs' ability to recognize and respond to diverse needs, advocate for early intervention, and foster a sense of belonging for all children in their care.

Early in their course, TCs demonstrated ableist conceptualizations of children with disabilities. When asked what disability looks like, students conceptualized children with disabilities through a deficit lens, as Nora[2] stated in the discussion: "Like a kid that can't sit or pay attention. In a wheelchair or can't eat by themselves." In their reflections, TCs described the children with disabilities in their fieldwork schools as "troublemakers," "distractions," and "disruptors," without additional descriptions of other identity markers. Many expressed their apprehension about working with children with disabilities, rationalizing their decision to work in general education. Lila shared in class, "I'm not sure I will need to learn much about children with disabilities. They don't learn fast, and I have no patience with that. That is why I chose gen ed."

As TCs completed the CRSC at their fieldwork placements, they focused on a specific aspect of the scorecard: disability representation in the literature available in their fieldwork classrooms. TCs found some improvement in representation in literature on racial and ethnic diversity and the emerging representation of gender, but no positive representation of disability. As TCs acknowledged this realization, the lack of access and equity issues for children with disabilities became even more highlighted. Furthermore, TCs' reflections and discussions demonstrated that while they were surprised by the lack of positive disability representation in the classrooms where they interned, they were also highly motivated to learn more about how they could change their future classroom library. Dina reflected, "I didn't even think about disability as an identity that needed to be part of a diverse and culturally responsive library. When we think about diversity, we really think about race, but never disability status."

Turning It Around: Awareness

Positive disability representation in literature served as the gateway to approaching DJPs. When introducing the book "Best Day Ever!" by Margaret Singer as part of a lesson in language comprehension, students could explore how a child using a wheelchair went about his day playing with his dog. Raquel reflected:

> When I saw the cover, I thought the book was about a child with a disability, but when you dig deeper it is about a child, a fun kid playing with a dog. He just happens to be in a wheelchair. It made me think, how many books like that have I seen? And that is what I also found when I did the scorecard. There are no books about children with disabilities. And the ones you find are about, let's be nice to them. Almost like a pity perspective. In the book you read, it was about a child. Just like any other child.

Raquel's perspective was found in several other discussions and journals. With this view, students could recognize identity in very concrete ways. Of particular impact was the use of positive disability representation literature to exemplify literacy principles (oral language, alphabet knowledge, comprehension, print awareness, and phonological awareness). Using inclusive literature organically to represent the five components of early literacy helped eliminate the sense of "otherness" when discussing disability.

The introduction of the CRSC consistently transformed the classroom dynamic each semester. However, the speed at which these changes occurred varied based on two key factors: (a) how early DJPs were introduced in the semester and (b) how soon TCs engaged with their fieldwork placements. In the earlier semesters of the PI's teaching, these principles were introduced later in the term, whereas, in later iterations, they became embedded in discussions from the very first sessions. The second factor, the chance to reflect on DJPs while working directly with children with

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[2] All participant names are pseudonyms.

disabilities in the field, was crucial. This hands-on experience made the challenges and experiences of these children feel more "real" to the TCs, deepening their understanding and reshaping their students' perceptions. Sydney discussed in class how being able to work with children the same semester as the course allowed her to see the DJPs principles in practice:

> Ava, she can't hold a crayon, using scissors, it's really difficult. I remember the first time I saw her struggle to open her lunchbox. She kept trying, just sat there quietly while the other kids ate. I wanted to jump in and help her, but I also didn't want to take over. I knelt down and said, "Do you want me to help?" She said, "I want to do it myself." It really hit me. We focus on what kids with disabilities can't do instead of finding ways to support their independence.

Throughout the course, perspectives grew to recognize that individuals experience multiple identities and forms of oppression simultaneously, thereby shaping their experiences of disability (Love & Beneke, 2021). Maria wrote of these understandings in her journal:

> Disability is not the same for everyone. Just like I'm Latin, there are many shades of Latin. There are all different kinds of children with disabilities. More importantly, I understand that children need to be seen beyond their disability as whole people with lots of interests and likes.

Through this evolving understanding of intersectionality (Sins Invalid), students like Maria recognize wholeness, a call to see disabled people not as broken or needing to be fixed but as full human beings with agency, complexity, and joy.

Furthermore, after exploring TikToks from disability justice advocates, students reflected on how the social/political model of disability contributed to decisions in the classrooms they visited. For example, Toni questioned her own role as a teacher:

> This blew my mind. We have talked about differentiation and how important it is. But if I don't do it as a teacher, and I don't see the teacher in my fieldwork doing it, are we the reason why these kids are considered "disabled"? I'm complicit on a system if I allow this to happen? And also, if this is good for a child, why don't we do it with all children? My cooperating teacher sometimes teaches the kids that can do it, and doesn't find a way to get there for the child that can't do it. Is she part of the problem?

Toni's reflection illustrates a shift from viewing disability as an individual trait to recognizing it as political, relational and systemic (Kafer, 2013) understanding how ableist teaching practices are embedded in daily pedagogical choices. This critical awareness, we argue, primes students for the hard work on inclusion.

RQ2. How do TCs describe their preparedness to work with children with disabilities after completing a literacy methods course that incorporates disability justice principles, and how do these perceptions reflect broader tensions in teacher education policy?

Commitment and Advocacy

While emergent, the critical awareness that involves examining disability justice in schools is undoubtedly a motivating factor in the participant TCs' commitment to inclusion work. It is heartwarming to find that despite the focus on general education literacy methods, 89% of TCs mentioned understanding how ableism is a systemic inequity in education, and they are willing to recognize and confront it. While the transformative impact of integrating DJPs is evident in how participant TCs have begun to perceive children with disabilities and prepare to become inclusive

educators, they also reported significant shifts in their approach to literacy instruction for students with disabilities. Melinda wrote:

> The biggest shift in my thinking has been moving away from deficit-based thinking to teach language. In my class, we often learned about the 'challenges' that students with disabilities face. However, in my placement, I've seen that these children don't have deficits. They simply have different ways of learning and expressing themselves.

This shift in pedagogical approaches represents a growing understanding of and commitment to inclusion as "a moral imperative," with many TCs seeing themselves as inclusive educators. The TCs' journals and discussions confirmed that they are less intimidated to work with children with disabilities, a change that reflects early forms of access intimacy (Mingus, 2011), as candidates begin to build trust-based, relational approaches to meeting students' access needs. They felt excited to use and continue learning specific strategies that would allow them to succeed as inclusion educators, as Raquel wrote:

> One child, Julien, who is nonverbal, really changed my perspective. During circle time, I noticed he wasn't responding to the story we were reading, and at first, I thought, well, he is just not interested, or just doesn't get it. But when I introduced the vocabulary with pictures, he lit up! He started pointing to pictures to express his thoughts about the story. That moment made me realize that literacy isn't just about speaking or reading; it's about access. He had things to say; he just needed a different way to say them. I began integrating more visual support and communication tools into my lessons, and it helped all the kids, not just Julien.

Overall, most TCs' confidence in teaching children with disabilities improved after the infusion of DJPs in the course. Furthermore, it is clear that the DJPs served as a framework for understanding how TCs can interact with children, making their experiences richer and more reflective, as Luca shared:

> In class, we talked about disability justice and education, but it wasn't until I was in the classroom that I understood what that meant. Nothing about us without us; that phrase kept coming back to me. These kids may be small, but they know what they need. Instead of making assumptions, I let them show me how they learn best. I still have a lot to learn, but now I see inclusion as something we create together; not just as teachers for students, but as a classroom community.

Bridging the gap between theory and practice, between hands-on experiences and rich discussions on disability justice, enabled students to gain a deeper understanding of disability as an identity, a political and social conceptualization, and to shift their perspective on the importance of inclusion. TCs stopped seeing inclusion as just a legal requirement. Instead, they began to view it as a dynamic process rooted in respect and community. This shift strengthened the belief that real inclusion involves not just access but also belonging and having a voice in the learning environment (Berne et al., 2018; Mingus, 2011).

Nevertheless, many TCs acknowledged the limitations of their current inclusion skills and knowledge and expressed a desire for further learning. Amalia explained, "But nothing prepared me for how fast-paced pre-K classrooms are. Kids don't always follow a plan. I wish we had spent more time practicing real-life teaching scenarios; especially for children with disabilities." Once they realized the amount of work that is required from inclusive educators, all TCs grew in both anticipation and concern about their role as future educators. As Jazmine expressed:

> I'm worried that when I have my own classroom, I'll have to choose between being
> the kind of inclusive teacher I want to be and meeting the pressures of the system.
> Right now, I feel torn. I believe in disability justice and that all students deserve access
> to literacy, but I see rigid curriculum, and lack of classroom support make that
> difficult.

This conflict is common among educators who wish to center accessibility and student needs but must navigate educational structures that prioritize standardization over flexibility (Siuty & Beneke, 2020). Jazmine's uncertainty reflects a broader issue within the education system; one where teachers are held accountable for meeting institutional expectations but not always given the tools to implement inclusive practices effectively (Sharma & Loreman, 2017). Her words also point to a deeper systemic challenge: Without structural change, the burden of inclusion falls on individual educators instead of being embedded in the framework of education itself.

Identity and Belonging

An unexpected finding of our analysis was that several TCs who did disclose their own disabilities felt empowered to reflect on the impact of learning about DJPs in their own identities as educators, as Zaheda revealed:

> I used to think that having a disability in the classroom meant I had to prove myself;
> prove that I could keep up, that I wouldn't be a burden. But now, I see that my
> presence challenges the idea that only a certain kind of body or brain belongs in here
> [in the classroom]. My students, whether they realize it or not, are seeing an adult
> who navigates the world differently but still teaches. And honestly? I wish I'd had
> that when I was their age. Someone who showed me that disability isn't something to
> be hidden, but something that shapes the way we move through the world, and that's
> okay. More than okay, actually.

The reflections of Zaheda, as well as other TCs, are not just about their own sense of self. The deeper message is about expanding the possibilities of belonging in education. Zaheda's presence in the classroom models a reality where educators with disabilities are not an anomaly but an essential part of the learning environment. The shift that the TCs experienced, from seeing their own disability as a barrier to recognizing it as a source of insight, mirrors the larger movement of disability justice itself: as a push away from mere survival toward futurism (Kafer, 2013); a world where people with disabilities can thrive, connect, and lead. Zaheda's story goes beyond her own need for belonging. It focuses on creating a sense of interconnectedness in a space where both she and her students are not only accommodated, but valued. This realization is particularly important for TCs with a disability because it directly impacts their ability to complete their training and secure employment. Although 19% of postsecondary students in the United States have a disability, only 21.1% of disabled adults over 25 attain a bachelor's degree, compared to 41% of their non-disabled peers. To navigate these challenges, many teacher candidates resort to masking their disabilities to avoid stigma (Siuty & Beneke, 2020). Those who cannot conceal their disabilities often face discouragement from pursuing teaching at all (Strimel et al., 2023). As a result, once they are in a classroom, disabled TCs tend to downplay their disabilities, conform to non-disabled norms to succeed, and feel responsible for how others perceive them (Siuty & Beneke, 2020). This reluctance to be open about their disability reinforces a cycle in which students rarely see educators with a disability, thus perpetuating the lack of representation in the profession.

While we recognize-there is no direct correlation between an educator's disability status and their perceived preparedness to teach in inclusion settings, research has suggested that students are

more engaged and have higher self-efficacy when they see teachers who reflect their identities and experiences. This, in essence, makes educators with disabilities particularly valuable (and prepared) for fostering a sense of belonging among students with disabilities (Squires & Countermine, 2018). The realization that learning about DJPs in a general education program fosters a sense of belonging among TCs with a disability opens a critical future line of inquiry that could lead to a more prepared and diverse workforce.

Structural Issues

Two specific DJPs, interconnectedness, and collective access (including indirectly what Mingus (2011) described as "access intimacy"), were central to our discussions. The TCs recognized that these concepts encompass teaching children with diverse learning needs, even within a general education program. Doing so requires understanding the rich identities and capabilities of children with disabilities and a deep emotional connection. However, students discovered a number of structural barriers to doing this. For example, Rafael reflected:

> I'm shocked that we don't talk about this in every course. I see there are so many children that need this kind of support and understanding, so why is not part of every course? Why do I need to get a master's to get in-depth on how inclusion works? I feel like after this course, I just take one more course in special education and I'm done? It feels so limiting.

Many TCs think about how the terms *general* and *special* as education labels carry a value judgment on the population each program serves. This, in turn, results in faculty members whose expertise follows those labels. After the integration of disability justice, however, TCs were quick to reflect on structural dissonances in who teaches them and in which spaces they are expected to teach, as Rocio mentioned:

> I see the need in the school [I attend fieldwork], and I wonder if I will be prepared to teach these kids. My professors are great and all, but how many of them are focused on children with disabilities? I had one that even said, you won't need that because you are a general education teacher. I don't think faculty realize that classrooms are very inclusive now, and that I need to have awareness and tools to work in those classrooms.

Other important structural issues arising from our discussions included contrasting policies, guidelines, and certification requirements that reinforce separate pathways in general and special education spaces.

Tensions with Teacher Preparation Policies

The opportunity to implement inclusive practices in their classrooms motivated TCs to question the artificial policy and systemic separations between general and special education, as Benny suggested:

> Before my internship, I thought special education and general education had to be separate, because that's how it's always been presented to me. But after working in an inclusive Pre-K classroom, I feel differently. Why are we still dividing children when they can learn so much from each other? I also don't understand why certification tracks still divide special education and general education so rigidly. I'm in an early childhood general education track. But in real life, we teach both populations! If we truly believe in inclusion, then teacher certification programs need to reflect that. We should be learning side by side, not separate.

The frustration expressed by many TCs underscored the need for more cohesive, interdisciplinary approaches to teacher preparation, ones that center inclusion not as a separate requirement but as a foundational principle embedded throughout the curriculum. Without this, future educators may feel ill-equipped to bridge the gap between theory and the dynamic, responsive nature of inclusive classrooms.

Discussion

Given the reported silos currently existing in teacher preparation in the United States and in many other nations, concerns that general education teachers express about inclusion are multifaceted, encompassing issues related to training, limited resources, and the perceived impact on classroom dynamics (Zagona et al., 2017). While teacher education programs have limited control over the allocation of resources in schools, higher education institutions are nonetheless obligated to prepare general education TCs to support all learners. While research has shown that general education teacher educators are not adequately prepared for inclusion (Allday et al., 2013; Zagona et al., 2017), we demonstrated that infusion of disability justice concepts in general education (and in special education as well) could be a promising pathway to remedy this dynamic.

Dismantling Current Policy Binaries

We recognize that in the ideal world, general and special education policies would not operate as two alternative paths. However, we do not propose erasing this duality in lieu of dual certification programs. Critics have argued that dual certification programs may dilute the depth of knowledge in both general and special education because of the compressed nature of the curriculum (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Kirksey & Lloydhauser, 2022). Furthermore, given that scholars also argue that special education programs often are not framed around a disability justice lens utilizing medical disability frameworks, we cannot blindly recommend more integration of special education courses. Instead, given that general and special education each require specific expertise and focus, we propose collaboration between the two paths in the form of an intentional infusion of DJPs into programming. Many suggestions provided by Kozleski et al. (2002) still hold true to this day and should be applied to special education programs that lack a focus on DJPs as well as general education programs, and so we propose the following specifically:

1. Infusing disability justice principles in all programs, including addressing systemic barriers due to racism, sexism, classism, and *ableism*, through an intersectional lens, in all methods courses taught both in general and special education programs.
2. Including TCs, particularly TCs with disabilities, in curricular and programmatic decisions. We should honor and include their voices in determining what future teachers need to know, as well as in any plans to transform existing siloed systems.
3. Increasing the number of special education courses that general education teachers are required to take as part of their certification, as suggested by McCray and Alvarez McHatton (2011). Given that many special education courses still follow a medical model of disability, these courses will need to be complemented with DJPs integration across methods in their general education coursework.
4. Increasing fieldwork with a focus on working in inclusive environments.
5. Requiring fieldwork that includes successful co-teaching experiences.
6. Attended mandated professional development for education faculty. As Kozleski et al. (2002) found more than a decade ago, higher education faculty are crucial in making headway toward inclusion. Thus, we should be required to attend

professional development that illustrates how to incorporate disability justice principles seamlessly into our syllabus.

In addition to teacher preparation policies, we found that general education TCs reported deficit views of children with disabilities, which may have drawn them to work in general education in the first place; and this bias requires immediate attention. TPPs should tackle this concerning issue directly and with purpose, ideally not just in education courses, but also as part of overall university requirements. However, it is essential to acknowledge that in the United States, recent attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) may hinder such efforts. Therefore, we urgently call on higher education faculty to reshape education from within with a "guerrilla pedagogy" that empowers and subverts traditional ways of learning (Freire, 1970). Alvarez and Rodriguez (2024) argued that this approach enables students to become active participants in their education. It prepares a generation ready to challenge systemic inequalities and support inclusive democratic values. We believe that infusing DJPs and other social justice principles stealthily in our everyday lectures and seminars can serve as a transformative way to resist anti-democratic efforts by reshaping perspectives, confidence, and commitments to inclusion. Our study illustrated as much with transformative success.

Finally, our findings confirmed that approaching inclusion with a focus on DJPs in mind benefits not only students at schools but also teacher candidates. We often forget that TCs themselves possess rich intersectional identities that require recognition and celebration. Pugach et al. (2021) reminded us of this imperative:

> To achieve socially just teaching, the intricacies of students' multiple and intersecting identities—disability among them—need to be acknowledged and understood in relationship to all other markers, and in relationship to the institutional and political structures within which they exist. (p. 238)

In this context, TCs with disclosed or undisclosed disabilities reported how being valued was a unique experience that uplifted their commitment to education and advocacy for inclusion, embodying DPJs through this process. As teacher educators who experienced this study as the creation of a sustainable community that is truly inclusive, our commitment to disability justice in teacher education spaces has only been strengthened and affirmed.

Implications

At a broader policy level, our findings support the need for teacher education accreditation standards, licensing policies, and curricular frameworks, nationally and internationally, to move beyond narrow compliance with inclusion mandates. Countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, Germany, Korea, and Japan continue to operate under bifurcated general and special education teacher preparation systems that reinforce exclusionary practices and inhibit progress toward inclusive schooling (Florian, 2014; Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Powell, 2016). Even where inclusive education is a stated policy goal, such as in South Africa and Italy, deeply embedded institutional legacies and limited teacher preparation often stall meaningful reform (D'Alessio, 2011; Walton, 2011).

Embedding DJPs into initial teacher preparation could enable policy actors and institutions to adopt a low-cost, scalable strategy aligned with global commitments, such as the Salamanca Statement and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, as well as Sustainable Development Goal 4, building more equitable and inclusive educational systems. For countries facing fragmented systems or uncertain inclusion paths, the DJPs infusion offers a sustainable starting point for change. Our proposed approach provides future educators not only with the tools

for inclusion but also with the necessary political and historical understanding to challenge exclusionary norms and enact educational justice.

Conclusion

This study was sparked by a deeply personal quest to recognize disability identity and justice principles within the context of educational settings. It was then fueled by the transformations and growth we saw in our college classrooms as we conducted this study. Our findings represent a first step in dismantling teacher preparation policies that do not adequately support teacher candidates in navigating the complexities of inclusion work. At a challenging and uncertain time in educational policy, we aim to contribute to the broader movement for equity and justice in education through DJPs infusion in general education programs. Future research should continue to explore the long-term impacts of such curricular changes on TCs' professional practices, as well as outcomes for students and TCs with disabilities in general education. Fostering a deep understanding of disability justice within teacher education, both in general and special education programs, is essential for cultivating a generation of educators who are knowledgeable about themselves and their students *and equally* passionate advocates for human dignity and justice.

Acknowledgements

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