

# Disability Studies and Inclusive Teacher Preparation: A Socially Just Path for Teacher Education

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*This article explores the benefits and challenges of operating an inclusive elementary and special education teacher preparation program within a disability studies framework. How does such a program balance issues of theory and practice? How does it provide students with a critical approach that essentially views disability as a social and cultural category much like race and gender, with a practical approach that attempts to address, remediate or eliminate those conditions that are considered disabling? How is it possible to become a successful professional with a disability studies perspective within a field such as special education that is traditionally based around a deficit model? The article provides recommendations for how such questions might be addressed in teacher education.*

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About half way through the semester during an introductory course on inclusive education, a worried first year student entered my office and sat down. When I asked her what was troubling her she replied, “You seem to be saying that special education and pull-out classes are a bad thing. But they really helped me. I have a learning disability and those resource room sessions helped me learn to read. I wonder if I am in the wrong program.” Those types of interactions happen at least once every semester as students come to me struggling to negotiate the current state of special education with the disability studies framework presented in class and throughout our inclusive elementary and special education teacher preparation program at Syracuse University. Many students feel pushed in uncomfortable ways to challenge the discourses and practices of schooling for students with disability labels, particularly in light of their own recent school experiences. Rather than viewing these conversations as a threat to my style of teaching, a challenge to the program or evidence of a troublesome disconnect between ideal and current reality, I smile and say, “Your experiences are part of who you are and how you make sense of the world. Let’s talk this through

in light of what we have been reading and talking about in class.” I try to reassure my anxious students that these are the very questions disability studies forces us to grapple with.

These are the questions that push us as educators to go beyond theory to practice, to wrestle with the tensions inherent to special education at this point in time. Those moments of disjuncture or instances of cognitive dissonance demonstrate the importance of integrating a disability studies framework into preservice teacher preparation for inclusive education. This article discusses the benefits of such integration, while highlighting examples of how this can occur in practice. I first describe the context of the inclusive elementary and special education program at Syracuse University as one example of a teacher education program grounded in disability studies principles. I then describe disability studies in contrast to more traditional approaches. Finally, I discuss how a disability studies framework can inform and enrich teacher preparation, with specific examples from one program.

Syracuse University is not alone in its integration of disability studies perspectives into preservice teacher preparation. The program in Elementary and Secondary Inclusive Education at Teacher’s College, which prepares masters students within a disability studies framework, is another example of a program that provides a disability studies focus (Oyler, 2011). However, as the author is a faculty member in the Inclusive Elementary and Special Education program at Syracuse University, that program and its courses will be referenced as an example throughout this article and will form the basis for this discussion. Before I discuss the integration of a disability studies framework, some background on the development of the program will provide needed context.

The inclusive elementary and special education teacher preparation program began in the early 1990s. Since that time, the School of Education has not offered a single certification program in either special or elementary education at the undergraduate level. All students leave the program prepared to apply for certification in both Grades 1–6 general education and special education. There is a clear and explicit expectation in every class, regardless of the content area, that our preservice teachers are responsible for teaching all students, regardless of ability or disability. It is especially powerful that this

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expectation is shared and expressed by faculty in every discipline. There is also a consistent message of the value of inclusive education. While individual faculty may describe this differently or may place a different emphasis on what this looks like, the message is clear: All students are entitled to a meaningful education, with the appropriate supports and services, in typical classrooms with same age peers.

When the elementary and special education teacher preparation programs were merged in the early 1990s, it was not done with a stated purpose of integrating disability studies. Rather, the value was in promoting “both excellence and equity in schooling” (Meyer, Mager, Yarger-Kane, Sarno, & Hext-Contreras, 1997). The intention was to develop a dual certification program that prepared students to work with *all* students in inclusive settings. By eliminating the single certification program, the founding faculty sent a clear and unambiguous message that *all* elementary teachers need to have the skills and dispositions to teach *all* children. The process of merging the programs began in 1987 and continued until the first class was admitted in 1990. The following shared values served as guiding principles in the program development process: (a) inclusion and equity, (b) teacher as decision maker, (c) multiculturalism, (d) innovations in education, and (e) field-based emphasis (Meyer et al., 1997). Throughout that change process and continuing today, the emphasis was on collaboration between and among faculty, rather than maintaining separate identities as general or special educators. Faculty co-taught courses both to model collaborative approaches but also to learn about the others’ discipline and content.

The seamless integration of general and special education can also be observed in our physical layout. There is no separate department of special education, the offices are intermingled throughout the building, and there are no separate bulletin boards advertising special education versus general education content. Unlike many education programs (Young, 2008), this physical integration is emblematic of our inclusive program philosophy. The students see examples of faculty coteaching and conducting shared classes across disciplines. When we talk with prospective students and parents, we talk about the “inclusive program,” shorthand speak for the Inclusive Elementary and Special Education teacher preparation program. These are markers of what we are as a program and what we aim to impart to our students.

As the program at Syracuse University leads to dual certification, we have an obligation to develop highly qualified special *and* general educators. Therefore, the students need exposure to the best content specific teaching strategies, in addition to a strong foundation in differentiation and the specific skills of special education. There is also a large foundational component to the program. Before they enter their professional blocks, focused on content and pedagogy, they take several “pre-block” courses, which address such topics as child de-

velopment, language development, general theories of learning, schooling and diversity, and schooling in an American context. To ensure our students are broadly educated, we also require a liberal arts concentration or major to be taken in conjunction with the degree in education. The following statement reflects the overarching philosophy of the program:

Programs in elementary education often presume that not all students will be able to access the curricula. Similarly, programs in special education often reflect an assumption that disability can sometimes interfere with learning such that some students will gain only modest benefit from inclusion in the traditional academic curriculum. The Inclusive Elementary and Special Education Program at Syracuse rejects these practices and assumptions; instead, the IESE program encourages students to see the benefits of presuming all students have the interest to learn, that all can benefit from exposure to learning opportunities, and that it is primarily the work of teachers and other school personnel to engage in research, innovation, and reflection to discover how particular students can learn most effectively. (Syracuse University School of Education, 2009)

Several elements of our program philosophy illustrate key tenets of the belief system that relate directly to the work of disability studies. These include listening to and learning from individuals with disabilities and their parents and guardians as experts on the experience of disability, a commitment to integrating “technical information about teaching and learning while at the same time understanding that teaching includes subjectivity as well as conscious theoretical framing” (Syracuse University School of Education, 2009), a commitment to universally designed instruction, a commitment to social justice and equality of opportunity, and a commitment to placing “difference at the center” so that access to instruction and social opportunity with the necessary accommodations and supports happens thoughtfully and not as an afterthought. Table 1 displays a full listing of program tenets.

This program—and its commitment to socially just inclusive education—is part of a long history at Syracuse University. Faculty have been at the forefront of efforts to support disability rights, promote deinstitutionalization, challenge the construct of mental retardation, support community integration, and promote school inclusion. In 2000, Syracuse University started the first disability studies graduate program, and in 2010, we added an undergraduate minor open to students from all across campus. Furthermore, recent faculty hires in the inclusive education program have backgrounds in both special education and disability studies. Most have experience teaching in inclusive settings to pair with their academic training in special education and disability studies.

## The Meaning of Disability: Contrasting Approaches to Special Education

Traditional teacher preparation for special education has relied on the medical model of disability and positions disability as a deficit that can be addressed through identification and remediation. Students are generally taught the common characteristics associated with the 13 federal categories of disability, including etiology and methods of assessment, along with strategies for remediating such differences. Disability is presented as a fixed and identifiable construct, an immutable part of the person. Many introduction to special education courses and textbooks follow a similar disability of the week paradigm. While this approach may be comforting to naive educators looking for solid answers to the challenge of educating complex students, it also serves to

further reinforce the notion of disability as something knowable that resides within a person.

The medical model of disability has its roots in positivist science or the idea that there are inherent truths about the world that can be proven and objectively studied. Within a medical model framework, there are discrete, definitive, and knowable categories of difference. The challenge for teachers is identifying key areas of difficulty and then providing the appropriate strategies to improve the areas of deficit. Another key tenet of this medical model is that the person is the same across settings. Context, therefore, is often not a significant factor as there is something inherent to the person that makes him or her the way he or she is. According to the medical model, the problem resides within the person (Davis, 1997; Linton, 1998; Shapiro, 2000; Thomson, 1997) and is often constructed as personal tragedy (Mackay, 2003). Human variation thus becomes pathologized. Linton (1998) described it this way:

Table 1

### Key Tenets of the Syracuse University Inclusive Elementary and Special Education Teacher Preparation Program

- Commitment to serving diverse populations in inclusive classrooms. This includes students of differing class, ethnicity, linguistic, family and community backgrounds, gender, color, sexual preference, religion, and ability.
- Commitment to on-going learning to integrate technology into one's practice, ensuring that students benefit from advances in technology, and utilize technology to augment learning.
- Commitment to learn from parents, guardians, community members, and others in the wider community who are part of creating educational opportunities for students.
- Commitment to integrating into practice technical information about teaching and learning, while at the same time understanding that teaching also includes subjectivity (e.g., personal history, personality, art, style) as well as conscious theoretical framing.
- Commitment to on-going professional development, through participation in educational associations, conferences, research, and training programs.
- Commitment to designing and adapting instruction so that it can be accessed by all students, including those from diverse linguistic backgrounds as well as those who have varying abilities (e.g., students who use augmentative and alternative communication systems).
- Commitment to social justice for all students and to reflecting on how their own practice reflects a commitment to equality of opportunity for students.
- Commitment to identifying, defining, and refining one's own educational philosophy within a commitment to democratic education.
- Commitment to placing difference at the center of one's considerations in planning instructional practice, so that access to academic instruction as well as social participation in the life of the school are never treated as afterthoughts.
- Commitment to listening to and learning from students about how they construct and understand their own education.
- Commitment to reflective practice. All students are expected to be able to document and examine their own practice and to speak knowledgeably about how they change their practice over time as a result of their own reflections.

Society, in agreeing to assign medical meanings to disability, colludes to keep the issue within the purview of the medical establishment, to keep it a personal matter and "treat" the condition and the person with the condition rather than "treating" the social processes and policies that constrict people's lives. (Linton, 1998, p. 2)

The pathologizing of difference and categorization serves to reduce human variation to simple and concrete binaries: able-bodied/disabled and normal/abnormal (Douglas, 1966). The abnormal is there to assure the able-bodied of his or her own normality. Those binaries "depend on each other for their existence and depend on the maintenance of the opposition for their meaning" (Linton, 1998, p. 23). In other words, one can know what is "normal" by establishing what it is not.

Conversely, disability studies is a field of inquiry interested in examining disability as a "social, cultural, and political phenomenon.... Disability is not a characteristic that exists in the person so defined, but a construct that finds its meaning in social and cultural context" (Taylor, Shulz, & Walker, 2003). Rather than viewing disability as something inherent to the person, it emerges or is created through a complex interaction between the individual and the larger social world. Rice states, "Disability studies is an interdisciplinary area of study that utilizes the lenses from social sciences and humanities to view disability from personal, social, cultural, historical, and literary perspectives" (Rice, 2006, p. 253). It has emerged as a field of study within the last 20–30 years "in response to the medical model's deficiencies in explaining or addressing the social marginalization and economic deprivation of many people with disabilities.... For the medical model it substitutes sociopolitical or minority group models of disability" (Longmore & Umansky, 2001, p. 12). It seeks to do what the medical model cannot, that

*Note.* Adapted from "Accreditation Report to the Council for Exceptional Children Specialized Programs Association," by Teaching and Leadership Department of Syracuse University.

is, address the social and political contexts that create and perpetuate hierarchies of ability and disability.

Rather than constructing disability as something inherent to the person and a singular phenomenon, the minority group model recognizes that individuals with disabilities are part of a marginalized group (Barnes, Oliver, & Barton, 2002; Davis, 1997; Hahn, 1997), subject to bias and discrimination similar to that experienced by other groups based on ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. Related to the minority model (and often used interchangeably) in its recognition that disability does not reside within a person but is a result of an interaction with the larger social world, the social model is the framework that has perhaps had the greatest influence on the field of disability studies. The social model holds that disability is not a personal tragedy or a personal deficit but is the result of an interaction with a hostile or disabling environment. Rather than seeking to “fix” the broken person with a disability, the social model seeks to address the larger cultural, social and political context (Barton, 2001; Erevelles, 2002; Linton, 1998; Wendell, 1989). It is not the person that needs to change but the environment. Wendell (1989) describes the importance of developing a theory of disability that is broader than personal identity:

We need a theory of disability. It should be a social and political theory, because disability is largely socially constructed, but it has to be more than that; any deep understanding of disability must include thinking about the ethical, psychological and epistemic issues of living with a disability. (p. 105)

Central to the social model is the idea that disability is socially constructed. Rather than relying on positivist science and its emphasis on constancy across time and setting, social constructionists contend that meaning is created through interaction and discourse. Taken further, disability in school emerges through the interaction of the student with the opportunities of the classroom, teacher perspectives, and practices.

## How Disability Studies Can Inform and Enrich Teacher Education

### *Disability as a social construct*

One of the tenets of a disability studies framework is that disability does not reside within the person but rather in the interaction with the larger social world. Some scholars in disability studies (Baglieri, Valle, Connor, & Gallagher, 2011; Rice, 2006) make the distinction between impairment and disability arguing, for example, that someone who cannot walk experiences impairment in motor function. However, it does not become disabling until the person interacts with an inaccessible world. Instead of being inevitable differences, these categories represent

constructed ideals of normative performance. These types of examples make sense to students when we are discussing physical differences or conditions of the body or senses. This gets more complicated when we discuss intellectual or developmental disability labels. The notion of impairment versus disability is less easily digested when the difference is not physical or visible. However, in class, we use the example of mental retardation in the 1970s. Prior to 1973, the cutoff for a “diagnosis” of mental retardation was an IQ of 85. However, thousands of people were “cured” in 1973, when the cutoff was lowered to 70 or two standard deviations below the mean. This glaring example of the social construction of disability illustrates the created nature of disability categories and helps students see that disability is not fixed but mutable.

Considering disability as a social construct does not signify a denial of difference. There are differences in the ways people move through the world, the ways people access print, and the ways people process new information. However, it is the meaning we make of those differences that is important (Baglieri et al., 2011; Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, & Morton, 2008; Kliever, 1998; Ware, 2003), “As DSE [Disability Studies in Education] scholars and former teachers, we do acknowledge that individual differences may have neurological, biological, cognitive, or psychological referents... However, our intention is to question conventional and naturalized ways of thinking about difference to bring greater balance to the intellectual grounding for understanding and responding to school failure” (Baglieri, 2011, p. 270). Kliever (1998) refers to this as “differences that matter,” arguing that only particular differences are constructed as deviant and worthy of remediation while others are seen as natural variation and, thus, do not require elimination or segregation.

When discussing disability as primarily a social construct, we hope students can take the next step in considering how their own assumptions and actions further reify notions of difference. Returning to the example of intellectual disability, if a student enters the class with a cognitive disability label, that carries with it cultural meanings and expectations. For example, a common assumption about students with cognitive disability labels is that they do not do well with abstract concepts (Friend, 2008; Smith, Polloway, Patton, & Dowdy, 2008) and have difficulty completing analytical tasks. If teachers believe that construction, they may hesitate to include such a student in math classes that include higher-level thinking and have him or her focus instead on basic facts. The student is then not exposed to content that includes higher level thinking, which means he or she will be less successful when facing content like that in the future, thus reifying the notion that students with cognitive disabilities are not successful with abstract concepts.

One of the ways we discuss these cultural constructions is through critical analysis of media and the ways in which media can both reflect and shape our cultural

understandings of difference. Teaching critical media literacy is an important tool in developing engaged and critical future teachers and scholars. From their very first course in the program, we ask students to examine movies, television shows, and children's stories for stereotypical representations of race, class, gender, and disability. Placing disability alongside other areas of diversity from the outset helps students see connections and shared oppressions. It also supports an expanded notion of diversity that includes disability rather than constructing disability as outside. This emphasis on critical media consumption and media literacy continues throughout the program. We want our students to understand how the media serves to both reflect and construct understandings of difference. The language of special education and disability also serves to construct our understandings of human difference.

### *Disability studies and the language of education*

Mutua and Smith (2006) argue that the "socialization of a teacher into the special education profession begins with the introduction to, and induction into and acquisition of the special education language" (p. 125). It is virtually impossible to avoid immersion into the lingo of disability. In line with the medical model of disability, traditional special education places a strong emphasis on identification and labeling of difference. Access to services for students is dependent on the assignment of categorical labels. Thus, disability studies, with its attention to the problems of labeling and locating disability within the person, butts head first into the very system of resource allocation for students who require additional supports. Furthermore, our students are or will be immersed in the professional discourse of special education in their placements and future classrooms. They need to be comfortable with that discourse if they are to challenge it from within. For example, they need to understand the 13 federal categories of disability according to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and still be able to articulate the shortcomings of this model and the limiting ways it positions students. "[M]any pre-service teachers in special education courses are neither critical of underlying messages with which these labels are inscribed, nor are they conscious of the nuanced ways in which those labels function to create regimes of fitness among students in schools" (Mutua & Smith, 2006, p. 125). Despite the challenges of the larger structure, we want our students to recognize not only the stigma associated with disability labeling (which most of them understand immediately) but also to question the functionality of a system that requires a specific diagnostic label to earn access to needed services and supports. Contrary to more traditional special education programs, we deemphasize a categorical approach and refuse to promote the flawed logic of "if the student is labeled this, then you do this." Our teacher candidates need to understand how disability labels can operate

within schools, serving to limit access to the very instructional services and supports they were intended to foster. We also hope students leave our program with the understanding that knowing one student with autism, for example, means knowing one student with autism.

In New York State, there is an additional system of labeling and categorization that further dehumanizes students. This categorical system refers to the adult to student ratio in the classrooms. For example, a 12:1:1 program means there can be 12 identified students to 1 teacher and 1 teaching assistant. However, those terms can become descriptors of the students themselves. Just as we used to hear (and sadly often still hear) students referred to as "Speds" or "short-bus kids," we now hear students referred to as "12:1:1s" or "8:1:1s." We encourage the students to see how these terms take on meaning for the teachers and staff and became cultural signifiers of the students' abilities and potential for inclusion and future academic success.

When faced with the problem of language and labels, students often raise questions such as, "Then what are we supposed to say?" or "Is this just about political correctness?" It is that second question that I love to take on. To consider labeling through a lens of disability studies requires that we go beyond avoiding certain terms because they are "politically incorrect" or potentially derogatory to questioning the meaning behind the labels themselves and the political function they serve. We try to push the students deeper into questions of, "Why do we have a system so dependent on labels?" "How did these labels emerge?" "Why are certain populations of students more or less likely to 'earn' certain labels?" In other words, we challenge students to go beyond implementation of person first language to challenging the necessity of systems that sort, classify, and rank students (Baker, 2002).

One of the first assignments in our introductory course is an observation of a classroom, either the inclusive preschool classroom where many of the students complete their first field placement or a college classroom in which they are not a student. In this qualitative observation, we ask them to take particular note of the language used by the teacher or teachers and how that language positions students in the classroom. Attending to teacher language, both formal and informal, is an important first step in understanding the dynamics of power in a classroom and the ways that hierarchies are perpetuated or challenged. We teach that language is not neutral or value free but often reflects the dominant discourses in the culture.

### *Critical lens for considering the experience of oppression*

Part of our approach at Syracuse University is to consider the sociopolitical culture of disability. In line with a minority model viewpoint, we teach disability as a political and social identity (Davis, 1997). Disability studies

is, by nature, interdisciplinary, encompassing sociology, humanities, law, literature, history, anthropology, media studies, and gender studies (Taylor et al., 2003) and provides a critical lens into the social processes that serve to disenfranchise and disable people who interact in the world in diverse ways. Critical disability studies approaches should be seen in line with other critical theories of education such as critical race theory or queer theory. Clearly, there are distinctions between these disciplines, but we need to align ourselves with other marginalized populations and help students see the interconnectedness. "Like other forms of oppression, the history of disability discrimination chronicles a relentless infliction of segregation, dehumanization, and exploitation. However, unlike race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, disability as a civil rights issue has received considerably less public attention" (Baglieri et al., 2011, p. 2).

It is vitally important to draw connections between discourses and racism and ableism (the persistent devaluing of disability resulting in exclusion, discrimination and diminished opportunities) without attempting to erase those differences (Ferri & Connor, 2005). For example, when we consider culturally relevant pedagogy, we include individuals with disabilities in that consideration. Too often, cultural relevance refers only to race, class, ethnicity, culture, whereas issues of disability are left out of that consideration. "DS is, of course, not just about disability, but rather about the intersections of disability with such factors and race, class, and gender as well as issues of social justice" (Broderick, Reid, & Valle, 2007, p. 137). Therefore, it goes beyond seeing how disability oppression is similar to the experience of other marginalized groups, it is also imperative that our students see how disability intersects with and compounds other categories of difference. For example, in our coursework, we delve into readings that address the overrepresentation of students of color in special education and the ways in which labeling, special education, and tracking have been used to resegregate students of color in our public schools (Connor, 2010; Ferri & Connor, 2005). We also consider the intersection of disability and poverty and the role of economic privilege in accessing services and supports for students with disabilities (Ong-Dean, 2009).

We also ask them to consider examples of disability-based oppression and discrimination throughout history and then provide examples of how current issues connect to those broader themes. For example, when discussing segregated classrooms for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities, we look at the histories of containment for other marginalized populations, drawing especially on Mary Douglas (1966) and her work on how societies have historically handled the "problem of difference." She describes several processes including assigning difference to absolute categories, labeling difference dangerous, elimination, and banishment, and we use these as frames for considering past and current practices.

### *Challenging normalcy*

Disability studies also encourages teachers and scholars to resist dominant discourses of normalcy. In the same vein as racism, sexism, and heterosexism, ableism (Ashby, 2010; Bogdan & Biklen, 1987; Gabel & Danforth, 2002; Hehir, 2002, 2005; Rauscher & McClintock, 1997) asks us to consider how normative notions of performance and participation can inhibit access to meaningful educational experiences. From an ableist perspective particular ways of being and particular world views are privileged and thus become "naturalized" through discourse (Artiles in Chamberlain, 2006). It is these unquestioned assumptions that position certain students on the margins that we aim to disrupt. From the syllabus for the introductory class in the inclusive elementary and special education program, the following is noted:

Students will be able to define ableism and describe how this impacts students' access to the educational and social opportunities of schooling.... These class sessions introduce the idea that schools transmit cultural expectations, definitions, and behavior. Among other things, schools convey certain notions about what teachers expect for their students. Students and the instructors will examine dominant cultural attitudes about ability and disability and about learning, and explore how these may be transmitted in schools. We will also consider how schools and teachers might play a role in transforming how the culture thinks about particular student differences.

Dominant notions of performance and participation are constructed and recreated; teachers have key roles in either reinscribing those notions or destabilizing them. We teach students about able-bodied privilege just as we teach about white privilege and class privilege. The students seem to find it easier to see examples of ableism when considering issues of physical or sensory access. They recognize that presenting uncaptioned films or having physically inaccessible classrooms leaves some students unable to engage. However, we push them to acknowledge subtler and, perhaps, more pervasive forms of discrimination and oppression. We ask them to consider one lesson they have recently taught and provide examples of ways they made that learning experience universally accessible. Then we challenge them to come up with examples of barriers to access and meaningful engagement. Perhaps this includes providing only one level of text for the students to read or asking all students to orally provide their responses. This needs to go beyond consideration of access to the meaning made of that access. In other words, what ways of responding and participating are most valued in this classroom and what alternatives should I consider?

Challenging dominant notions of normalcy in schooling is an act of resistance (Peters & Reid, 2009), one we hope students take with them when they leave our

program. We want students to challenge the naturalness of many school practices—tracking, ability grouping, emphasis on verbal linguistic ways of learning, oral reading as a marker of literacy, uniformity of student output. We encourage students to unlearn some of these taken for granted assumptions and recognize that all of these practices reflect choices about what is valued in our culture and what is considered within the range of “normal.” However, we have to be careful not to simply broaden our conceptualization of normative performance, moving the boundaries further out but still holding on to the concept (Baker, 2002). Rather, we need to turn normalcy and the desire for it on its head, valuing instead a plurality of perspectives and ways of being.

In order for that message to hold water with our future teachers, we have to model that in our own classes and program. This means utilizing a variety of approaches to instruction, encouraging alternative forms of assessment, providing more choice in activities and ensuring that all ways of being and performing in the classroom are valued and supported. This requires that faculty consider issues of access in our own classes. How do program faculty respond when our students require accommodations that seem to disrupt our own normative expectations of a novice teacher? How can reasonable accommodations be balanced with the demands of classroom teaching? How can accommodations be provided such that the student can be successful in a future position? For example, if a student requires additional time for every assignment and class activity, how can that be supported within a classroom setting? If a student requires additional processing time to respond to questions, how can they develop the skills necessary to respond in the pace of a real time classroom? How we take these issues up within teacher preparation reflects our assumptions about the profession and the normative discourses of teacher performance, which are always historically situated. What can we learn from individuals with disabilities that can inform our current understandings?

### *Decentering of knowledge*

Another key element of a disability studies framework is that it turns the tables on traditional constructions of disability and traditional hierarchies of power by locating the lived experiences of disability at the center of consideration. Rather than seeing disability as being on the periphery of human experience, disability studies shifts the focus and looks at the experience of disability from the inside out. “Disability studies is concerned with the social processes that ‘disable’ people and the understanding of disability and disabling social processes from the inside, or from the perspective of lived experience” (Gabel & Danforth, 2002, p. 3). It represents a “body of knowledge owned by the disability community as opposed to one written about that community by ‘normals’” (Davis, 1997, p. 1). For teacher educators, disability studies decenters the locus of knowledge that all too often

places individuals with disabilities at the periphery, while so-called scholars and experts on disability get to define the experience and the needs. A disability studies framework privileges individuals considered to have disabilities as the experts on that experience. Therefore, it is essential to learn *from* the individual, not *about* the individual.

There are several ways to decenter the location of knowledge within a teacher preparation program. When choosing texts and articles, it is important to assign first person narratives of disability. Too often, the experience of disability is narrated through a professional or clinical voice in textbooks and journal articles. While those sorts of knowledge can contribute to our understanding, the primary source of textual data about the experience of disability should come through the voice of individuals who experience disability. It is also imperative to invite individuals considered to have disabilities into our classrooms to teach our students and not just to have them share about their experience with disability. Rather they can and should be invited to contribute to the larger knowledge base about education and schooling. For example, at Syracuse University all of the students in our inclusive education program have the privilege of being taught alternative approaches to mathematical concepts such as square and cube roots by a man who developed his own mathematical theories after spending much of his life in an institution. When he speaks in class it is as an expert on math, not an expert on disability. While first person accounts are always preferable, documentary films are another excellent resource for accessing the perspectives of individuals with disabilities.

In our courses, we also highlight the important knowledge that parents and families bring to the experience of school. Students read family narratives, written by parents and siblings. We also invite family members into our classrooms to talk about working with school districts in support of inclusive education. When we discuss individualized education program (IEP) development and implementation, we stress the role of parent and student involvement in all phases of the process. Our students attend Committee on Special Education meetings and discuss how parents are, or are not, empowered to participate meaningfully in the discussion and planning. This emphasis on shared knowledge is foundational to an understanding of disability as multi-dimensional and socially embedded.

One of the biggest benefits of such an enmeshed certification program is that we do not emphasize separate bodies of knowledge. We aim to send the message that special education is not a different kind of education, it is simply “really good education.” There is no magic, no special education fairy dust. The tools and strategies of special education should not be owned by a small group of specially trained and selected professionals. Rather, we encourage interdisciplinary student-centered problem

solving. Some of our students enter the program with a desire to become special educators, whereas others are interested in general elementary education. Therefore, we have to equip both sets of students with the same set of tools that will enable them to be highly qualified in either role.

### **Preparing Future Teachers for the Work of Inclusive Education**

When I was going through interviews for faculty positions, a dean once asked me, "Do you think it is enough to just deconstruct what is wrong with special education or do you think students need to learn how to teach?" Obviously, this was a somewhat tongue-in-cheek question. Of course we need to prepare teachers for the actual work of teaching. When this dean went on to explain her question further, her concern stemmed from the fact that disability studies as a field of study has been critical of traditional models of special education and would I, therefore, be able to prepare students for the work of special education, no matter how flawed the system is. Would I only teach my students to critically consider what is wrong with the system, or would I also teach them concrete strategies for working with students that challenge typical ways of performing in schools.

My response was that both of those are essential skills for both preservice and in-service teachers. Faculty need to actively challenge the discourses of ability, disability, and normalcy that serve to limit access for so many students. However, we do need to equip future teachers with pedagogical tools to provide high-quality instruction. Those tools do not need to be and *should not* be disability specific or based on rigid descriptions of categories of difference. Rather, they should reflect a strengths- and needs-based approach to determining supports and useful teaching strategies. Perhaps the more pressing challenge is to alter the instructional context such that students can be successful rather than focusing on remediating supposed deficits. Gabel (2005) argues, "One methodological dilemma for educators is the problem of deciding how to balance the need for the improvement of function (often the school's concern) with the refusal to pathologize and the reticence to 'cure' difference (two concerns of social interpretations)" (p. 9). This is the rub. Teaching should not be about "cure" or "elimination of difference." Rather, educators need to approach teaching as an active and reflective process of altering the environment to make meaningful engagement possible and providing instruction that builds on areas of strength while addressing areas of academic need. It is not "just" or "inclusive" to fail to teach students skills that would help them meet important academic and life goals.

#### ***Strengths and needs-based approaches***

One of the benefits of a disability studies approach to education is that it is much more emancipatory than

traditional models of special education. When disability is viewed through a lens of social construction, when context is considered, teachers have clearer ways to intercede. If context and environment matter, teachers are empowered to alter them. In effect, a disability studies framework gives teachers permission to be creative problem solvers and to reach out to others from different disciplines. If we eschew the positivist notion that disability resides in the person and that we have to have all the answers as the professional, then we open ourselves up for greater possibility. Conversely, "A neutral/objective framework, once embraced, invariably leads to teaching that is largely a matter of applying a prescriptive method. Thus instruction emphasizes form over function and meaning" (Gallagher, 2005, p. 143).

One way that we support a strengths- and needs-based approach to supports and services is through the implementation of positive student profiles and utilization of an inclusive lesson-planning template. This lesson-planning template (Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, & Trezek, 2008), utilized in some form throughout all of the professional blocks, requires that students develop positive student profiles on identified focus students. The teacher candidates then have to consider these students as they plan for instruction and develop student specific supports. Rather than basing the supports and accommodations on an identified disability label, the students have to focus on individualized strengths and needs, areas of multiple intelligence strength, and subject-specific academic skills. Very much in line with our emphasis on universal design for learning (Rose, Meyer, & Hitchcock, 2005), rather than approaching lesson design and implementation from a "teacher proof" or prescriptive position, this lesson-planning template encourages future teachers to keep students at the center of instructional design.

#### ***Teachers as problem solvers***

In keeping with our emphasis on learning from our students, we encourage our students to try and understand the meaning of behavior rather than simply trying to change students' behavior to comply with a stated norm. In the course *Collaborative Teaching for Inclusive Education*, a senior level course taken by students in conjunction with their special education student teaching placement that focuses on the inclusion of students with more complex needs, we ask the students to conduct a functional behavioral analysis with a focus student. The idea is to identify a behavior that has proven challenging for the team to make sense of and then conduct specific and targeted observation to determine potential contextual factors or triggers. The idea is to see the behavior as communicative and potentially functional. Once students surmise potential functions the behavior serves for the student, they brainstorm other ways to meet that function, other ways to address that need for the student that are less disruptive or harmful to the

student or the environment. Often, what students learn from this activity is that behavior that has been constructed by the adults in the room as highly problematic is less so when viewed through the perspective of potential function. It also creates a culture of student-centered problem solving, rather than focusing on eliminating the behavior or ignoring the need, the students have to consider the meaning of the behavior to the person experiencing it.

In addition to teaching the skills of IEP development, we ask our students to analyze an IEP for a student in their placement classroom, but pair that with a qualitative observation across multiple contexts. Then, students are expected to draw interpretations using both the IEP document and the observation as data, and consider how differently the student can be constructed. What different meaning can be made of these two, often disparate, data sources. We also ask them to consider those potential disjunctures—the examples where the student on paper does not correlate with the observational data. Again, we are teaching a necessary special education professional skill but are placing it in a broader context, where students can see the socially constructed nature of our assumptions about students.

#### *Rethinking student assessment*

I struggled for several semesters with the worry that my students were leaving this program in inclusive elementary and special education without sufficient exposure to the standardized test measures used so often to identify and plan for students with disabilities. However, our program does not embrace formal assessment as the most accurate means of understanding how students learn. We emphasize a needs-based approach, rather than a categorical approach. Therefore, formal standardized assessment has not historically been a focus. However, our students then leave and go into jobs where they are expected to administer and interpret achievement tests. What then is our responsibility? How can we find that balance between theory and current practice? How do we simultaneously prepare our future teachers for the world as it is while helping them work toward the world as we would like it to be?

In this instance, I decided to integrate an assessment laboratory into my senior methods course. In this laboratory, the students examine and administer several commonly used measures. We review the administration procedures and explore the test books, with an eye on starting to understand how to administer the tools, but I also ask them to take note of any questions raised by the materials. Many students point out the obvious cultural bias in some of the test protocols. Others point out the challenge of responding in the time allotted if you are an individual with motor planning or sensory challenges. After they practice administering the assessments, we have a discussion of both the process and the concerns that they identified.

One idea we discuss for addressing test bias is administering some sections of the assessments twice: once adhering to all administration rules and procedures and once with additional time allowed. The first set of data can be used for diagnoses, reporting of progress, and official decision making. The second can be used for instructional decision making. We also discuss alternatives and additions to standardized assessment, such as portfolio assessment, systematic observation, and curriculum-based measures. In this course, the students have to identify a targeted academic goal for a student with complex support needs and then develop instructional activities to address this goal over the course of the semester. In addition, they have to develop and implement an assessment plan that does not rely on standardized measures. They need to be able to administer standardized measures, but we are also asking them to question the process and think about ways to make the assessment of students more meaningful and in-line with their own beliefs about student learning. This balancing act is an example of what it takes to operate a teacher preparation program within a disability studies framework.

#### *Becoming agents of change in schools*

One of the foci of our program is helping future teachers see themselves as agents of change in schools and equipping them with the tools necessary to make that happen. We want teachers to feel empowered to be part of a change process with students and to teach with an eye on constant improvement and striving toward more just and inclusive school communities, but we recognize that we send our students out into a world that is not necessarily in line with what we are teaching. At least once a semester a past student e-mails me to ask for help with a specific challenge she is facing in her new position. But that is often accompanied by a tone of frustration that the school world she entered was not nearly as inclusive or progressive as she was expecting based on our instruction and expectations. We prepare them as inclusive educators, prepared to teach all children with and without disabilities in typical education classrooms, yet many of our graduates will enter into positions that are not inclusive. Many accept positions as special education teachers in self-contained settings.

We have struggled as a department with the question of placements in segregated classrooms. We want all of our students to have experience in inclusive classrooms, and we prepare them to teach inclusively, yet the local schools do not always afford us enough options for placements. Furthermore, we want our students to work with a whole range of learners including those with more complex support needs and those students are not always educated in typical classrooms. Therefore, some of our students do complete their student teaching in pull-out resource rooms or with teachers that spend part of their day in special class settings. During the course of their

programs, our students complete over 900 hours of fieldwork, so they experience a wide variety of models.

To provide even more exposure to the continuum of services, the students are also required to visit a classroom that utilizes a different model of service delivery. We then discuss the different skills and competencies necessary for success in these varied settings. As many of our students take jobs working with students with more complex needs, we emphasize strategies for embedding individualized education plan goals and functional goals in academic curriculum and expect them to be able to utilize an IEP goals matrix for that purpose. They are also expected to develop student specific objectives for each lesson they teach, regardless of setting, that address not only the grade level curriculum, but the specific needs outlined by the students' IEPs.

As we hope that our students will be advocates for greater inclusion in their future jobs, we provide tools and resources to that end. For example, during the senior level course on collaborative teaching for inclusive education, we take the students through a series of activities that are useful when initiating inclusive teaching with a new partner. They are required to develop a shared philosophy of education and then develop a plan for roles and responsibilities in their inclusive classrooms. We also share and discuss differing scheduling and support models for special education. Furthermore, we hold mock discussions with resistant teachers and administrators where the students role play their responses in support of inclusive practice. We group these activities and examples in our own work with inclusive school reform and our current efforts to help schools utilize staff and support in more inclusive ways.

## Conclusion

The separation between general and special education is neither natural nor inevitable. We can envision a way to teach all kids, including those with the most complex needs. We can all assume this responsibility, regardless of training or title. And, hopefully, students can work to foster a similar climate in their future classrooms and schools. I have not attempted to present a model for teacher preparation. There is not a cookie cutter disability studies infused program that can or should be replicated at other universities. Rather, disability studies can provide a guiding framework for thinking about the experience of difference and a way to inform programmatic decision-making.

This is a trying time in education. Schools are facing drastic reductions in funding, class sizes are growing in many places, and special educators are struggling to balance the demands of high stakes testing and accountability with the desire for more inclusive opportunities. Our current students are entering the field during a time of great uncertainty. Disability studies is a field of study that asks us to reconsider disability not as something to

be cured or eliminated but as an inevitable and important part of human diversity. It requires that we listen to and learn from individuals with disabilities and their families. A disability studies framework requires us to consider the ways that school policies and teacher practices can serve to either enhance or limit opportunity. For all of those reasons and so many more, this approach to preservice teacher education is emancipatory.

My wish for the students I described in the introduction is that that they leave our program with many more questions than answers, with open minds and a commitment to social change. For the student in my office, I hope she leaves the program with the ability to think critically about her own experiences in light of what she learned. Rather than simply stating that all students need to be taught in general education classrooms, end of conversation, we can talk about the racial and economic factors related to provision of services. We can discuss the characteristics of that resource room and what elements of that experience could and should be brought into a general education setting to support the learning of *all* students. We can ask the questions, what students are not gaining access to age-appropriate curriculum and why do we think that is? Disability studies is not intended as a replacement for special education. Rather, it provides discursive tools for making sense of disability and engaging in the critical conversations necessary to re-envision education for all.

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