

Beyond Survival: Reflections on Anti- Ableist Mentorship in Special Education Teacher Education

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ABSTRACT

Disabled doctoral students and faculty members' experiences with disability and ableism uniquely and intimately shape their work within special education and teacher education. Yet, traditional mentoring and collaboration structures for doctoral students too often ignore this reality, instead creating support systems that explicitly and implicitly privilege nondisabled and neurotypical ways of being. This is particularly prevalent within special education, where special educators and students are statically positioned: educators are presumed to be nondisabled experts, while students are pathologized and perceived as in need of said expertise. In this article, we share insights from our lived experiences as special education faculty engaging in mentorship that was organically developed and informed by the ways we saw ourselves and each other while navigating and challenging traditional norms, expectations, and structures of higher education. Situated within the broader literature on mentoring, ableism in special education, and higher education, we share three characteristics of mentorship that have the potential to strengthen and sustain a more diverse special education faculty workforce.

KEYWORDS

Ableism, doctoral preparation, mentorship, special education

A *anna, a third-year doctoral student, is about to begin teaching her second course in her university's special education preparation program. A disabled educator and former learner who received special education services, she is passionate about disability justice and anti-ableist pedagogy in teacher education. In her first course, she proudly implemented practices rooted in an inclusive and universal understanding of accessibility (Sins Invalid, 2019). Thinking beyond accommodations, Anna's course policies recognized that everyone has needs and that no one needs to justify, disclose, or prove when their needs are not being met.*

In preparation for her next teaching assignment, Anna met with a senior faculty member who aimed to orient her to the course. Anna, eager for mentorship around teaching, was hopeful that this would be one of many opportunities to discuss teaching and learning with an experienced teacher educator. She was not, however, prepared for what would follow...

"Under no circumstances can you give accommodations to teacher candidates without a signed letter from disability services," said the faculty member.

The faculty member continued, "Students are going to come to you without documentation, and they are going to wink and say, 'trust me, I have a disability.' They will try, but do not let them convince you to give any accommodations without a letter."

Anna's heart sank, and her body froze, disheartened by the way that disabled students were being positioned as dishonest people trying to gain an upper hand. She knew firsthand how impossible it could be for some disabled students to obtain the so-called "proper" documentation. She also knew that disclosing disabilities came with great risk and vulnerability.

During this short interaction, Anna thought about her own pedagogy and syllabus. She could not risk sharing about her approach, fearing unknown potential consequences that might jeopardize her teaching assistantships or force her to acquiesce to an ableist status quo. Anna decided that she needed to remain quiet for the remainder of the interaction. In the weeks that followed, she grappled with complex and layered feelings that, at times, consumed her. She felt anger towards the academy for normalizing the deficit positioning of disabled students. She felt guilty for not pushing back and speaking out against such positioning. Her hope for mentorship now shattered, she also felt deeply sad and isolated. Without a clear pathway for support, she wondered, “Who can I trust? Is there a place for people like me in teacher education?”

With research over the past 15 years raising critical questions about the supply, demand, and composition of special education faculty (e.g., Mirielli et al., 2025; Montrosse & Young, 2012), scholars have warned of the serious consequences that longstanding shortages have on students with disabilities and their families (Smith et al., 2011; West & Hardman, 2012). Federal initiatives, such as doctoral training grants awarded by agencies like the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), have aimed to address these shortages by increasing the number of special education doctoral students prepared to enter the academic workforce (McCorkle et al., 2023).

Many of these programs have simultaneously prioritized recruiting doctoral students from historically underrepresented groups (Dieker et al., 2014; Tyler et al., 2012) and securing better-funded pathways for emerging teacher educators like Anna into the professorate (Smith et al., 2011). Despite nominal improvements in the diversification of the special

education faculty pipeline vis-a-vis these externally funded programs (McCorkle et al., 2023; Tyler et al., 2012), the special education faculty workforce remains largely white, female, and nondisabled (deBettencourt et al., 2016; Friedman-Krauss et al., 2025). More specifically, disabled doctoral students make up less than 7% of the special education faculty pipeline (Tyler et al., 2012); likewise, just over 7% of higher education faculty report being disabled (Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education, 2024).

Disabled teacher educators’ experiences with disability and ableism uniquely and intimately shape their work within special education and, more broadly, higher education (Campbell, 2009; Sarchet, 2026). Anna’s interaction with a senior faculty member, as illustrated in the opening vignette, raises critical questions about how disabled teacher educators are supported (or not) in their special education doctoral programs and beyond. Understanding that her experience is reflective of pervasive patterns rather than an isolated incident requires a recognition of the longstanding and well-documented histories of ableism and exclusion in both special education (e.g., Baglieri et al., 2011; Broderick & Lalvani, 2017; Erevelles & Minear, 2010) and higher education (e.g., Dolmage, 2017; Kattari & Erickson, 2025; Lindsay & Fuentes, 2022).

Ableism is a system of oppression that reinforces and rewards those who meet, conform, or assimilate to white, nondisabled, male, and wealthy norms (Lewis, 2022). Operating in tandem with racism and other systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991), ableism is baked into the fabric of every educational institution (Annamma, Connor, et al., 2013). We argue, however, that while ableism remains endemic to special education, teacher education, and academia at large, there have *always* been disabled people

and nondisabled co-conspirators actively resisting and imagining a better way (Wong, 2020, 2022). These movement builders have deeply shaped our own work within special education teacher education, as well as how we have come to conceptualize an anti-ableist approach to mentorship.

MENTORSHIP FROM AN ANTI-ABLEIST LENS

There is strong consensus in the literature around the need to invest in high-quality mentorship to better support and prepare students for the successful completion of the doctoral program and subsequent transition to special education faculty roles (Bessette & Bennett, 2019; McCorkle et al., 2023; Regan & King-Sears, 2023). Bessette and Bennett (2019) similarly argued that mentoring can no longer be viewed as an “academic frill,” but instead a necessary way to build and foster high-quality teacher education. However, mentorship is understood, enacted, and experienced in different ways by different people (Kemmis et al., 2014; Yun & Sorcinelli, 2009). Yet, at its core, mentorship is defined as a process with a shared purpose and set of aims (e.g., Council for Exceptional Children, 1997) by which knowledge and information are shared (Martin et al., 2016). Within special education, however, scholars have emphasized significant shifts related to teacher educators’ roles and expectations (e.g., Nagro et al., 2020; Robb et al., 2012), highlighting the dire need for intentional mentorship that reflects the needs and changing realities of the field.

Mentorship is also not neutral, nor universal. Limited attention has been given to the ways mentorship can and must attend to the diverse and unique ways disability and disablement shape the needs and experiences of disabled doctoral candidates and early-career faculty (Campbell, 2009; Hubrig, 2021;

Rice-Evans & Stella, 2021). Mentorship must expand beyond models that view disability as something to accommodate (e.g., Dieker et al., 2014), and instead interrogate how mentorship in higher education often privileges nondisabled and neurotypical ways of knowing, being, and doing (Kattari & Erickson, 2025). When grounded in anti-ableism, mentorship can empower mentors and mentees to understand how each person's experiences are shaped by their multifaceted identities and positioning within society and push back on systems that have marginalized and harmed those who do not reflect the nondisabled archetype of academia.

Anti-Ableist Mentorship in Action

In 2022, Author 1 (Katie) was a third-year doctoral student interested in teaching, and Author 2 (Lindsey) was a newly hired non-tenure track faculty member who had just transitioned from another institution. Our mutual mentorship first began when Katie was actively seeking out additional opportunities related to teaching and, at the recommendation of an advisor, volunteered to serve as a teaching assistant for a course Lindsey was teaching. In some ways, our mentorship began by chance and from a traditional perspective of a mentor supporting the mentee within the specific area of higher education teaching. However, shaped by our own professional and personal experiences, we connected over a shared belief that the teacher education classroom can be a powerful place to challenge ongoing inequities within (special) education (hooks, 1994). Bringing our passion and layered personal and professional identities into this process allowed us to foster a culture of mutual support that transcended how we both had previously understood what mentorship could and should look like.

In this article, we share insights from our lived experiences as special education faculty engaging in mutual mentorship that was organically developed and informed by the ways we saw ourselves and each other while navigating and challenging traditional norms, expectations, and structures of higher education. Reflecting and contextualizing these experiences within the broader literature on mentoring, ableism in special education and higher education, and disabled wisdom, we examined characteristics of mentorship that have thus far been insufficiently addressed in special education. We argue that anti-ableist mentorship is best characterized by: 1) relationships that value and affirm wholeness, 2) explicit attention to the complexities and tensions within special education, and 3) reciprocal wisdom. After describing each characteristic, we end with a final note about the importance of finding and embracing joy in mentoring.

Building Relationships That Value and Affirm Wholeness

All doctoral students enter the field of teacher education with diverse personal and social identities that transcend and shape how they experience graduate school (e.g., Crenshaw, 1991; Darby, 2023). While much has been written about this by disabled scholars in the humanities (e.g., Campbell, 2009; Hubrig, 2021; Rice-Evans & Stella, 2021), mentoring within special education doctoral programs has largely focused on supporting students' professional outcomes (McCorkle et al., 2023). Further, with success criteria rooted in neurotypical and nondisabled ways of knowing, being, and communicating, it is not surprising that academia fails to support disabled and neurodivergent faculty as their full and authentic selves (Kattari & Erickson, 2025; Lindsay & Fuentes, 2022).

Maintaining these norms can con-

tribute to reductive assumptions about doctoral programs, reinforcing the notion that expectations and demands can be understood from a neutral lens (Dolmage, 2017). Higher education, however, is not neutral, particularly for those who do not meet privileged identity markers (e.g., white, nondisabled; Hubrig, 2021; Rice-Evans & Stella, 2021). Strong mentorship requires a holistic approach that meaningfully considers the tapestry of identities and experiences that mentors and mentees bring to higher education, as well as the contextual factors that shape this relationship (Maloch et al., 2025). Mentoring rooted in anti-ableist approaches invites disabled doctoral students and faculty to build authentic relationships that allow them to show up as they are without hiding their needs, silencing their voices, or concealing core aspects of themselves (Mingus, 2017).

Honoring the diverse lived experiences and social identities of each individual (Anderson, 2006; Campbell, 2009; Pritchard, 2010), however, does not require mentors and mentees to disclose aspects of themselves or their histories, nor does it require them to share a list of identities. Instead, relationships are built on resisting assumptions about each person's relationship to and experiences with disability and special education. For example, mentors and mentees should remain mindful of the varied ways one can experience ableism and disability. While some people proudly claim a disabled identity, others might grapple with a label imposed on them without their input. In a different vein, not all people with disabilities or disability labels have received special education services, while those who did receive services have diverse and complex experiences.

Building relationships and connections that honor one's wholeness also requires mentors and mentees to resist

pressures that privilege productivity over human connection (Hubrig, 2021; Sins Invalid, 2019). Mentorship that extends beyond teaching, research, and other professional outcomes requires each person to spend more time as mentors and mentees so that they can focus on getting to know one another as their full selves. While this will look different for each mentor and mentee, it might include getting to know each other's passions, interests, and personal responsibilities. Without a prescriptive set of criteria, each individual must also commit to cultivating and sustaining a culture of mentorship that centers on the self-actualization and needs of each person (hooks, 1994). For example, when supporting advanced doctoral experiences as they enter the faculty job market, mentors might consider:

- *What were my experiences during the faculty hiring process? More specifically, what were my physical, emotional, mental, and sensorial experiences?*
- *What aspects of the process were disabling for me? What aspects of the process were nourishing for me?*
- *How can I resist normalizing aspects of the process that reproduce ableist and nondisabled assumptions about being a faculty member?*

Both reflective and reflexive, these questions provide mentors with opportunities to confront and trouble ableism that often becomes normalized in academia, particularly when applying and interviewing for faculty positions.

Explicit Attention to the Complexities and Tensions Within Special Education

The field of special education is undoubtedly complex, with a troubled and contentious history (Ferri & Connor, 2005). This complexity is further

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compounded by profound disagreements about how disability is conceptualized, the purpose of education, beliefs about the outcomes of special education, the current state of knowledge about special education practice, and necessary steps to improve special education (Andrews et al., 2000; Connor et al., 2019). Mentorship that is highly relational and built on a foundation of trust allows for explicit attention to be paid to the complexities and tensions within special education. Perhaps more importantly, anti-ableist mentorship requires an acknowledgment of how these complexities and tensions impact one's own personal and professional experiences, goals, and beliefs.

For many doctoral students and faculty, including those who are disabled, tensions within the field are not merely theoretical; they can also be personal. Dominant belief systems in any given program shape the culture, sense of belonging, and perspectives of its students. Despite calls for a *plurality of perspectives* (Baglieri et al., 2011) and a more recent focus on ways to adopt critical perspectives in teacher preparation programs (e.g., Lukins et al., 2023), traditional belief systems rooted in deficit ideas of disability continue to explicitly and implicitly show up in the curricula, policies, and support structures within doctoral programs in ways that can be experienced as both dehumanizing and othering (Darby, 2023).

Anti-ableist mentorship makes space for doctoral students and faculty to

acknowledge and process how special education teacher preparation continues to reinforce ableist beliefs and practices. This includes supportive guidance for how to navigate challenging and contentious situations and perspectives from colleagues and peers in ways that foster a sense of belonging and safety. Rather than acquiescing to the status quo, mentors and mentees can engage in collaborative resistance. More specifically, anti-ableist mentorship focused on teaching might include an examination of the broader principles and practices within the disability rights and justice movements (Sins Invalid, 2019) and reflexive conversations about the implications of their work. For example, mentorship focused on syllabus development could be guided by questions such as:

- *How do the syllabi position disability and disabled people? What assumptions are being made? What past assumptions have I made that need to be troubled and/or interrogated?*
- *How might each of us experience the content, goals, and aims of the course as we discuss them?*
- *How can we support each other in staying committed to our anti-ableist commitments to special education and teacher preparation?*

With a shared purpose rooted in anti-ableism, mentors and mentees can hold each other accountable, ensuring that their work extends beyond dialogue to include action.

Giving and Receiving: Reciprocal Wisdom

Traditionally, mentorship statically and hierarchically positions the mentor and mentee; the student is labeled as the mentee in need of guidance and the faculty member as the expert and mentor (Yun et al., 2016). This dynamic is similarly seen in how special educators and students are statically positioned in special education; educators are presumed to be nondisabled experts, while students are pathologized and perceived as in need of said expertise (Baglieri et al., 2011; Brantlinger, 2004). More than inaccurate, these broader patterns limit knowledge production and what is possible within both special education and teacher education (Freire, 2000). Drawing on scholarship that has positioned disabled lived experience as a worthy and valuable asset within education and teacher education (Anderson, 2006; Pritchard, 2010; Siuty & Meyer, 2025), anti-ableist mentoring disrupts academic hierarchies and ableist binaries, privileging reciprocal wisdom that values the contributions and knowledge each individual brings (Freire, 2000).

Centering reciprocal wisdom within mentorship first requires acknowledgment of the social or positional context of the mentoring relationship and the histories and identities of both the mentor and mentee (Maloch et al., 2025). Expanding on dominant expert/novice binaries within special education teacher preparation, an anti-ableist approach repositions not just *who* is expert, but also *what* is considered expertise (Freire, 2000). Anti-ableist mentoring looks beyond narrow conceptions of what is considered “best practice” to include lived experience as not just valid, but as meaningful evidence that can positively shape special education teacher preparation. For example, formative new insights can be generated when mentors and mentees consider their own em-

bodied experiences as disabled doctoral students and faculty as a form of valuable knowledge. For some, this might look like candid and frank conversations about experiences receiving intensive intervention, pull-out services, and/or being placed in segregated settings. Since disability is not a single identity or monolithic experience, how mentors and mentees practice reciprocal wisdom will vary, yet they might engage in reflective practice around questions such as:

- *What assumptions am I making about who is an expert and what is considered expertise?*
- *What kinds of knowledge and expertise am I foregrounding? Who and what is being privileged?*
- *How am I considering my own embodied experiences as a learner? An educator? A researcher? What new knowledge or insights come from my lived experiences?*
- *How are the experiences, perspectives, and insights of those impacted by this particular special education practice and approach being considered? Whose perspective might be missing?*

Together, mentors and mentees balance their valuable lived experience and wisdom with curiosity and openness for different identities, experiences, and insights.

Finding and Embracing Joy in Mentorship

As all three characteristics provide opportunities for mentors and mentees to grapple with and unpack ongoing inequities within special education, higher education, and teacher preparation, finding joy is also paramount. Finding humor and joy is a longstanding practice within disability communities (LeBrecht et al., 2020; Wong, 2020). For example, Imani Barbarin, a disability rights activist, subverted the othering of disabled people by creating a popular

hashtag #AbleDsAreWeird (Quraishi, 2019). Alice Wong (2019), similarly, created a social media campaign called #SuckItAbleism to make visible disabled people who use plastic straws and feeding tubes whose humanity had been erased by straw bans. Importantly, Wong and Barbarin’s work is instructive for those engaging in anti-ableist mentoring. A both/and can exist, where mentors and mentees find joy while also refusing to sanitize the social barriers, oppression, and harm that continue to persist within the field. With countless ways for disabled people to find and embrace joy, we have found our own unique ways to spark laughter and validate our own lived experiences and realities within academia. Whether it is sharing memes evoking dumpster fires, sending each other astute clips from *Abbott Elementary*, or something else entirely, anti-ableist mentoring should always include opportunities for mentors and mentees to connect through laughter (and maybe tears, too #EverythingIsFine).

CONCLUSION

Not intended to be a prescription or a singular solution to a complex problem, this article aims to expand current discussion around sustaining doctoral students and early career faculty in special education through mentorship. Rejecting longstanding personal and professional siloes, we have presented an approach to mentorship that recognizes and affirms a more diverse array of experiences, identities, and knowledge. When rooted in anti-ableist understandings of disability, special education, and higher education, mentorship has the potential to create subversive spaces that protect and sustain those who deviate from what educational systems have historically deemed worthy, valuable, and so-called “normal” (Annamma, Boelé, et al., 2013). Moreover, mentors

and mentees who build relationships that affirm wholeness, grapple with the complexities within special education, and embrace each other's wisdom can generate critical knowledge that positively shapes the future of special education and teacher education. Anti-ableist approaches can provide long-overdue opportunities for disabled doctoral students and faculty members to find an authentic place of belonging where their knowledge, experiences, and contributions can be fully recognized.

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