

FROM *the guest*  
EDITORS

## Centering the Knowledge of Neurodivergent and Disabled Educators & Educators to Be: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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In 2016, the Council for Exceptional Children released a “Policy on Educators with Disabilities,” which firmly positioned teacher education programs in an important role to recruit, support, and retain educators with disabilities in the field of special education. The policy affirmed disabled teachers’ “strengths that emanate from first-hand experience” with disabilities, and noted that “institutions of higher education must provide supports and accommodations to educators with disabilities based on the needs of individuals and disability documentation” (p. 407). Without this appropriate support, the field of special education risks “losing the unique expertise, knowledge, and skills [teachers with disabilities] contribute to our schools” (Council for Exceptional Children, 2016, p. 407).

Ten years after the publication of this policy, schools have seen an increase in both the number of disabled and neurodivergent children, with the majority spending most of the day in dominantly non-disabled and inclusive general education settings (OSEP, 2026); as well as a near doubling of the number of undergraduate students with disabilities between 2008 and 2020 (NCES, 2023). The field of special education has also seen an increase in research and scholarship that explores the experiences of disabled teachers and researchers, including impacts on pedagogy (Neca et al., 2020), the importance of role models for students with disabilities (Mueller, 2021), and identification of barriers from teacher education programs to the classroom (Siuty & Beneke, 2020; Strimel et al., 2023). This *Journal of Special Education Preparation (JOSEP)* special issue continues an ongoing conversation about the role of disabled people in special education and offers practices and strategies that can support teacher educators in better preparing people with disabilities to enter professional roles in the field.

### Introducing the Neurodivergent Educators & Researchers with Disabilities Special Interest Group

Within this context, in 2022, a small group of researchers and graduate students began conversations about forming an affinity space in the CEC-Teacher Education Division that would provide mentorship opportunities, scholarly collaboration, and discussion about current issues focused on educators and researchers with disabilities. Many of the founding members had gone through teacher preparation and doctoral special education programs attempting to independently navigate life as a teacher and a scholar with a disability (or disabilities). These teachers often experienced isolation and microaggressions in addition to facing many barriers towards their progression in the field.

The Neurodivergent Researchers and Educators with Disabilities Special Inter-

This special issue offers both theoretical and practical contributions that center disabled educator expertise. Each contribution takes a unique approach in addressing the practical need for disabled-led policy, practice, and scholarship in the field of special education.

est Group (NERDS SIG) was formed from a desire to build community with other people with disabilities invested in the field of special education, and to formalize supportive pipelines for disabled people to be involved in special education leadership roles, from teaching to research. The NERDS SIG directly responds to the field of special education's goal of supporting disabled students while also confronting its dominant epistemological focus that aligns with the medical model of disability, by emphasizing the role of disability identity, community, and pride in the field (Bialka et al., 2024; Smith & Mueller, 2022). To this end, as NERDS leadership, we invite the readers of this special issue to consider the ways that their research, teaching, and scholarship centers and privileges the knowledge of disabled people as leaders and experts in the field. Further, we encourage *JOSEP* readers of this special issue to critically reflect upon the ways their teacher preparation programs (and teacher

education nationally) may support or inhibit the recruitment and retention of disabled and neurodivergent educators and teacher educators and consider what could be done to make more inclusive and accessible environments.

To date, NERDS has hosted affinity spaces, a roundtable presentation session for scholars with disabilities at the TED conference, and plans to continue this work through invited speaker sessions, mentorship programs, and webinars. The authors of this special issue are disabled/neurodivergent scholars and NERDS members, who participated in the inaugural NERDS spotlight research presentation session at TED's 2025 annual meeting. This issue, as an extension of the spotlight session, provides strategies to help teachers educators cultivate more inclusive classroom environments that empower and better retain disabled/neurodivergent educators and encourage preservice teachers to engage in similar disability-affirming practices in their future classrooms.

This special issue is grounded in a few important beliefs about disability knowledge in special education. First, disabled educators have both professional and personal knowledge that enriches the learning experience and outcomes for all students, especially disabled and neurodivergent ones (Mueller, 2021). Second, disabled educators often connect their personal experiences and perspectives to their pedagogical practice, helping move their teaching towards a more student-focused, accessible, affirming direction, which is beneficial for preservice teachers to see and experience before entering the workforce (Sarchet, 2026).

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arship in the field of special education. The article by Dean and Didrichsen (this issue) illustrates the importance of disability-informed practices, and demonstrates they can both confront deficit-based assumptions and model for preservice teachers how to create more inclusive learning environments. Readers interested in specific practices they can utilize with their preservice teachers and advising work might consider redesigning group work to be effective for all learners, including neurodivergent students (VanUitert & Santhanam, this issue), and focusing on anti-ableist mentorship (Meyer & Chapman, this issue). Zepp and colleagues (this issue) introduce a pedagogical opportunity in the Disabled Speakers' Bureau, demonstrating the empowering role the group plays in allowing disabled/neurodivergent students to be leaders in teacher education program design and policy, speakers of disabled experience, and mentors to peers. Lannan and Kohnke (this issue) offer strategies and programmatic changes to support disabled preservice teachers as they navigate coursework, field experiences, and the transition from student to teacher. Macko and Pearson (this issue) offer a concrete strategy for preparing special educators to support autistic female students and explores considerations at the intersection of disability and gender.

Taken together, the articles in this special issue offer both conceptual approaches towards understanding the experiences of educators with disabilities, and practical tools and tips that can provide faculty involved with educating preservice teachers with disabilities a more accessible, explicitly anti-ableist experience in their programs. Each article reflects the deep work of many disabled people inside and outside of the field of special education, who understood the power dynamic inherent in a system designed to educate disabled

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### Carlyn Mueller, PhD

Carlyn Mueller is an Assistant Professor of Special Education in the Department of Rehabilitation Psychology & Special Education. Her research focuses on disability identity development in school contexts; including development of disability community in special education, disability representation in curriculum, and intersectionality of race and disability.

### Victoria VanUitert, PhD

Dr. Victoria J. VanUitert is an assistant professor in the School of Inclusive Teacher Education at Bowling Green State University. Her research focuses on a) developing interventions to improve the social-emotional & academic success and well-being of neurodivergent individuals (e.g., autistic, with ADHD, with learning disabilities), (b) exploring the experiences of neurodivergent individuals and the implications of these outcomes, and (c) preparing pre- and in-service K-12 teachers and university and service professionals to provide inclusive, affirming, and effective learning experiences for their students.

### Lauren Zepp, PhD

Lauren Zepp (she/her) is an Assistant Professor of Special Education at the University of Wisconsin - Whitewater. Her research focuses on special education teacher preparation with two primary strands: (1) building pre-service teachers' knowledge and skills for delivering effective reading instruction and (2) supporting disabled and neurodivergent teacher candidates. Dr. Zepp teaches introduction to special education, as well as courses on reading assessments and interventions.

students absent disability pride, knowledge, and community. The NERDS SIG is grateful to TED and to JOSEP for the opportunity to build our own pipelines and both conceptual and very real physical spaces. We look forward to continuing the conversation outside of the special issue as a community.

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