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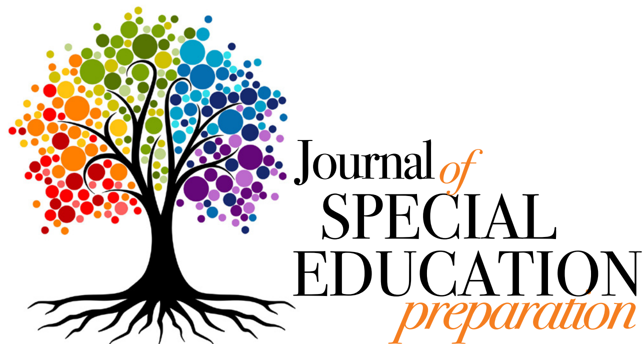

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FROM *the guest*
EDITORS

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

AUTHORS
Carlyn Mueller
Victoria VanUitert
Lauren Zepp

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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).

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. 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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Designing for Access: Learning From Disabled Educators in Higher Education

AUTHORS
Zoë J. Dean
Samantha Didrichsen

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ABSTRACT
Inclusion in education is often framed as a technical or compliance-driven process, emphasizing accommodations and policy requirements rather than everyday instructional practice. This article argues that centering disabled voices, particularly those of disabled educators, can support more relational, proactive approaches to inclusion in teaching and learning. Drawing on a narrative vignette of a disabled teacher educator, we illustrate how lived disability and/or neurodivergent experience informs instructional decision-making that normalizes access, reduces cognitive barriers, and benefits all learners. Shared examples demonstrate how disability-informed practices can interrupt deficit-biased assumptions and model inclusive pedagogy for future educators. These practices are situated within broader discussions of inclusion, othering, and belonging in higher education, with particular attention to teacher preparation contexts. Drawing on existing research, we highlight how disabled and/or neurodivergent educators contribute a unique perspective on inclusive learning environments and shape teacher candidates' understanding of disability, advocacy, and instructional responsibility. Practical, higher-education-specific recommendations at both institutional and individual levels are discussed, including reducing barriers to accommodations, supporting faculty learning, amplifying the voices of disabled people, and embedding inclusive instructional strategies within routine practice.

KEYWORDS
Disabled educators, higher education, inclusive teaching, relational access, teacher preparation

Barbara, an autistic[1] former special education teacher, is currently an instructor in a higher education teacher preparation program. In her current role, self-accommodations, such as using visual timers during activities, creating written and visual directions for each task, and building in quiet processing time during discussions, have become part of her everyday teaching practice. Additionally, she continues to script her class transitions before every lecture, a strategy she developed to manage masking through overstimulating meetings and unpredictable school days.

Barbara's case shows how lived disability[2] experience can shape everyday teaching practices to make learning more accessible for everyone. Rather than treating inclusion as a checklist or set of required accommodations, her instructional choices reflect how access can be built into the instructional design from the start. Barbara's use of scripting and other self-accommodations reveals an important and understudied issue in special education teacher preparation: how disabled instructors can uniquely model and inform inclusive teaching pedagogy.

Instead of beginning with the lived expertise of people with disabilities in teacher education, inclusion is often described in technical or compliance-driven terms, particularly in policy and professional guidance (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012). For many educators, however, inclusion is best understood as actionable behaviors, such

as the daily decisions they make about instruction, classroom routines, and participation, within the contexts they teach (Waitoller & Artiles, 2013). From this perspective, disabled educators bring valuable insights to inclusive practice (Price, 2024). Their teaching is often informed by years of navigating access barriers, problem-solving in complex systems, and adapting environments to support participation (Martin, 2026).

Emerging research also suggests that teacher candidates benefit from disabled educators. When teacher candidates engage with and learn from disabled instructors, they report greater empathy, stronger advocacy orientations, and a deeper understanding of disabled experiences, suggesting that these instructional contexts can meaningfully shape future educators' practices and their approaches to inclusion in their own classrooms (Snider et al., 2025). Together, these experiences highlight how disabled educators contribute not only to student access in higher education settings but also to future teachers' understanding and enactment of inclusion in their classrooms.

TRADITIONAL MODELS OF INCLUSION

Traditional models of inclusion can be explained as either a broad equity agenda for all students or access to the general education classroom for students with disabilities (Waitoller & Artiles, 2013). In practice, however, inclusion is often reduced to the physical placement of students with disabilities in general education classrooms, where they receive minimal accommodations (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012) within typical, normative educational frameworks. Within these frameworks, there is limited recognition of disabled and/or neurodivergent experiences and insights (Sarchet, 2024), despite evidence recognizing the benefits of diversity in academia (Anicha et al., 2017). This exclusion can be explained by the "othering" effect, in which a group of people is either explicitly or implicitly excluded from a larger group (Rakoska & Didrichsen, 2025). Oftentimes, this othering is a result of the majority's engagement in a deficit mindset of disability, assuming that disabled individuals are less capable simply because of their disability.

Othering has affected the practice of inclusion by omitting a key element of true inclusion in K-12 settings: social integration, which is characterized by a sense of belonging, community, and agency (Francisco et al., 2020). The same can be seen in higher education, where the lack of true inclusion has created an othering of both disabled students and instructors. In turn, any discussion of needs or accommodations can become taboo and discouraged, thereby preventing the disability community from being seen or heard (Sarchet, 2024; Toutain, 2019). This is especially detrimental in teacher preparation programs where future educators are trained to support all students in their care. To prepare educators to foster true inclusion, we must first address othering in higher education and destigmatize the experiences of disabled individuals.

During a micro-teaching practice session in one of her courses, Barbara notices a teacher candidate quickly verbalizing a series of instructions. A student in the back shifts uncomfortably, trying to keep up while scribbling notes in a notebook. Barbara recognizes the familiar experience of cognitive overload from her K-12 school days, when directions came too fast, and she did not want to burden anyone by asking for help or repetition.

Barbara pauses the candidate's lesson and offers to model a redesign of how the instructions were presented to the students: breaking the task into steps, posting them visually, and slowing the pace. Drawing from her own experiences, she explains that clear structure and visual supports improve her ability to process and engage with information. Immediately, the energy in the room shifts, and the students re-engage. Barbara explains, "Attention isn't a character problem; it's a design mismatch. When directions are designed with people like me in mind, they tend to help almost everyone."

The class grows quiet as the students witness how a strategy rooted in disability-informed practice supports not only individuals with specific access needs but also enhances learning conditions for the group. What began as a routine activity became a concrete demonstration of how the lived experiences of disabled educators can interrupt deficit thinking and reshape teachers' instructional practices to create more authentic inclusion opportunities.

LESSONS TO LEARN FROM DISABLED EDUCATORS

Accurate portrayals of lived experiences can disrupt the othering of individuals with disabilities and dissuade false notions of disability by fostering belonging (Kirby, 2017). Disabled educators in higher education have the opportunity to shape the discussion surrounding disability, inclusion, and accommoda-

1 Both identity-first and person-first language are used throughout this article. While person-first language has historically been promoted in professional settings, many disabled individuals and advocacy communities prefer identity-first language as an affirmation of disability as an integral aspect of their identity. Using both forms acknowledges these perspectives, respects the diversity of language preferences within disability communities, and aligns with Disability Studies in Education perspectives that center disabled voices and lived experience (Connor et al., 2008).

2 Guided by the social model of disability, this article conceptualizes disability as produced through inequitable systems and societal barriers rather than inherent individual deficits. The term disability is used as an umbrella term that may include individuals who identify as disabled, neurodivergent, or both. The authors acknowledge that these identities are distinct and personally defined, and that terminology in this area continues to evolve.

tion by becoming a counter-narrative themselves and sharing their thoughts and experiences. This can be done by introducing teacher candidates to aspects of disability studies (Kofke & Morrison, 2021) and by being open with students as a disabled teacher educator.

One disabled educator explains how she incorporates her own lived experiences into her role modeling strategies and why she does so:

> Student teachers in my classes are under my sphere of influence, and I have to mentor them to grow professionally. Thus, role modeling is a fundamental teaching strategy in my toolkit…I am a disability rights advocate committed to social justice, and I use my experiences to help student teachers understand how systemic biases suffocate disabled students…I structure my classes to support teacher candidates' self-reflection and self-awareness and help them acquire the skills they need to address school and societal issues. My goal is to have educators override their egos and negative thinking about disabled students to be allies who champion the inclusion of vulnerable people. (Ressa, 2023, p. 188)

By amplifying disabled educators' experiences and insights, researchers like Ressa (2023) illustrate the lived experiences of being on the receiving end of othering and offer possible solutions to combat the deficit perspective on disability in higher education settings. These insights prove that disabled people are not broken; rather, the systems around them are and must be transformed to foster true inclusion (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). True inclusion is more than providing physical accommodations. It is proactive and relational, involving deep understanding, flexibility, and care that is not reduced to standardized support procedures or a checklist.

The experiences of disabled educators navigating access needs, defined here as the supports, accommodations, and environmental conditions required to ensure equitable participation and meaningful engagement, provide a unique and nuanced perspective on the interpersonal forms of inclusion (Brown, 2021; Snider et al., 2025). Collectively, this creative, embodied knowledge developed by disabled people as they navigate inaccessible environments is referred to as *crip wisdom* (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). The term *crip* is intentionally reclaimed within disability communities as an act of resistance against its historical use as a pejorative, instead signaling pride, solidarity, and critical insight derived from lived experience. Within higher education contexts, this knowledge emerges as *crip spacetime*, describing how disabled academics experience and navigate institutional expectations of time, productivity, and presence differently due to structural constraints (Price, 2024). Intentionally recognizing and learning from the crip wisdom of disabled educators is essential to improving the inclusionary practices in higher education and beyond.

Price's (2024) framing of crip spacetime encourages institutions to understand disability and access as more than providing individual accommodations, positioning accessibility as part of reimagining academic norms around productivity, pace, and participation. Nondisabled individuals may not always have accurate perceptions of accessibility or inclusion because they do not require the same supports as people with disabilities (Shigaki et al., 2012). Viewing inclusive education as a collective responsibility, constantly negotiated and responsive to shifting needs, aligns with Titchkosky's (2011) relational access, rooted in human connection and mutual respect. Combining the perspectives and experiences of both disabled and nondisabled individuals in higher education settings can combat implicit and explicit bias and provide future educators with a more comprehensive understanding of true, dynamic inclusion before entering the classroom.

Throughout the semester, Barbara notices that the teacher candidates in her class are becoming more insightful and reflective practitioners. After an early class discussion in which she shared examples of how disability-informed instructional practices could improve student engagement and learning, she observes a shift in how candidates approach their own teaching. Questions about pacing, clarity, and access become increasingly common, and Barbara now intentionally sets aside time during each class meeting for open discussion and questions about inclusive teaching practices.

As these conversations unfold, Barbara reflects on her position in the classroom. She wonders whether and when she wants to disclose her identity as a disabled educator to her students, particularly given her continued hesitation to formally disclose this part of herself within the university. The decision to name that experience aloud is complex, shaped by questions of vulnerability, professional boundaries, and institutional context. Ultimately, Barbara decides to disclose her disability to her class, which opens a line of communication between her and her students about how she accommodates herself and how her lived experience has deeply informed her teaching. Encouraged by positive discussions with her students after disclosing her disability, Barbara also decides to formally disclose her status to the university and learns about ways the university can accommodate her in her role.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These moments of reflection underscore that inclusion is not enacted through a single decision or strategy, but through ongoing, relational work embedded in everyday teaching and institutional practice. Reimagining disability within higher education requires more than the provision of accommodations. Instead, it calls for examining the norms of productivity, pace, and participation that structure academic life (Price, 2024). It is also important to distinguish between accessibility and accommodations. Accessibility involves proactive efforts to design environments and practices that anticipate diverse participation and reduce structural barriers. Alternatively, accommodations are individualized supports that respond to specific needs that cannot always be anticipated. While proactive accessibility can reduce reliance on reactive practices, individual accommodations remain essential. In higher education settings, there are many ways to disrupt the deficit mindset of disability, ranging from simple strategies for individuals to those that require consistent group effort and initiative. While not intended to be comprehensive, the recommendations that follow are organized into institution-level and individual-level considerations for advancing more authentic inclusion.

Institution-Level Recommendations

Improving inclusive practices in higher education settings at an institutional level requires initiative and consistent group effort. These efforts should be ongoing and regularly reassessed as the administrative culture evolves and needs change. For many individuals who identify as neurodivergent or disabled in their day-to-day lives, sharing that part of their identity on campus can be daunting (Accardo et al., 2025), likely due to the continued stigma of differences. As a result, higher education institutions must focus on improving attitudes, policies, and campus environments (Accardo et al., 2025).

Beginning with the hiring and onboarding process, institutions should openly recognize the value of disabled identities rather than simply stating that employment is equal opportunity (Sarchet, 2024). Directly acknowledging and validating the added value that individuals with disabilities can provide to the organization by elevating their experiences and insights can increase campus-wide awareness and knowledge about neurodiversity and disability. This recognition may also reduce anxiety and negative feelings of self-worth among disabled individuals (Hull et al., 2017).

Beyond the onboarding process, working conditions for individuals with disabilities can be greatly improved by reducing the institutional barriers to requesting accommodations. Policies and procedures for seeking accommodations can be complex, discouraging, and intimidating to navigate (Dong et al., 2022; Price et al., 2017). As Price (2024) argues, these processes are embedded in broader academic norms that create expectations and conditions that often draw attention when individuals disrupt them to request support. Institutions can reduce these barriers by increasing transparency about who is eligible to request accommodations and by clearly communicating which supports are commonly available on campus. Relatedly, clarifying the use of terms such as *disabled* and *neurodivergent* can reduce confusion and support more affirming understandings of disability and neurodiversity as valued identities (Accardo et al., 2025).

In addition to structural changes, institutions should invest in ongoing faculty learning that supports inclusive instructional practice. Rather than focusing solely on disability categories or legal compliance, effective faculty training emphasizes accessible course design, inclusive communication, and flexible teaching practices. Consistent with Price's (2024) call to reconsider academic norms, such training invites faculty to examine how expectations around efficiency, independence, and standardization shape classroom access. When faculty are supported in developing these skills, particularly through training that incorporates disabled educators' perspectives, inclusion becomes a shared instructional responsibility rather than a reactive accommodation.

To support meaningful change in faculty learning, institutions should embed these opportunities within instructors' everyday teaching contexts rather than delivering isolated or one-time workshops. Embedded approaches, such as department-based conversations, teaching communities, or guided reflection on real instructional scenarios, create sustained connections between faculty learning and actual classroom practice. Through these connections, instructors are better positioned to examine how routine decisions about pacing, communication, and assessment shape access and participation. Over time, this reflective engagement can also contribute to shifts in faculty attitudes and perspectives about disability, moving away from deficit-based understandings toward viewing disability as an integral aspect of learner variability and instructional design.

While these shifts often begin at the level of instructional practice, broader institutional structures also shape how inclusion is supported across campus. In response to these systemic considerations, several institutional models outline concrete strategies to better support disabled individuals, including improved access to accommodations, neurodiversity-affirming counseling services, and other campus-based resources (Locke et al., 2024). Some institutions

within the United States have begun revamping their practices to better serve neurodivergent individuals in their communities. For example, three universities in New York have taken the lead with actions that align with the institutional support framework described by Locke et al. (2024). The Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) hosts a program that fosters collaboration, coaching, and programming to better serve the needs of neurodivergent members, including a neurodiverse hiring initiative that connects graduates with supportive employers and prepares them for self-advocacy in their careers (Rochester Institute of Technology, n.d.). Adelphi University on Long Island partners with reputable autism organizations to support its community's needs, has a sensory room, and offers employment supports similar to RIT's (Adelphi University, n.d.). In 2022, Empire State University, New York's only fully online public higher education institution, was designated an "Autism Supportive College" by the Anderson Center for Autism for its culture of supporting neurodivergent individuals in its culture, infrastructure, and planning (Empire State University, 2022). Empire has created a multi-tiered system of supports for neurodivergent community members by holding listening sessions, incorporating their voices, and conducting assessments to promote a more inclusive environment for all (SUNY Empire State College, n.d.). Following in the footsteps of these universities and aligning with the framework described by Locke et al. (2024) is a strong step toward changing the higher education system.

Individual-Level Recommendations

Faculty and staff who do not yet have comprehensive institutional support but still want to improve their own inclusive practices can take a variety of actions. Looking internally, educators can shift their attitude toward disability from a deficit to an asset-based perspective by adopting an assumption of competency in which all students are perceived as wanting to learn and engage. This shift in perspective alone can change how instructional decisions are made. It is also important to interrogate the language used when talking about individuals with disabilities or neurodivergence. While some individuals prefer person-first language and others prefer identity-first language, the most respectful approach is to ask the person(s) themselves and honor their preferences.

We provide the following examples to illustrate how individual educators might translate principles of access and inclusion into everyday instructional decisions. These practices are not intended to be a comprehensive list or universally applicable. Rather, they offer ways for instructors to intentionally design learning environments that anticipate variability and normalize access across diverse contexts. Determining which instructional practices will be most effective requires professional judgment informed by context, course goals, and student needs. Examples of disability-informed instructional practices include:

- Sharing the rationale for instructional design choices (e.g., "I'm posting the directions for next week's activity so everyone has time to review them in advance")
- Building in intentional wait time during discussions and explicitly naming it as part of thoughtful engagement
- Offering flexible options for participation and demonstration of learning
- Making lecture slides or instructional materials available in advance to support planning and organization
- Providing feedback in clear, supportive, and timely ways that emphasize growth and understanding
- Inviting ongoing feedback from students about pacing, clarity, and access throughout the term

For instructors who do not identify as disabled or neurodivergent, intentionally seeking and amplifying disabled voices is a critical component of inclusive practice. This can include incorporating first-person narratives, scholarship authored by disabled researchers, guest speakers, podcasts, or other media that center on lived experience. Engaging with these perspectives helps counter deficit-based narratives and ensures that disability is represented as a source of knowledge rather than solely a category of need (Connor et al., 2008). When doing so, instructors should be mindful to present these perspectives as diverse and multifaceted, rather than as singular or representative of all disabled experiences.

Within class meetings, certain communication styles and formats can intentionally support engagement among all students. During class discussions, educators should set the expectation that only one person speaks at a time. Doing so might slightly slow the pace of conversation, which allows for interpretation and wait time before a student is expected to respond (Smith & Andrews, 2015). Allowing for wait time benefits all students, since high-level cognitive discussions and questions require more time to formulate an answer (Shiau et al., 2024). Some additional low-effort inclusive instructional practices include providing both visual and auditory instructions, adding captioning to live or recorded lectures (Smith & Andrews, 2015), offering time management guidance to support self-regulation, and providing multiple ways for students to demonstrate their knowledge (e.g., video, audio, or infographic formats;

Didrichsen & Smigielski, 2025). These strategies, aligned with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), require little to no additional time or energy but can significantly improve accessibility for all students.

CONCLUSION

Barbara's teaching practices illustrate how inclusion can move beyond compliance and accommodation toward an intentional, relational design. Her choices, such as slowing instructional pace, externalizing directions, and modeling accessibility in real time, were not framed as special supports for a few students but instead as thoughtful instructional decisions informed by lived experience. She demonstrated how disability-informed practices can benefit entire learning communities while simultaneously disrupting deficit-based assumptions about disability.

Throughout this article, we argue that disabled educators offer uniquely valuable perspectives on inclusion because their professional practice is shaped by sustained engagement with access negotiation, problem-solving, and adaptation. When these perspectives are centered, rather than marginalized, inclusion becomes less about retrofitting existing systems and more about reimagining teaching and learning from the outset. This shift is especially important in teacher preparation programs, where future educators develop and shape their beliefs about learners, differences, and responsibility.

Advancing inclusion requires both institutional commitment and individual action. Institutions must reduce structural barriers, destigmatize accommodation processes, and intentionally create environments where disabled and neurodivergent identities are recognized as assets. At the same time, individual educators can enact meaningful change through everyday instructional decisions by modeling their assumption of competence, interrogating language, and designing learning environments that anticipate variability rather than react to it.

Ultimately, centering disabled voices in higher education teaching practice is not an added initiative or specialized intervention, but a shift in orientation toward access as a shared, collective responsibility. As Barbara's story demonstrates, when disability is understood as a source of knowledge, rather than limitation, inclusion becomes not only more authentic but more achievable for everyone.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Zoë J. Dean

Zoë J. Dean (she/her) is a doctoral student in Special Education at the University of Florida and identifies as neurodiverse. Prior to beginning her Ph.D., she worked as a special education teacher in rural elementary schools. Her research examines how measurement-informed approaches can strengthen instructional systems to expand access to literacy for students with disabilities, focusing on instructional quality, teacher learning, and equity in under-resourced contexts.

Samantha Didrichsen, Ph.D.

Dr. Samantha Didrichsen (she/her) earned her PhD from the Curriculum, Instruction and the Science of Learning program at the University at Buffalo (SUNY). Her dissertation is titled "Losing Joy: Understanding the Phenomenon of Burnout in Early Childhood Special Educators." She received her BSEd. in Early Childhood Education from SUNY Fredonia and her MSEd. in Special Education Early Childhood Intervention from Hofstra University. Her research interests center on special educator well-being, inclusivity and equity matters within early childhood education, strengths-based interventions, and self-regulation skills of both teachers and young children.

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Creating a Disabled Speakers' Bureau to Influence Policy and Practice in Teacher Preparation

AUTHORS
Lauren Zepp
Briannah Busch
Courtney L. Wilt

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ABSTRACT
This article outlines the creation of a Disabled Speakers' Bureau that centers disabled and neurodivergent preservice educators as leaders and contributors to teacher preparation. The bureau functions as both a learning community and a feedback structure, in which participants share lived experiences, advise on policy and program design, and mentor peers. Grounded in disability justice and neurodiversity frameworks, this initiative positions disability as a source of professional expertise rather than a deficit (Berne et al., 2018; Botha et al., 2025). Potential outcomes for teacher education programs embracing this approach include stronger self-advocacy; increased retention of disabled preservice teachers, thereby improving disability representation and epistemology in PK-12 schools; and improved faculty understanding of accessibility and inclusion. For special education teacher educators, this model offers a practical pathway for embedding disabled voice and leadership in teacher education and working toward the goals of retaining neurodivergent and/or disabled teacher candidates and highlighting less medicalized and stigmatizing views of disability within special education. This article offers implementation steps, lessons learned, and recommendations for reimagining diversity and inclusion as dynamic, participatory, and continually evolving practices.

KEYWORDS
Disability studies, lived experience, neurodivergence, self-advocacy, teacher preparation

Prior to a new semester, Dr. Johnson prepared to teach an introductory special education course by reviewing syllabi and updating materials to reflect new research and changes in the field. She was proud of her efforts to ensure preservice teachers (PSTs) were exposed to concepts related to diversity and equity, such as culturally responsive pedagogy and inclusive education. She felt particularly invested in addressing inclusive education, as this course was required for all education majors but was the only opportunity for those not majoring in special education to learn about students with disabilities.

Given current data showing most students with disabilities spend 80% or more of their school day in general education settings (Irwin et al., 2024), Dr. Johnson focused her course on practical strategies for accommodations, modifications, and co-teaching in inclusive classrooms. She passionately believed that all educators needed to develop self-efficacy for teaching students with disabilities, as these skills would influence their decision-making around students' access to the general education curriculum (Ruppar et al., 2017). Therefore, she supplemented the course textbook with video examples of instruction, hands-on activities, and role-playing of individualized education program (IEP) teams. As the semester progressed, Dr. Johnson received feedback from PSTs, several of whom mentioned their own experiences as disabled and neurodivergent learners. Some noted that the medical model of disability emphasized in the textbook felt cold and clinical. Others shared how their own experiences with special and

> This work centers disabled PSTs as knowledge producers with insight into accessibility, pedagogy, and inclusive practices. This knowledge—rooted in lived experience—challenges traditional hierarchies of expertise by situating disabled PSTs not as case studies for analysis, but as emerging scholars and practitioners who shape program culture and direction.

inclusive education contrasted with the information presented in course materials and expressed an interest in incorporating those experiences into their assignments.

Valuing her students' feedback, Dr. Johnson reflected on the course content. Despite the emphasis on inclusive practices, her course materials did not reflect the voices of people with disabilities. She also realized that she had not considered that some PSTs may identify as disabled and had unintentionally framed the course almost entirely for an audience without disabilities. She endeavored to make changes for future semesters, but how could she affirm disabled PSTs and find opportunities for all PSTs to engage directly with people with lived experience of disability?

Statement of the Problem

A multitude of non-disabled and neurotypical norms and their mechanisms of enforcement function to position disabled and neurodivergent persons as either in need or invisible (Keefe, 2022). This rings true for disabled PSTs, who, despite ongoing calls for inclusive teacher preparation, experience limited opportunities to contribute their expertise toward that reality (Neca et al., 2022; Strimel et al., 2023). Instead, their lived experiences—rich with insights about accessibility, belonging, and classroom realities—are often filtered through academic discourse rather than being invited into it. As Dr. Johnson discovered, the structure of educator preparation courses often assumes a non-disabled audience, reinforcing a norm in which disabled PSTs' experiential and embodied knowledge is invisibilized or undermined by medicalized rhetoric (Snider et al., 2024). This dynamic subtly signals that disability expertise resides outside the classroom or in scholarship rather than within the bodies and experiences of disabled educators themselves. In turn, self-advocacy and opportunities for connection are suppressed, contributing to the overall precarity disabled PSTs experience when faced with instructors who assume that teachers must not be disabled. In recognition that disability can be an inherent part of a person's identity and affirmation that the value and worth of an individual is not separate from their disability (Brown, 2020; Haller, 2016), we use identity-first language throughout this paper to describe disabled people, including those who identify as neurodivergent. Too often, disabled PSTs are pressured to shrink themselves and their needs (often without accommodation) to prove they deserve to be enrolled in teacher preparation and/or to avoid ableist assumptions about their competencies (Neca et al., 2022; VanUitert et al., 2025b). Without intentional mechanisms to surface, honor, and elevate disabled PSTs' perspectives, programs risk reproducing systemic ableism under the guise of inclusion.

Recognizing that she needed more support to affirm disabled PSTs and center disabled voices more intentionally in coursework, Dr. Johnson raised the issue with other faculty and former students. These conversations planted the seed of a new idea – inviting disabled college students to serve as guest speakers in the introductory special education course so they could share their lived experiences. Dr. Johnson first asked two students who had shared their identity as disabled students if they would be interested in speaking to future classes. They agreed and presented on their experiences with inclusive education.

The student response was overwhelmingly positive, and more disabled PSTs volunteered to speak during future semesters. A blind student joined the group of speakers, describing assistive technologies and ways teachers can make learning accessible. After each presentation, PSTs indicated how helpful the guest speakers were for making sense of what they were learning. Dr. Johnson was deeply grateful to disabled PSTs for their willingness to share, but she wondered if there was broader potential to formalize guest speaking and build community around shared identities. Perhaps a formal structure could reach a bigger audience and even contribute to reimaging teacher preparation and challenging ableist norms in higher education.

One intentional approach to affirm and amplify the experience of disabled PSTs is a Disabled Speakers' Bu-

TABLE 1: Replication Checklist

Phase	Action items
Foundational planning	☐ Identify a leadership team. ☐ Explore institutional requirements for student organizations. ☐ Develop governing documents as required by campus policy. ☐ Complete required institutional training.
Mission and goal development	☐ Co-construct a mission statement. ☐ Develop initial goals to help achieve the mission statement. ☐ Include participation options that do not require disability disclosure.
Organizational structures	☐ Establish a monthly or bi-monthly meeting schedule. ☐ Offer flexible modes for attendance and participation. ☐ Ensure meeting spaces are accessible.
Recruitment and visibility	☐ Create a logo or use the provided logo in Figure 1. ☐ Develop and disseminate accessible recruitment flyers and materials.
Member orientation and community building	☐ Hold an orientation to introduce the organization's purpose, mission, and opportunities for involvement. ☐ Include opportunities to develop shared norms. ☐ Plan activities to develop public speaking skills and build community.
Leadership and speaker development	☐ Support members in developing professional introductions. ☐ Build skills for advocacy and public speaking. ☐ Provide opportunities for practice and feedback. ☐ Cultivate members' strengths, interests, and advocacy goals.
Core programming and partnerships	☐ Collaborate with faculty and university units. ☐ Create a system for organizing speaking engagements. ☐ Advocate for accessibility throughout campus.
Ethical considerations and power sharing	☐ Ensure participation remains voluntary and flexible. ☐ Avoid tokenization by distributing opportunities across members. ☐ Establish rules for the use of personal narratives and shared materials. ☐ Acknowledge and mitigate hierarchical power dynamics between students and faculty.
Sustainability planning	☐ Secure institutional funding or structural support. ☐ Develop leadership succession and mentorship processes. ☐ Archive organizational documents for historical purposes. ☐ Hold annual planning and reflection sessions.

reau—a structured, replicable framework that places disabled PSTs into roles of leadership, mentorship, and policy influence. This work centers disabled PSTs as knowledge producers with insight into accessibility, pedagogy, and inclusive practices. This knowledge—rooted in lived experience—challenges traditional hierarchies of expertise by situating disabled PSTs not as case studies for analysis, but as emerging scholars and practitioners who shape program culture and direction. We contend that disability-informed expertise is not supplementary to teacher education—it is foundational. Therefore, a Disabled Speakers' Bureau offers a pathway to concretely enact this belief and (re) shape rhetoric on inclusion within teacher preparation programs.

Conceptual Frameworks

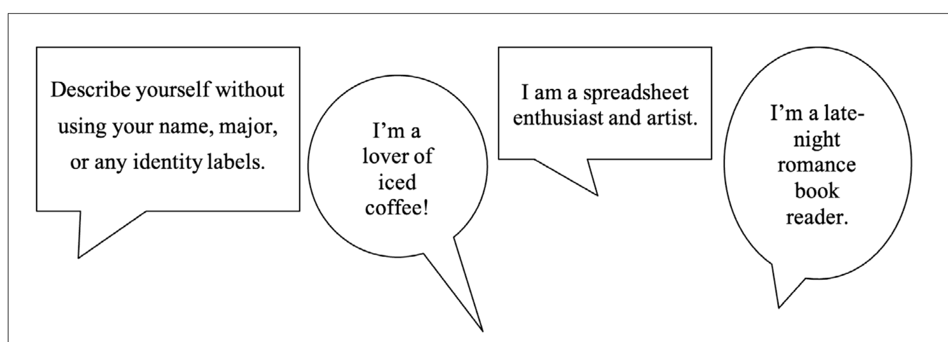
Frameworks positioning disabled and neurodivergent identities as sources of expertise rather than as deficits or burdens serve as the foundation

TABLE 2: Initial Goals for the Disabled Speakers' Bureau

Goal Number	Description
Goal 1	Center disabled PSTs as knowledgeable agents of change rather than passive participants or bystanders to accessibility and inclusion efforts.
Goal 2	Build community around shared identities for disabled college students, a demographic traditionally marginalized on college campuses.
Goal 3	Influence policies and instructional practices in teacher education by advocating for more accessible and inclusive learning environments.

FIGURE 1: Disabled Speakers' Bureau Logo

FIGURE 2: Warm-Up Prompt with Sample Responses



for our Disabled Speakers' Bureau (Botha et al., 2025; Dwyer, 2022; Kapp, 2020). Scholars in the field of disability studies have long advocated for recognition of disabled people's lived experiences as critical sites for knowledge production, offering insights into pedagogy, accessibility, and policy that cannot be obtained through other means (Clifton et al., 2025; Garland-Thomson, 2020; Loja et al., 2013). Increasingly, teacher preparation seeks to integrate such perspectives through disability studies in education (Baglieri et al., 2011; Lukins et al., 2023). These shifting values are reflected in ways that disrupt traditional notions of teacher education research and practice, such as re-examining who is positioned as capable of becoming an effective educator (Snider et al., 2024). From this perspective, disabled pre- and in-service teachers are not merely recipients of programming but also co-constructors of essential knowledge and agents of change in education.

As part of these shifting values, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) explicitly affirmed the importance of supporting disabled pre- and in-service educators, recognizing their lived experiences as valuable sources of insight and expertise within inclusive education (CEC, 2016). Further, including disabled PSTs may help to cultivate and retain a diverse educator workforce and align with the broader goals of inclusive education (Pugach et al., 2014). Taken together, these frameworks serve as a foundation for conceptualizing disability not as a limitation but as a vital form of knowledge that shapes more equitable and humanizing approaches to teacher preparation.

Creating a Disabled Speakers' Bureau

Drawing on our experience, we recommend a step-by-step process, detailed in Table 1, for creating a Disabled Speakers' Bureau. First, create a founding leadership team with interested parties to explore opportunities for institutional support and attaining status as a recognized student organization. Depending on the required procedures, this may involve drafting a constitution and attending training on budgeting and federal mandates (e.g., the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title IX). At this stage, the team can formally identify students to serve as president, treasurer, and secretary, as well as a faculty advisor for the campus-based organization. A sample constitution and leadership structure are provided in the supplemental file.

The leadership team can then develop a mission statement and goals for the organization. Goals should prioritize learning from those with lived experiences of disability, creating opportunities for disabled PSTs to identify barriers to access, and emphasizing avenues for change (Strimel et al., 2023; Snider et al., 2024). Table 2

TABLE 3: Steps for Building the Elevator Pitch

Step	Prompts	Example
Step 1: Who I Am	• Your name and pronouns, if you feel safe to share them • Your role or major/year • A strength, passion, or personality trait	"I'm Dante and I use he/they pronouns. I'm a junior majoring in special education. I'm passionate about accessible sports and am a member of the wheelchair basketball team."
Step 2: How I Identify	• Disability identity (only if you want to disclose) • Brief insights about how disability shapes your perspective, advocacy, or experiences	"I'm Autistic, which shapes most aspects of my life and how I view the world. It's important to me that people see autism as a normal part of human diversity while also recognizing the need for accommodations and support."
Step 3: Our Shared Mission	• Co-create a 1-2 sentence description of your organization and mission. • Share why the mission is important to you or how you are contributing to the group's goals.	"I joined the disabled speakers' bureau because the mission of creating a more equitable and accessible campus is important to me."

displays our initial goals as an example.

Next, we recommend planning a monthly or bi-monthly meeting schedule with set dates throughout the academic year to help new members commit to participating in the group without feeling overburdened. After scheduling regular meetings, the leadership team can create a logo and recruitment materials to distribute on campus and on social media platforms. See Figure 1 for a sample logo. Although advertising through multiple modalities increases visibility and accessibility, the leadership team should ensure materials meet digital and physical accessibility guidelines (e.g., image descriptions, high contrast, font readability, size). Membership should be voluntary and open to both disabled individuals and allies. By welcoming participants through multiple pathways, we can prioritize accessibility and self-determination, ensuring that members can engage in ways that honor their identities, experiences, and comfort levels (Getzel & Thoma, 2008). Additional sample recruitment materials are provided in the supplemental file.

For the initial meeting, we recommend preparing a slideshow to welcome new members and orient them to the Disabled Speakers' Bureau's mission. Explaining how and why this student organization was founded can help build enthusiasm and establish a solid foundation for the work ahead. New members can then share their ideas for achieving the goals set by the leadership committee and raise other issues that could be addressed. Next, consider discussing disability-related language and offering space for students to share their preferences for identity-first or person-first language. It may be helpful to set clear expectations for how the group will discuss disability and other identities, including acknowledging the need to respect an individual's self-description.

As an initial speaking activity, we encouraged participants to practice introducing themselves to other members of the organization using the language they felt most comfortable with. Beginning with a low-pressure prompt to warm up helped reduce anxiety and facilitate community building, as some members were not yet familiar with one another. Figure 2 displays a warm-up prompt with sample responses.

During the next meeting, members can be supported in developing a 30- to 60-second elevator pitch using a three-step process. An elevator pitch is a short introduction that communicates who you are, what you do, and what matters to you in a brief amount of time (Gaffey, 2014). Table 3 presents steps for building the pitch, including prompts and student examples. Members should be given time to practice their pitches with a partner before sharing with the larger group. The elevator pitch guidance should encourage participants to include their name and pronouns, year in school, area of study, personal interests or passions, optional disability identity disclosure, and an additional personal detail such as a hobby or goal. A more detailed activity guide is available in the supplemental file.

Subsequent meetings can be dedicated to sustaining member engagement, strengthening advocacy skills, and collaborating with university faculty and other university entities, such as technology integration and professional development for instructors. During these sessions, members might examine common instructional technologies used in both teacher preparation coursework and daily student life, providing feedback grounded in their experiences as disabled users. For example, on our campus, members col-

TABLE 4: Topics and Potential Audiences

Topics:	Potential Audience(s):
• Lived experiences with specific disabilities • Identity-first vs. person-first language • Assistive technology demonstrations • Advocating for and accessing accommodations • Neurodiversity-affirming practices • Experience using screen readers and other digital accessibility tools • Accessible housing	• Introduction to special education courses • Instructional methods courses • Center for students with disabilities events • Prospective students • Field experience coordinators • Department and faculty meetings • Student affairs office and university housing

laborated with the campus technology integration center to discuss the need for digital accessibility and share their experiences using assistive technologies such as screen readers and closed captions (Americans with Disabilities Act, 2024). Through sessions like this, PSTs' insights can influence faculty understanding of how disabled students experience instruction, fostering improved student access. These contributions also showcase the influence PSTs can have on instructional design, thereby reinforcing accessibility as a central component of teacher education.

Additional meetings should focus on building knowledge about disability history and identities, as well as preparing members for speaking engagements. In our campus-based Disabled Speakers' Bureau, members engaged in discussion about person-first and identity-first language, sharing their preferences and acknowledging the complex history of disability identity. Members also brainstormed ways faculty can reduce reliance on individual disability disclosure and instead design courses that anticipate diverse learner variability by examining and reflecting on how disabled PSTs experience accommodations processes. These proactive engagements not only challenge stereotypical assumptions about people who require accommodations and the reasons for them, but also support faculty in shifting from abstract, compliance-driven approaches to implementing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles in their pedagogy (CAST, 2024). By engaging in these discussions, PSTs can reflect on and help shape institutional norms, language policies, and practices that model inclusion and respect in teacher education.

Advocacy efforts can also extend to broader campus accessibility, including university housing and dining. Members might share their experiences in residence and dining halls, highlighting physical, sensory, and environmental barriers (e.g., doorway widths, furniture arrangements, lighting, noise levels). As a group, they might offer recommendations for improving the accessibility of room layouts, increasing the clarity of signage (e.g., print size, Braille, multiple languages), or improving the usability of kiosks in dining halls. These recommendations could emphasize the design of university spaces and systems with embedded accessibility in anticipation of diverse student body needs, rather than focusing on individual requests. Of note, the student labor involved in these activities should be made explicit and either compensated or otherwise honored through mutual agreement (e.g., via formal recognition). By no means is this work meant to replace the university's responsibility for accessibility improvements and legal guidelines. However, by integrating disabled PSTs into evaluations and discussions, the Disabled Speakers' Bureau can not only identify barriers and proposed solutions but also inform institutional policies and operational practices toward an accessible campus environment for all students, faculty, and guests. Table 4 summarizes topics and potential audiences for the bureau's work.

Navigating Challenges

Considering the complex interplay among power relations, cultural factors associated with vulnerability, and institutional contexts, disability disclosure in higher education can pose challenges for students and faculty alike (Brown, 2020; Strimel et al., 2023). Although there are potential benefits associated with disability disclosure, such as access to accommodations, there are also associated dangers of stigma, questions of competence, and marginalization (Brown, 2020). Such risks may be exacerbated by the hierarchical nature of higher education, particularly in special education teacher preparation, which has historically framed disability as a deficit requiring remediation or a cure (Keefe, 2022).

These factors might deter disabled PSTs from disclosing their disability (Dolmage, 2017; Price, 2011). Therefore, individuals and programs aiming to position disabled PSTs as leaders must acknowledge power dynamics and provide meaningful pathways to participation that do not require disability disclosure. Further, we caution against framing disability disclosure

as inherently empowering and instead advocate for institutional shifts that broaden accessibility and challenge ableist norms (Dwyer, 2022). Additionally, we recognize that the risks of structural ableism, such as tokenization and exploitation, require careful consideration throughout each step of this work (Keefe, 2022). It is essential that efforts to learn from any traditionally marginalized community include recognition and compensation for the labor involved, and participation must remain voluntary for students and faculty alike.

Outcomes and Reflections

After helping to establish a Disabled Speakers' Bureau, Dr. Johnson began noticing small but meaningful changes on campus. As a recognized student organization, the Disabled Speakers' Bureau had grown from a few volunteers speaking in her classes to a more established presence within the teacher education program. Faculty and instructors regularly invited group members to speak about their identities and experiences in courses. Members also participated in panels aimed at improving accessibility and disability representation in course materials, which faculty and administrators received positively. These efforts helped launch discussions among teacher education faculty about how to more explicitly model UDL in coursework, illustrating a shift from theory to tangible changes such as flexible assignment formats, multiple modalities for accessing content, and the integration of student voice.

*In the larger teacher education program, the Disabled Speakers' Bureau participated in a focus group to provide feedback on a revised student teaching handbook that detailed accessibility requirements and reflected a more affirming approach to neurodivergent and disabled educators entering the profession. The faculty then revised a letter to cooperating teachers, clearly outlining expectations for student teaching, including information on accommodations and support for disabled educators. The Office of Field Experiences also began planning revisions to the professional dispositions rubric used to evaluate student teachers, aiming to remove ableist and exclusionary expectations (e.g., eye contact, affect) and add elements related to advocacy and disability-affirming language. These specific actions were undertaken to increase the retention of disabled PSTs in the program, as the transition to field experiences had historically been challenging. Although incremental, these changes reflected the impact of learning directly from disabled individual*s.

Implications for Special Education Teacher Educators

Although the work of a Disabled Speakers' Bureau can inspire the reframing of teacher education, there remains a critical need for coordinated shifts in programming and instruction. Learning from disabled PSTs and listening to student voices are necessary but insufficient without structural change within the field of special education teacher preparation. Toward that goal, we advocate for specific programmatic shifts and intentional connections to the broader goals of inclusive education.

Programmatic Shifts

Teacher preparation programs and accrediting bodies, such as CEC and the Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP, 2022), should take steps to embed disabled students' voices within formal processes, including accreditation reviews, program evaluations, and advisory councils. This move would position students with disabilities as integral to the continuous endeavor of inclusivity and institutional access. Doing so offers a means of protection against symbolic inclusion and instead incentivizes structures for funding, staffing, and other support for participatory initiatives that can be sustained over time. In this way, student voices are positioned as a foundational component of high-quality programming rather than a peripheral or discretionary element that is vulnerable to diminished accountability or discontinuation when external funding or individual leadership changes. These procedural moves would, in turn, facilitate additional benefits to the field, such as redefining professional standards.

Programs must actively interrogate and disrupt dominant constructions of professionalism that position disability—particularly neurodivergence—as incompatible with effective teaching. Although professional dispositions are often framed as neutral indicators of readiness, they are frequently ill-defined and grounded in neurotypical norms related to communication, affect, and behavioral conformity, allowing them to function as subjective gatekeeping mechanisms rather than valid measures of instructional competence (VanUitert et al., 2025b; O'Dwyer, 2022). Rather than treating disability as a liability to be mitigated, teacher education programs should explicitly recognize disability-related traits—such as adaptability, persistence, and relational attunement—as professional assets that strengthen inclusive practice and advocacy (Bialka, 2015; Broderick & Lalvani, 2017). Accordingly, programs should revise disposition rubrics and assessment tools to prioritize observable teaching practices, reflective growth, and access-oriented competencies, thereby reducing subjectivity and advancing

equity-centered preparation.

Connecting to Broader Goals of Inclusive Education

Programmatic shifts should align with other strategies centering disability justice in higher education and teacher preparation spaces. At the level of everyday instructional practice, this means normalizing conversations about access, modeling the use of accommodations as routine tools for participation, and resisting narratives that position disabled students as objects of sympathy or exception. For example, teaching instructional methods from a disability studies framework has recently been shown to enhance student understanding of accommodations while reducing deficit-based or pity-oriented responses to disability (VanUitert et al., 2025a). Combining disabled student leadership with other practices proven to enhance PST development reinforces inclusive practices as central, rather than peripheral, to educational excellence.

Modeling the intentional creation of programs and systems that imply the inherent value of disabled PSTs and their perspectives, such as the Disabled Speakers' Bureau, sends a powerful message disrupting the normalization of disability-based exclusion and its harms that remain prevalent in today's schools.

CONCLUSION

Centering disabled PSTs is critical to the forward momentum of meaningful, inclusive education across multiple spheres of influence. Reflecting on the work of the Disabled Speakers' Bureau, Dr. Johnson often describes a shift from accommodating disabled and neurodivergent teacher candidates to collaborating with them in a culture of shared learning. This evolution also supports disability as a valued identity and source of insights, not deficits, in the teacher education program. For faculty, collaborating with the Disabled Speakers' Bureau underscored the value of listening deeply to students and of creating structures that sustain rather than tokenize disabled voices.

The curation of structures and opportunities for advocacy holds untold potential for empowerment and cultural impact. For other teacher education programs and the broader field, the message is clear: If we want to prepare reflective, empathetic, inclusive educators, we must model these values. When we make space for lived experience to lead the conversation, we have the potential to create not only more accessible college classrooms but also a generation of skilled educators prepared to be role models for disabled children, to undo ableism, and to reshape special education in ways that are affirming and aligned with social justice.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Lauren Zepp

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. She identifies as neurodivergent, serves as the faculty advisor for the Disabled Speakers' Bureau, and is committed to disability justice in education.

Briannah Busch

Briannah Busch (she/they) is a sophomore, undergraduate Special Education major at the University of Wisconsin–Whitewater. They identify as multiply disabled and neurodivergent, including being Autistic, ADHD, blind, chronically ill, physically disabled, and having multiple chronic psychiatric disabilities. She serves as the founding president of the Disabled Speakers' Bureau and is a passionate disability advocate.

Courtney Wilt

Courtney Wilt (she/her) is an Assistant Professor of Special Education at the University of Wisconsin - Whitewater. Her research interests include the impact and implementation of special education policy, the experiences of racialized students and their families during the transition to adulthood, and (special) educator discourse on dis/ability and race. She mentors undergraduate research teams in explorations of academic ableism and educator agency/positionality within school systems.

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Facilitating Effective Neurodiverse Group Work in Teacher Education

AUTHORS
Victoria J. VanUitert
Siva priya Santhanam

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ABSTRACT
Group work can be challenging for all students, particularly neurodivergent learners. Teacher educators can facilitate equitable, inclusive experiences by communicating group work expectations clearly, actively guiding group processes, reflecting on neurodivergence and disability, and engaging in inclusive group work practices. By experiencing these practices firsthand, preservice teachers learn to foster classrooms where all students are seen, supported, and empowered to participate meaningfully, ensuring inclusion, access, and belonging in diverse learning communities. This article provides strategies for supporting teacher educators in preparing neurodiverse preservice teacher cohorts, including neurodivergent and non-neurodivergent students, to collaborate effectively in college-level group work.

KEYWORDS
Group work, inclusive pedagogy, neurodiversity, teacher education

Group work is a frequently used learning experience in higher education classrooms that often involves students working in a small group of two to five people to complete an assignment (Lavy, 2017). Some group work is cooperative, which emphasizes structured interdependence through defined roles, shared goals, and individual accountability within the group. Collaborative group work emphasizes student autonomy, shared meaning-making, and less instructor guidance. Although these approaches have distinct features, they both can take varying forms depending on the level of structured interdependence built into the activity (Yang, 2023). Understanding this distinction matters, since the amount of structure and instructor guidance built into group work can significantly shape how well students can participate equitably and successfully. For many students, group work presents a wide range of challenges (LaBeouf et al., 2016). These difficulties can be even more pronounced for neurodivergent students when compared to their non-neurodivergent peers (Rhoades & Santhanam, 2021). The purpose of this article is to outline the challenges faced by neurodivergent students during group work and share recommendations to enhance the design and implementation of group work assignments in postsecondary coursework for preservice teachers. The article aims to (1) support teacher educators in preparing neurodiverse groups of preservice teachers—including both neurodivergent and non-neurodivergent individuals—to collaborate effectively and (2) provide clear, practical models of inclusive and accessible group work that teacher candidates can apply in their own future classrooms.

GROUP WORK IN EDUCATION

By nature, the education field is collaborative. On any given day, a special education teacher will need to be able to plan, negotiate, and work with a diverse group of people in roles such as paraprofessionals, general education teachers, administrators, speech language pathologists, and parents/guardians (Billingsley et al., 2020; Pellegrino et al., 2015). Being able to collaborate is one of the most important factors to enhance teacher quality and student academic outcomes (Aceves & Kennedy, 2024).

Given the need for collaboration, teacher education programs need to provide

space for students (preservice teachers) to develop the necessary skills to navigate these collaborative relationships more effectively (Da Fonte & Barton-Arwood, 2017). Specifically, many teacher educators attempt to support preservice teachers' collaboration skill development by having them participate in group work (Rios et al., 2023). Likewise, group work can help enhance preservice teachers' ability to contribute towards a common goal with colleagues and increase their "leadership, decision-making, trust-building, communication, and conflict management skills" (Johnson et al., 2014, p. 94). However, teacher preparation often does not provide sufficient instruction on *how* to collaborate effectively (Hamilton & Petty, 2023). This may contribute to many postsecondary students reporting a dislike for group work activities for reasons such as unbalanced contributions to the assignment, unclear rationale for why that activity is relevant, ambiguous roles, and interpersonal conflicts and communication difficulties between group members (LaBeouf et al., 2016). As such, teacher educators must provide structured opportunities for preservice candidates to learn how to communicate and collaborate with each other effectively to improve their instruction (Urbani et al., 2017).

NEURODIVERGENT EXPERIENCES

Neurodivergent, a term coined by Kassiane Asasumasu (2015), refers to individuals whose way of being differs from the dominant societal expectations and norms, which includes people with disabilities and/or mental health conditions such as autism, learning disabilities (LD), obsessive compulsive disorder, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, and acquired brain injuries. The prevalence of students with disabilities, including neurodivergent students, enrolling in higher education is increasing (Government Accountability Office, 2024).

This article will focus on the group work experiences of a subset of neurodivergent people, specifically autistic students and students with ADHD or LD (Drexler, 2024; Rhoades & Santhanam, 2021), from which the CARE framework was developed to guide inclusive, supportive practices in collaborative learning. CARE stands for (a) **C**lear communication, (b) **A**ctive role in the design and monitoring of the group work experience, (c) **R**eflection upon understanding of neurodivergent students, and (d) **E**ngagement in and modeling practices that promote neurodivergent student success.

Neurodivergent college students are more likely to report discomfort with in-class communication, including experiencing challenges with doing group work (Santhanam & Wilson, 2024). For instance, college students with ADHD or LD identify barriers such as lack of clear directions, increased likelihood of negative emotions, and lack of belonging as challenges with group work participation (Pfeifer et al., 2023). Additional barriers to successful group work experiences shared by neurodivergent college students include miscommunication with group members, disorganization with executing the group work activities (e.g., setting and keeping schedules, managing time and tasks), feeling the need to "please" other group members, and not clearly articulated division of work leading to uneven contributions from group members (Drexler, 2024; Salvatore et al., 2024). These issues often become an extra burden for neurodivergent students as they either tend to take on more work or a leadership role to ensure the assignment is completed, or they find themselves being excluded, unable to contribute, or, if they were able to contribute, having their ideas or effort discounted (Drexler, 2024; Salvatore et al., 2024). Additionally, research suggests that group work participation requires quicker processing time of information compared to completing tasks alone (Hsieh et al., 2020), which may pose an additional challenge for many neurodivergent students.

Despite the challenges that may arise from group work participation, many neurodivergent students recognize the need for and value of it. Specifically, they see value in having opportunities to connect with classmates, engage with course content in another way, and may be helpful for their future career (Drexler, 2024; Salvatore et al., 2024). In recent studies, neurodivergent college students shared recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of group work experiences. In the next section, we share these suggestions and explore how teacher educators can implement these recommendations toward the goal of creating more accessible and effective collaborative learning experiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GROUP WORK

To prepare *all* teacher candidates for working in neurodiverse school environments comprised of neurodivergent and non-neurodivergent students, a reconceptualization of group work is essential (Drexler, 2024) as educators are responsible for removing barriers and designing accessible learning opportunities for all students. Neurodivergent students experience barriers in collaborative learning, such as miscommunication, unclear directions, uneven division of work, ostracization, heightened anxiety, and the need to take on extra cognitive or leadership burden (Drexler, 2024; Rhoades & Santhanam, 2021; Salvatore et al., 2024). The CARE framework was developed by the authors to guide teacher educators in structuring their inclusive group work activities. The framework

TABLE 1: Examples of Providing Clear Communication Around Group Format Rationale

GROUP WORK ACTIVITY	RELEVANCE TO TEACHING	SAMPLE RATIONALE STATEMENT
Mock Individualized Education Plan (IEP) Team Meeting	Actively participating in and attending IEP meetings is an expected job activity for general and special education teachers. Special education teachers can also expect that they will be leading these meetings. Since it is almost guaranteed that teachers will be part of IEP teams, experiencing the process in a structured and low-risk way may help them prepare for when they do it in their actual jobs.	We will be working in groups to develop an IEP for a case student and prepare for a subsequent IEP meeting. This will be done as a group, since the creation of IEPs involve the input of multiple people such as the special education teacher, general education teacher, related service providers, and family members, and you will need to be able to contribute to this process in your future career
Co-Teaching Lesson Plan – Work with a partner to design a lesson, make accommodations/ modifications based on the needs of assigned fictional students, and delegate roles for each teacher.	General and special education teachers often co-teach in inclusive settings. To optimize student outcomes, it is imperative that co-teaching partnerships can communicate, collaborate, and problem-solve together.	Special education teachers often co-teach with general education teachers in inclusive classrooms. We need to communicate and problem-solve with our co-teacher to ensure our students are getting what they need to be successful. The co-teaching lesson plan assignment will be done with a partner so that you can experience planning and negotiating responsibilities with a colleague. Who you will work with will be randomly assigned, to simulate what co-teaching may be like on the job.
Response to Intervention (RTI) – Identify an area of concern, design a screening method, develop a research-based intervention for Tier 3 instruction, and design a progress monitoring plan in groups of 3.	It is important to be proactive as teachers. Screening and monitoring student progress and providing instruction and support tailored to their specific needs can help ensure students can make as much progress as possible. This process often involves multiple professionals to make it effective.	As educators, it is important to be proactive about ensuring students are getting the support they need to be successful. We need to collect and analyze data to help inform instructional decisions. You may have teacher assistants or other educators helping with the evaluation, monitoring, or instructional process. You need to communicate well and coordinate this process efficiently. Doing this in groups will allow us to practice navigating the RTI process like you would in your future classrooms.

was derived from a synthesis of empirical literature on neurodivergent students' experiences in higher education, combined with established best practices such as Universal Design for Learning. It was refined through observation and reflection on preservice teacher group work dynamics. By grounding the framework in both research and practical experience, teacher educators are provided with actionable strategies for fostering equitable and accessible group work environments.

Clear Communication

Neurodivergent students consistently recommend that their professors provide clear expectations and learning objectives for their group work assignments (Drexler, 2024; Pfeifer et al., 2023; Salvatore et al., 2024). Specifically, students need to know what they are doing, why they are doing it, and how it should be done (Salvatore et al., 2024). First, it should be clear *why* it is necessary for the assignment to be done in a group setting. Many neurodivergent students prefer completing work individually; however, they understand that there are times when working in a group may be necessary (Drexler, 2024). Teacher educators need to state clearly why the assignment is being done in a group and how this would relate to their future job experiences. See Table 1 for examples of learning rationales for common teacher preparation group activities.

Likewise, if there is no clear rationale for requiring group work, teacher educators can provide alternative activities or allow for independent assignment completion. For example, reading a practitioner article and responding to questions may not inherently involve collaboration, yet this type of activity is a common example of group work in teacher preparation courses. Unless a clear rationale for group work can be articulated to students (i.e., how working with others will directly benefit their development as future teachers), teacher educators should offer the option to complete the task independently.

In addition to understanding the rationale for tasks, students need to know *what* exactly they need to do to be successful with the assignment

TABLE 2: Examples of Group Roles

ROLE	DESCRIPTION
Coordinator	Keeps the group on track to complete the project. Schedules meetings, sends out reminders, and develops and sends out agenda to group members. Leads discussion in setting initial group expectations and goals and determining next steps for subsequent meetings. Leads efforts to resolve disagreements in the group. Checks for group consensus on project.
Recorder	Keeps a written record of group member's ideas and overall progress on the project. Shares what occurred in group meetings at the end of meetings and share notes with group members through email or in a group-accessible folder. Compile and edit the project pieces to ensure consistency. Primary manager of group's project documents.
Reporter	Will take the lead in presenting project activities or sharing in whole group discussions (if applicable). Responsible for initial design of presentation slides and materials.
Researcher(s)	Investigates and shares facts, examples, and other information relevant to a given topic or issue the group is working on.
Contributor(s)	Share and evaluate ideas for content or approaches to complete the project, solve procedural issues, and resolve conflicts. Supports with writing tasks.
Facilitator	Asks for clarification of ideas and opinions of group members. Poses questions to encourage further discourse on topics. Summarizes these ideas and describe what may work based on this information. Encourages less talkative group members to participate, while trying to limit length of speaking of more verbose group members.

RESOURCES: These group roles were informed by these resources. Check these out for more group role ideas.

- Beebe, S. A., & Masterson, J. T. (2014). *Communicating in small groups: Principles and practices.* Pearson.
- Drew, C. (2023, August 23). *21 group roles for students* (list of examples). Retrieved from: https://helpfulprofessor.com/group-roles-for-students/
- Effective U (2026). *Group Roles.* Retrieved from: https://effectiveu.umn.edu/projects/group-project/group-roles

Note. Neurodivergent students recommend instructors keep groups small (two to six people) for group work assignments (Drexler, 2024). As such, only six roles are provided on this list. If there are less people than roles needed to make the project successful or you find that more than one student may need to take on a role, it is okay to group roles together. Rolls can be rotated among group members to promote skill-building. Provide alternative roles for non-speaking contributions during presentations such as technology support, if applicable. However, please reflect upon the nature of the roles and if they would align well with one another.

and *how* the professor is expecting the assignment to be done. Neurodivergent students require clear, detailed instructions on *what* tasks to complete within the group context, *what* group roles they are assigned to, and *what* expectations they need to meet to be successful. This information, when provided prior to initiating group work, will help minimize confusion and prevent misinterpretations, thereby enhancing student confidence and engagement in group work (Drexler, 2024; Pfeifer et al., 2023). Additionally, to address *how* the student engages in group work, educators must acknowledge that students may process auditory, written, and visual information at varying processing speeds; may need clarifying questions answered in a timely manner; and may need additional time to prepare for group work. Likewise, neurodivergent students recommend that professors set an expectation of an open line of communication and share necessary information related to the group work in advance of starting the assignment (Drexler, 2024; Salvatore et al., 2024). When students share concerns or advocate for their needs, it is crucial that the teacher educators meet them with sensitivity and be receptive to what they are sharing. These practices will help establish trust and may encourage students to reach out for support during the group work experience.

Active Role

Often, higher education faculty utilize group work to support deeper student learning and enhance student communication, critical thinking, and teamwork skills (Hogan & Young, 2021). Despite the intent, there are frequently underlying issues with the group work experience that professors may miss if they are not actively involved. Neurodivergent students recommend that faculty have an active role not only in ensuring a successfully developed group work assignment but also during the assignment implementation process. For instance, professors can incentivize inclusivity practices among group members by creating certificates for meeting a specific objective (Pfeifer et al., 2023).

Teamwork skills consist of being able to (a) communicate, (b) actively listen, and (c) collaborate while also being honest, responsible, empathetic, and aware of one's actions and perspectives (Kratumnok & Phrakhrusutheejariyawattana, 2024). Working in groups is not sufficient for students to become proficient in working with others effectively (Goldsmith et al., 2024). Students who make up neurodiverse groups will vary in their work habits and needs, which, without effective teamwork skills, can amount to disharmony and conflict. To address this,

teacher educators should set aside time early in the semester to teach *all* their students teamwork strategies and provide opportunities for them to practice them (Salvatore et al., 2024).

To further promote student teamwork skill development, teacher educators need to consider the dynamics between and the nature of the group members before and during the group work experience (Salvatore et al., 2024). They must be prepared for the potential misalignment in how group members will approach tasks and identify ways to support them in navigating any conflicts that could arise. Therefore, teacher educators should regularly check in with groups to ensure that not only everyone is being included but also to gauge how things are going (Drexler, 2024; Salvatore et al., 2024). When checking in, professors are encouraged to be receptive to what the students are sharing and demonstrate sensitivity about what students say they need or what issues they are experiencing in the group (Drexler, 2024). As an example of an ineffective way to address a student issue, after expressing a concern to their professor, a student shared "My [instructor said], 'If you communicate what you want…they're going to listen.' That's not what happened. I don't have the time, energy, or effort" (Salvatore et al., 2024, p. 23). When students cannot find good solutions for their concerns, they may end up doing all the work themselves or disengaging from the activity (Salvatore et al., 2024). Additionally, faculty should avoid assuming student attempts at assertiveness will resolve issues within group work and instead facilitate needed conversations among group members. For example, professors can proactively help group members negotiate procedural elements of the group work, such as how often they would meet, whether they would meet in person or online, and when they may take breaks during the process. Creating roles for group members to take on while doing the group work may help reduce misunderstandings with work distribution and the likelihood of someone not doing their part (Drexler, 2024). See Table 2 for examples and resources for group roles.

Reflect Upon Understanding

Traditionally, teacher preparation programs have framed disability as something to be fixed or remediated, which may promote the medical model of disability (i.e., deficit-focused belief that it is the individual who must be "fixed" without considering how the environment or systems contribute). Despite best efforts to move teacher education toward a more inclusive and positive view of disability, not only do deficit framings persist in these programs and the school system, but also many programs do not consistently consider *how* disability is being discussed (Cosier & Pearson, 2016). This matters since the way disability and disabled people are discussed in courses and teaching placements provides a foundation for the assumptions and expectations preservice teachers will make. In other words, when disability is taught in a deficit-based manner, it risks negatively impacting how preservice teachers view and teach their future students with disabilities.

To prepare students to work with neurodiverse populations, teacher preparation programs must have consistent messaging regarding their beliefs about disability. Teacher educators should be reflective about their understanding and views about neurodiversity and be able to model affirming, inclusive attitudes for their students. This can help teacher educators strengthen their insights regarding the dynamics of their students and may naturally provide an opportunity for them to discuss disability within the group work context. Since most teachers will likely have group or partner work as part of the classroom activity repertoire, their awareness of different communication styles and perspectives can help them better support *all* of their students in the experience.

The Double Empathy Problem & Camouflaging

Communication differences can lead to a variety of interpretations of messages, which can result in misunderstandings and unintended outcomes. In fact, 80% of autistic participants shared that they felt ostracized in group work, had difficulties getting questions clarified, and experienced challenges with resolving communication issues with members in their group (Drexler, 2024). Further complicating this, autistic students expressed a deep desire to be liked and accepted by their peers, leading to them volunteering for undesirable tasks or doing the majority, if not all, of the project alone. Autistic students also report that their group members have excluded them from group interactions and discriminated against them once the group members learned they were autistic (Drexler, 2024). These types of experiences can be indicative of a double empathy problem.

The double empathy problem is described as "a breach in the 'natural attitude' that occurs between people of different dispositional outlooks and personal conceptual understandings when attempts are made to communicate meaning" (Milton, 2012, p. 884). In other words, communication breakdowns occur because of *both* parties struggling to communicate and understand the other accurately, rather than only one type of person being responsible (Milton, 2012). Multiple studies have investigated the validity of this theory regarding the interaction styles of

autistic and non-autistic people. Recent findings have corroborated this theory by demonstrating that people communicate effectively with others with the same neurotype (e.g., two autistic people talking together or two non-autistic people talking together) but both groups struggled in mixed-group interactions (e.g., Chen et al., 2021; Crompton, Ropar et al., 2020; Crompton, Sharp et al., 2020b).

Although autistic empathy has been theorized upon for decades, understanding and interpreting behavior accurately is a challenge for non-autistic people as well (Chown, 2014). For instance, researchers have also found that non-autistic people have significantly more difficulty interpreting autistic emotions accurately compared to non-autistic emotions, which can have negative implications for mixed-group social interactions and relationship development (Cheang et al., 2025). These challenges may contribute to neurotypical people reporting less interest in interacting with autistic people and viewing them as less likable or reliable (Sasson et al., 2017). Although the double empathy problem has been largely studied in the autistic context, there is reason to suggest that similar miscommunications exist between other neurotype pairings (e.g., someone with ADHD or LD and a neurotypical person). These findings suggest that *both* neurodivergent and non-neurodivergent people need support in bridging these communication and interpretation differences. However, historically, autistic communication and perspectives have been stigmatized and pathologized (DeThorne, 2020). This is likely due to being a neurominority group, which often means neurotypical people experience less pressure to learn how to empathize with autistic people (DeThorne, 2020). Instead, much of the responsibility to remediate communication barriers is placed upon the autistic person by expecting them to assimilate to neurotypical norms (Zhuang et al., 2023).

Like most, autistic people largely desire to be accepted and liked (Drexler, 2024). However, many autistic people experienced years of discrimination, rejection, and bullying due, in part, to societal prejudice against autistic characteristics (Zhuang et al., 2023). Over time, many autistic people learn to mask (i.e., reduce the visibility of) these characteristics to protect themselves from these negative social experiences and victimization from peers. Some autistic people feel that it takes less effort to hide their autistic traits to appease their neurotypical peers than it does to try to explain autism or wait for them to accommodate their needs. However, masking has been associated with many negative outcomes, including, but not limited to: (a) negative self-image, (b) internalized stigma and feelings of inferiority, (c) burnout, (d) psychological distress, and (e) having their experiences dismissed or invalidated by others (e.g., employers, service providers, educators; Zhuang et al., 2023). Ultimately, this often leads to poor academic performance and mental well-being.

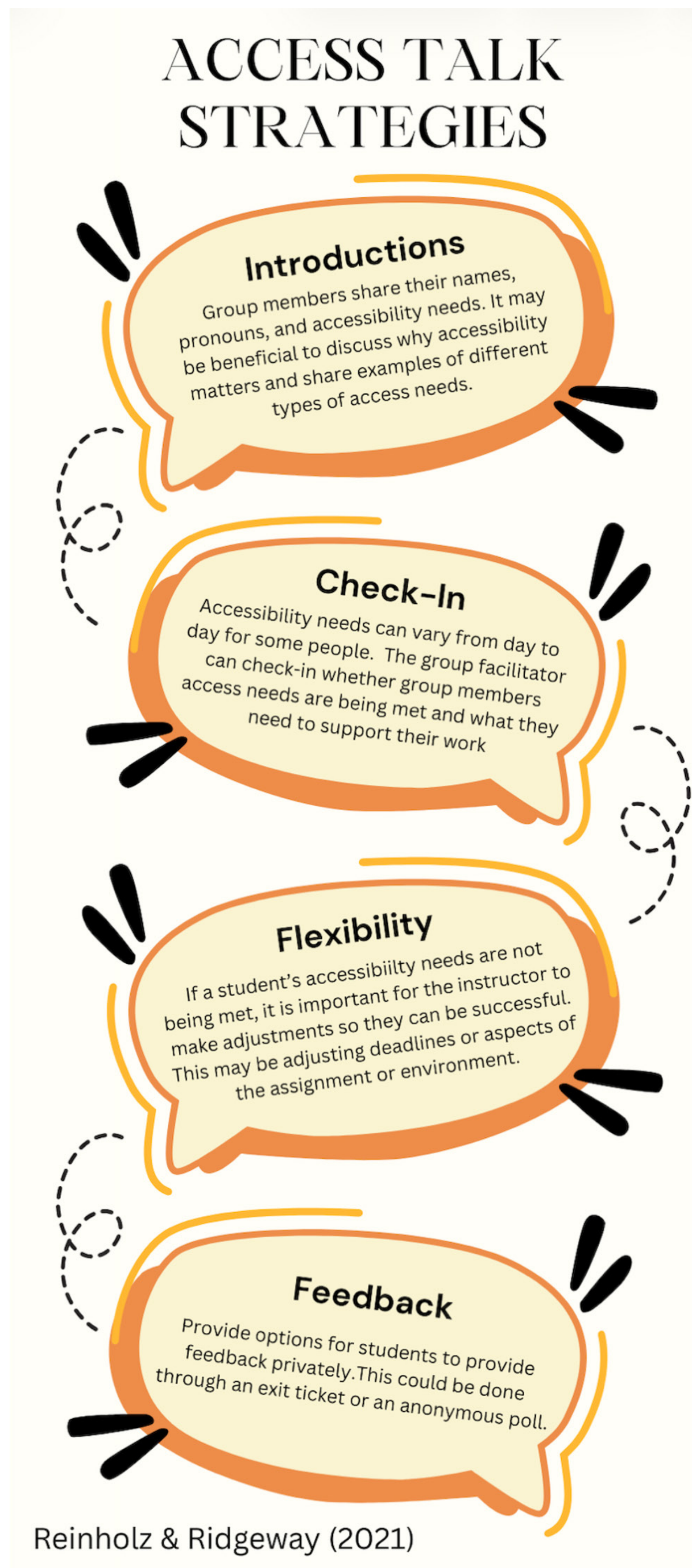
These communication barriers and the pressure to mask directly play into neurodivergent experiences in group work. As one student shared: “Although autism has had a lot more exposure over the years, people, they’d rather ignore things they don’t understand. So, the more you seem neurotypical… the more it’s easier to manage a group project” (Drexler, 2024, p. 44). Seeking acceptance from their group members, autistic students may avoid sharing their opinions or disagreement out of fear they will be seen as “a problem” (Drexler, 2024; p. 48). Many autistic people experience social anxiety in group work, since they become concerned about what they should say or how they should act and evaluate what they do accordingly (Drexler, 2024). This behavior may ultimately contribute to an autistic person experiencing burnout.

Recognizing the bidirectional nature of miscommunication and how expecting autistic people to (often solely) make changes to bridge these differences can have negative implications for neurodivergent students, it is crucial for teacher educators to understand these nuances and plan for how to help *both* groups of students bridge communication differences and foster an inclusive learning experience.

Instructor Versus Student Choice

Groups are typically created in one of two ways. Either the instructor assigns each student in the class to specific groups, or they allow the students to choose their group members themselves. The context matters as to which group selection model is being used (Drexler, 2024). For instance, student choice selection works well in situations where the neurodivergent students have established a good rapport with peers or have friends in the class. In contrast, in cases where they are not familiar with their classmates or have not established a rapport with them, it can become immensely challenging for them to choose a group. Choosing “wrong” risks being placed in a group in which the rest of the members are friends and excluding the student by not letting them be involved in the project or expecting them to do the majority, if not all, of the project alone while they socialize. In either situation, there is a risk for the student to develop increased stress or diminished feelings of belonging, which may compromise their learning. Having the instructor choose the group makeup when the neurodivergent student has not established strong relationships with peers can help reduce anxiety related to making a group choice (Drexler, 2024).

FIGURE 1: Access Talk Strategies



Accept and Normalize Diversity of Needs

The way neurodivergent individuals are discussed matters. Language is not neutral, and the way one talks about neurodivergence can indicate their beliefs and likelihood of maintaining ableist practices (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2024). According to Nario-Redmond (2019), ableism is a system of beliefs and practices that devalue and discriminate against people with disabilities while privileging those who are perceived as able-bodied or able-minded. This includes both explicit and implicit biases that contribute to social exclusion, stereotypes, and systemic barriers that limit opportunities for disabled individuals. Believing that neurodivergent students are less competent or capable than their neurotypical peers, while having an over-focus on neurotypical assimilation, can lead to negative outcomes. For example, underestimating the abilities of neurodivergent students can lead to ineffective teaching practices and inequitable educational experiences (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2024; Vaz et al., 2015). Unprepared neurodiverse groups may not only face challenges related to the double empathy problem but also may find that their goals and needs come into conflict with each other. To address this, teacher educators can consider doing the following:

Normalize Diversity of Needs. Everyone is unique. Each person has their own set of strengths and areas of need. Prior to beginning group work, the instructor should normalize "access talk" (Salvatore et al., 2024). Access talk is a framework used to guide talking about disability and ableism while also promoting a classroom culture in which advocating for what you need is expected and honored (Reinholz & Ridgeway, 2021). To successfully use access talk, the instructor should first discuss how people have diverse needs and the importance of accessibility and accommodations (Reinholz & Ridgeway, 2021; Salvatore et al., 2024). The instructor may want to provide examples of different types of needs and ways to accommodate them. Afterward, the instructor can utilize the access talk strategies, which include (a) introductions, (b) check-ins pertaining to accessibility needs, (c) allowing for flexibility, and (d) providing opportunities for anonymous feedback (see Figure 1 for details).

In addition to creating a culture of honoring diverse needs, it is important that teacher educators remain open-minded and receptive to student requests for help. It should be expected that differences in communication style, working preferences, and project vision may foster conflict (Salvatore et al., 2024). Teacher educators

may want to act proactively by sharing conflict-resolution skills group members could implement, reaffirming the importance of honoring the accessibility needs of both the student seeking help and their groupmates, and sharing some options students can use if they need support from them (Salvatore et al., 2024). When teacher educators practice what is taught to the preservice teachers, it may help motivate these students to engage in similar practices in their future classrooms.

Engage in and Model Practices

Explicit instruction is one of the most essential practices for educators to master (Aceves & Kennedy, 2024; Archer & Hughes, 2011). Oftentimes in coursework, preservice teachers are told that their instruction and feedback should be "structured, systematic, and effective" (Archer & Hughes, 2011, p. 1). Explicit instruction involves providing support (or scaffolds) and breaking information into smaller chunks to guide the student through an activity or the learning process more successfully. Archer and Hughes (2011) laid out 16 components of explicit instruction, some of which include (a) use clear and concise language, (b) monitor student performance, (c) sequence skills logically, and (d) begin lessons with a clear statement pertaining to the goals and expectations of the lesson (or activity). Further, they stated that educators should ensure that students have access to multiple forms of knowledge and receive instruction with embedded structure and support for it to be effective. Specifically, students need to know factual information (i.e., declarative knowledge), how to do the activity (i.e., procedural knowledge), and when the assignments are due or when and where they should use a given skill (i.e., conditional knowledge). However, the extent to which these practices are followed in the higher education setting can be variable.

Across multiple studies, neurodivergent students have shared a need for more explicit instruction practices used in group work (Drexler, 2024; Pfeifer et al., 2023; Salvatore et al., 2024). Specifically, participants requested clear expectations and learning objectives for group work assignments. The instructor may identify benchmarks that groups should reach at each stage of the activity and provide a checklist that the groups can use to help them keep on track (Salvatore et al., 2024). Instructors should also ensure that assignment directions are clearly written and broken down into manageable steps (Drexler, 2024; Salvatore et al., 2024). If an instructor determines that it is in the best interest of the students to complete this project as a group (see "Communication" section for rationale), they must make sure that the students will have access to clear declarative, procedural, and conditional knowledge that will foster their success pertaining to the project and with the group expectations. Building upon the reflective process related to one's views of a "good" learner and what is assumed they *really* need to know to be successful, teacher educators must consider whether their beliefs influenced the design of the instructions and how they might impact the success of students, especially neurodivergent ones (Salvatore et al., 2024). Based on the conclusions the teacher educator comes to, more specificity may be needed. Considering how common requests for more specificity and structure are from neurodivergent students, it is possible that many teacher educators are not consistently applying explicit instruction practices in group-work design. Despite best efforts, instructions and scaffolding of assignments and group work dynamics may not be specific enough to ensure inclusivity and accessibility to the project. As such, it may be useful to get feedback from a trusted external source (e.g., colleague, mentor) to ensure the instructions and level of scaffolding are strong. Even if the reviewer approves, providing multiple opportunities for students to provide feedback is recommended. Using exit slips or related weekly communication formats for students to easily and anonymously provide feedback allows the instructor to respond promptly.

Universal Design for Learning

Universal design for learning (UDL) is a set of guidelines used "to ensure that all learners are able to access and participate in meaningful, challenging learning opportunities" (CAST, n.d., para. 1). The goal of UDL is to make changes to the environment and instructional process rather than attribute the learning difficulties solely on the student, which moves away from the deficit-based perspectives of disability. The UDL framework offers specific recommendations to enhance accessibility based on engagement, representation, and action and expression (see Table 3). As mentioned in the previous section, teacher educators and preservice teachers alike must understand, accept, and plan for diversity of needs and learning/working approaches in their classrooms. Using UDL-aligned practices can support instructors and preservice teachers in addressing individual needs while also providing an avenue for all students to best demonstrate their learning.

Compassionate Pedagogy

Compassionate pedagogy is described as "seeking to create a learning environment that notices distress and disadvantage of all students and staff and takes steps to reduce these barriers to learning" (Killingback et al., 2025, p. 3). Neurodivergent students face a plethora of stressors in higher education; however, some that relate to group work include navigating the unwritten

TABLE 3: Overview of the Universal Design for Learning 3.0 Guidelines (CAST, n.d.)

Principles	Guidelines	Example Strategies for Group Work
Engagement *Motivate student learning*	*Value Student Interests & Identities*	• Give student choices • Ensure group work relevance to students' lives is clear • Address biases and potential distractions (e.g., sensory needs)
	Sustain Effort & Persistence	• The purpose of the group work should be clear to students • Promote student sense of belonging and an inclusive community • Give regular, specific, goal-focused feedback based on student strengths and needs • Provide supports and strategies to facilitate student and group growth.
	Emotional Capacity	• Support student reflection on group dynamics • Build student appreciation of their personal strengths and those of their groupmates • Develop strategies for navigating challenges and model their usage
Representation *Present information in multiple ways*	*Perception*	• Provide multiple ways to access information • Include multiple perspectives in the group work project process (e.g., information sources) • Be flexible in how students display information to heighten accessibility of materials
	Language & Symbols	• Ensure students understand term and symbol meanings • Incorporate multiple forms of media to enhance student/group access to content
	Building Knowledge	• Make clear connections with student's prior knowledge and the group project • Emphasize the big ideas and important information/skills that students should learn from this project. • Apply what was learned in the activity to other relevant contexts for the students
Action & Expression *Options in how students demonstrate learning*	*Interaction*	• Be flexible with how students respond to questions or group work components • Be flexible with student group work environment (e.g., adjust lighting that may be too strong for a student, allow them to meet in a quieter space)
	Expression & Communication	• Scaffold the group work assignment • Provide multiple opportunities for students to share their ideas in the group work process • Allow and be accepting of multiple ways for students to communicate their learning
	Strategy Development	• Provide support for students to organize group work tasks • Be reflective and proactive regarding potential challenges students may face in the group work activity • Attend to students' individual and collective group progress • Collaborate with students to determine ways to address exclusionary behaviors if they happen in the group to promote more inclusive experiences

Note. Visit www.udlguidelines.cast.org for more information and strategy ideas.

expectations and norms of the university, contending with previous negative educational experiences and lingering concerns about whether the current course will be different, and navigating social-communication aspects and double empathy problem challenges that may promote masking behavior (Hamilton & Petty, 2023). Compassionate pedagogy practices, such as being flexible about grading, timelines, and methods for disseminating information, and instructional and activity delivery (using UDL; Hamilton & Petty, 2023), can enhance all students' (especially neurodivergent students') group work experience. Neurodivergent students advocate for instructors to be flexible in the group development and grading process and to provide clear directions for activities and discussions in both spoken and written formats (Drexler, 2024; Salvatore et al., 2024). Specifically relating to grading and group flexibility, neurodivergent students state that instructors should take into consideration who chooses the group make-up (see Reflect section for more information), the level of necessary engagement within the group (e.g., does everything have to be done as a group or can some things be done individually), and, in terms of grading, how balanced the work allocation was between group members (Salvatore et al., 2024).

In addition to flexibility in group work design, instructional/activity delivery, and grading, another significant compassionate pedagogy practice that should be modeled by the teacher educator is leveraging student strengths (Hamilton & Petty, 2023). As suggested earlier, neurodivergent students often have years of experience with being pressured to mask their neurodivergence or be

prepared to experience negative social consequences, which can lead to low self-esteem (Zhuang et al., 2023). Getting to know the students to determine what they need for support, what they are passionate about, and their strengths can allow instructors to determine which group roles they would thrive in. Leveraging their strengths to facilitate their success within their group may help neurodivergent students cultivate better self-images, develop greater pride in who they are (and confidence), and help build more positive neurodiverse group experiences.

CONCLUSION

Group work experiences can be challenging for anyone, but especially for neurodivergent students. Teacher educators can help facilitate positive, successful group work experiences for neurodiverse groups by demonstrating **C**lear communication, taking an **Ac**tive role in the group work process to ensure it is an inclusive and equitable learning experience, **R**eflecting upon their understanding about neurodivergence and disability, and **E**ngaging in and modeling effective practices such as explicit instruction, UDL, and compassionate pedagogy. To cultivate future teachers who will ensure students are meaningfully included, provided explicit instruction and support to access curricula and activities, know they are believed in and are seen as capable, and feel they belong, it is imperative that teacher educators model this for them first.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Victoria J. VanUitert

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.

Siva priya Santhanam

Dr. Siva priya Santhanam is an associate professor and graduate coordinator at the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders at Bowling Green State University, Ohio. Her research focuses on (a) developing and evaluating strengths-based social communication supports for autistic adults that leverage their special interests, (b) investigating factors that influence autistic self-advocacy in educational settings, and (c) increasing understanding and appreciation of autistic communication among non-autistic people.

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

AUTHORS
Kathryn M. Meyer
Lindsey A. Chapman

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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

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 contribute 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.

> 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.

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 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 embodied 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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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kathryn M. Meyer

Kathryn (Katie) M. Meyer is a PRODiG+ Fellow in the Childhood/Early Childhood Education program at Binghamton University. Katie's research and teaching use critical and reciprocal methods to empower and support educators as they take action to build a more just education system.

Lindsay A. Chapman

Lindsey A. Chapman is a Senior Lecturer and Program Director of Special Education at Boston University. Her research and teaching focus on inclusive education, social perspectives of disability, and universal design for learning (UDL).

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From Candidate to Colleague: Preparing Special Educators with Disabilities

AUTHORS
Amanda Lannan
Shalece Kohnke

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ABSTRACT

Teacher preparation programs shape not only instructional competence but also professional identity and persistence among future special educators. Candidates with disabilities continue to encounter systemic barriers across coursework, field placements, certification, and entry into the profession. This article examines how teacher preparation programs can support special education candidates with disabilities as they transition from candidate to colleague. We identify program-level factors associated with candidate readiness, belonging, and persistence. Implications are provided for program administrators and instructors focused on aligning preparation structures with candidate outcomes through disability-informed design (Duquette, 2000; Neca et al., 2022; Sokal et al., 2017; Tal-Alon & Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2019).

KEYWORDS

Disability disclosure, disability-informed teacher preparation, educator preparation programs, field placements, special education teacher candidates

A special education teacher candidate with disabilities arrived at her student teaching placement eager to begin. Within weeks, however, she encountered repeated disruptions: unclear communication about accommodation responsibilities, inconsistent supervision expectations, and a lack of coordination between university offices and the placement site. Facing these compounding barriers, she began to question not only her preparedness but also her belonging in the profession, a perception that prior research demonstrates influences persistence and engagement in educational settings (Walton & Cohen, 2011).

Experiences such as this illustrate a persistent and underexamined tension within teacher preparation. While programs are increasingly committed to preparing candidates to serve students with disabilities, they have paid far less attention to how programs prepare and support teacher candidates who are themselves disabled. For candidates with disabilities, particularly those preparing to enter special education, the transition from candidate to colleague may involve navigating layered systems of disclosure, access, evaluation, and professional identity formation within environments that are not always designed with disability in mind. Although scholarship has examined the experiences of teachers with disabilities and teacher candidates with disabilities (Bellacicco & Demo, 2019; Strimel et al., 2023), limited attention has been paid to how preparation systems shape these trajectories.

These concerns are particularly salient in special education preparation. Candidates preparing to become special educators occupy a distinctive dual position: they are simultaneously learning to design inclusive systems for others while navigating the inclusivity of their own preparation contexts. Special education preparation programs, therefore, hold a unique responsibility to model the inclusive systems they expect graduates to implement in P–12 settings. However, teacher preparation programs have rarely been held to the same inclusive standard they expect their candidates to implement.

In response to this gap, we propose a Disability-Informed Teacher Preparation framework to guide programs toward moving from reactive accommodation to proactive structural design. The framework identifies three interconnected leverage points within teacher preparation systems: (1) access infrastructure, (2) field placement systems, and (3) disability-affirming mentorship and evaluation practices. We align these leverage points with four key candidate outcomes: academic readiness, sense of belonging, persistence and retention, and preparedness for professional practice.

Drawing on practice-based vignettes and existing scholarship, this article illustrates how systemic barriers operate across coursework, field placements, licensure processes, and employment transitions and how programs can intentionally redesign these systems to better support candidates with disabilities. By centering disability-informed preparation within special education programs, the framework advances a model in which candidates move from surviving barriers to thriving as colleagues in the profession.

DISABILITY-INFORMED TEACHER PREPARATION

Disability-informed teacher preparation extends beyond compliance-based accommodation models by examining how preparation systems design, communicate, and enact access for candidates with disabilities. Rather than centering access solely at the point of individual disclosure, disability-informed preparation asks how program structures themselves may anticipate variability in candidate experience and proactively reduce barriers across coursework, field placements, licensure processes, and evaluation systems. Research documents significant variability in how accommodations are implemented and communicated across preparation contexts, leaving candidates to navigate these inconsistent systems independently (Csoli & Gallagher, 2012).

A disability-informed approach reframes preparation as a shared programmatic responsibility rather than an individualized burden. It emphasizes structural transparency, anticipatory access planning, collaborative communication across units, and relational mentorship practices that affirm disability as a valued aspect of professional identity. This orientation recognizes that access is not only a matter of format or modification, but also of belonging, evaluation equity, and participation in professional communities. Disability-informed preparation thus requires programs to align their internal practices with the equity principles they promote externally.

Disability-informed preparation is distinct from, but complementary to, broader inclusive pedagogical frameworks. While inclusive instructional design addresses how programs teach candidates, disability-informed preparation also attends to how these systems position candidates within or outside the norms of professional practice. It considers how policies, placement assignments, supervision structures, and assessment mechanisms may unintentionally privilege normative assumptions about communication, stamina, mobility, or professional presentation. By making these assumptions visible, programs can shift from reactive problem-solving toward intentional system design. This orientation aligns with Disability Studies in Education, which reframes disability as socially constructed and shaped by institutional design rather than individual deficit (Connor et al., 2008).

The following section introduces the conceptual framework guiding this approach, outlining the leverage points and candidate outcomes that anchor disability-informed teacher preparation.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK GUIDING DISABILITY-INFORMED TEACHER PREPARATION

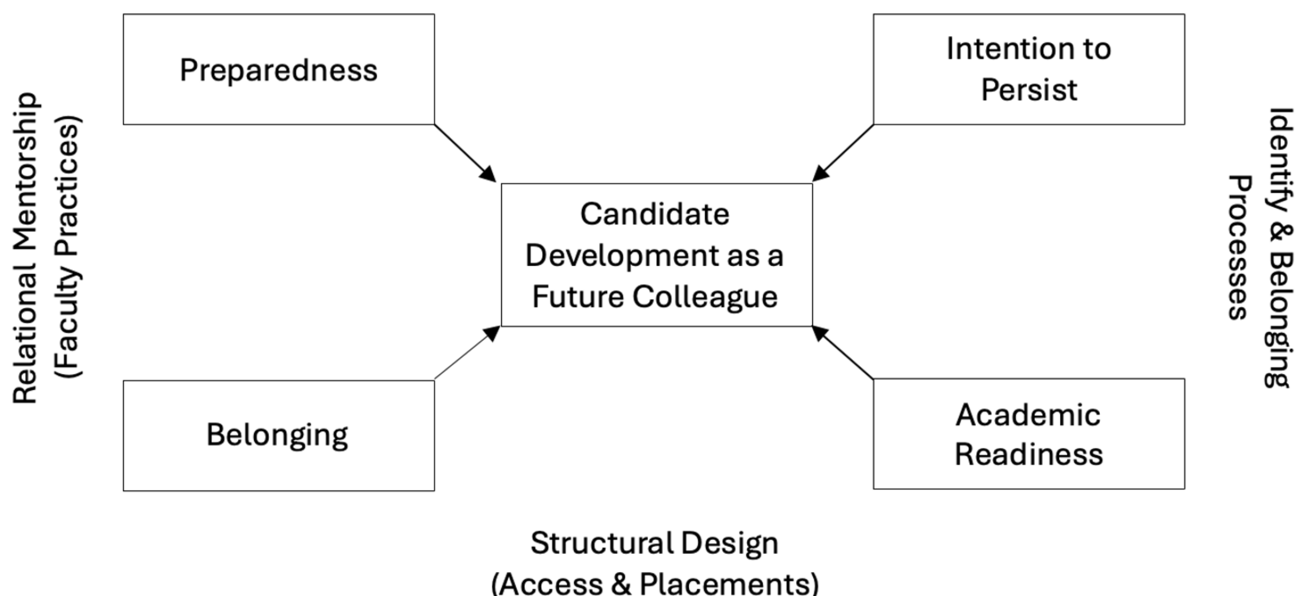
Disability-Informed Teacher Preparation is guided by a systems-oriented framework that identifies how structural design, field coordination, and evaluative practices interact to shape candidate experiences and outcomes. Rather than conceptualizing barriers as isolated incidents, the framework positions preparation as an interconnected system in which policies, communication pathways, placement procedures, and mentoring relationships collectively influence how candidates with disabilities experience and persist through their teacher preparation programs.

The framework centers three interconnected leverage points within teacher preparation programs: (1) access infrastructure, (2) field placement systems, and (3) disability-affirming mentorship and evaluation practices. We selected these leverage points because they are recurring sites where candidates with disabilities encounter systemic friction across programs and institutions. Together, they capture both structural and relational dimensions of preparation.

Access infrastructure refers to the policies, processes, and communication systems that govern how candidates navigate accommodations, certification, and institutional requirements. Transparent communication, anticipatory planning, and cross-unit coordination are central components of this leverage point.

Field placement systems encompass the procedures for assigning candidates to practicum and student teaching settings, as well as the expectations communicated to placement sites and supervisors. Field experiences are often the most intensive and evaluative components of teacher preparation. Misalignment among university policies, school-based expectations, and disabil-

FIGURE 1: Conceptual Framework Guiding Disability Informed Preparation



Note. *The framework situates candidate development within interacting layers of Structural Design (access infrastructure and field placements), Relational Mentorship (faculty practices and representation), and Identity/Belonging Processes, informed by Disability Studies in Education and Universal Design for Learning.*

TABLE 1: Preparation Leverage Points × Outcomes

Preparation Stage	Disability-Informed Supports	Faculty/Program Action	Targeted Outcomes
Coursework	UDL-based, accessible materials from the start	Proactive design of curriculum and materials for accessibility	Belonging; Academic readiness; Persistence
Certification	Guidance on accommodations and timelines	Early planning and assistance with licensure processes	Academic readiness; Persistence
Field placements	Access-aware placement matching and support plans	Coordinated support across program, disability services, and school site	Belonging; Preparedness to teach with a disability; Persistence
Transition to employment	Coaching on disclosure and interview strategies; connections to disabled educator networks	Mentoring for advocacy in job search and hiring	Preparedness; Persistence

ity-related supports can compound into significant effects on candidate confidence and performance. Because field placements serve as both instructional and gatekeeping contexts, their design exerts disproportionate influence on candidates' persistence and retention, as well as their professional trajectory.

Disability-affirming mentorship and evaluation practices address the relational and interpretive dimensions of preparation. Faculty members and supervisors play a central role in shaping how disability is understood within professional contexts. Mentorship practices that normalize disability disclosure, emphasize collaborative problem-solving, and focus evaluations on instructional competence rather than on normative presentation can significantly influence candidates' sense of belonging and self-efficacy. Conversely, evaluative frameworks grounded in unexamined assumptions about what professional communication, stamina, or demeanor looks like may unintentionally marginalize candidates. Research examining disability disclosure

and professional normativity suggests that implicit standards may disadvantage candidates whose disabilities affect communication or presentation style (Neca et al., 2022).

These leverage points are not independent domains. Access infrastructure shapes how field placement systems are coordinated; mentorship practices influence how access processes are enacted; evaluation systems interact with both structural and relational conditions. This framework, therefore, conceptualizes disability-informed preparation as an integrated system rather than a series of discrete interventions. These leverage points align with four key candidate outcomes: academic readiness, sense of belonging, persistence and retention, and preparedness for professional practice.

In addition to candidate outcomes, this framework foregrounds faculty and program-level responsibility. Disability-informed preparation requires more than individual goodwill; it depends on intentional program-level design choices. Faculty actions (e.g., syllabus construction, communication practices, supervision expectations, and evaluation criteria) determine how structural policies are experienced by candidates. By situating faculty practice within the broader preparation system, the framework emphasizes shared accountability for creating environments in which candidates with disabilities can thrive.

Leverage Point 1: Access Infrastructure

Access infrastructure refers to the policies, communication systems, instructional design practices, and procedural pathways that shape how candidates navigate coursework, field requirements, certification, and institutional expectations. While accommodations are often conceptualized as individualized adjustments granted after disclosure, access infrastructure emphasizes the broader programmatic conditions that determine whether candidates can engage fully and predictably in preparation experiences.

Vignette: Navigating Certification and Licensure

Jordan, a visually impaired special education candidate, enters his final semester prepared to complete the state licensure exam. Throughout his preparation program, he has successfully used accommodations such as screen readers and extended time, so he expects the licensure process to be similar. Instead, he learns that the testing vendor requires a separate accommodations request, additional documentation, and an approval process that can take several weeks. The program materials provide little guidance on this process, and no one in the program has walked him through it before. Although the program coordinator expressed sympathy, the responsibility for resolving the situation fell entirely onto Jordan. He had to contact the testing vendor, gather documentation, and navigate the approval system alone. The process delays his testing timeline and creates uncertainty about whether he will be able to complete licensure requirements before graduation. This scenario illustrates how certification and licensure systems can introduce structural barriers even when coursework and program supports function effectively.

Such breakdowns reflect a broader pattern in which access barriers arise from fragmented systems rather than isolated policy failures. Within teacher preparation, access infrastructure encompasses not only classroom materials but also learning management systems, certification procedures, observation documentation platforms, clinical evaluation tools, and cross-unit communication practices. When these systems operate independently or rely on candidates to broker coordination among offices, the burden of navigation shifts to the individual.

A disability-informed approach to access infrastructure moves beyond reactive compliance to proactive design. One mechanism for operationalizing this shift is the use of accessibility checkpoints—intentional review points within program processes where accessibility is examined prior to candidate difficulty. Accessibility checkpoints may include structured syllabus design standards; prior review of digital materials for compatibility with assistive technologies; transparent timelines for accommodation implementation; pre-placement communication protocols clarifying accommodation responsibilities; and coordination procedures with external certification vendors. These checkpoints function as anticipatory safeguards, reducing reliance on crisis response and minimizing the need for candidates to repeatedly advocate for baseline access.

Importantly, accessibility checkpoints extend beyond format conversion or document tagging. They also encompass the clarity of expectations, alignment across institutional units, and transparency in procedural requirements that determine whether candidates can plan and prepare confidently. For example, clearly delineating which office coordinates field placement accommodations, how supervisors receive information about approved supports, and what steps are required to adjust certification timelines can substantially reduce ambiguity. When programs standardize communication pathways and make responsibilities explicit, candidates can direct their cognitive and emotional resources toward instructional learning rather than administrative negotiation.

Within this leverage point, principles commonly associated with inclusive instructional design, such as providing materials in accessible digital formats, offering multiple pathways for engaging with content, and ensuring compatibil-

ity with assistive technologies, serve as foundational elements. However, disability-informed preparation extends these principles beyond classroom pedagogy to encompass the full ecosystem of preparation systems.

Strengthening access infrastructure directly supports academic readiness by ensuring that engagement with coursework and certification processes reflects competence rather than navigation skills. It also contributes to a sense of belonging by signaling that disability access is anticipated rather than exceptional, a message that is strongly associated with persistence and engagement in higher education settings (Strayhorn, 2019). When programs institutionalize proactive checkpoints and coordinated communication, they reduce systemic friction that can undermine persistence and retention and delay professional entry.

The next leverage point examines how these structural conditions intersect with field placement systems, where coordination breakdowns and evaluative pressures may intensify access challenges.

Leverage Point 2: Field Placement Systems

A teacher candidate entered her student teaching placement expecting structured supervision and clearly communicated support. Instead, she encountered inconsistent expectations between university supervisors and school-based mentors, uncertainty regarding how approved accommodations would be implemented, and delayed responses to concerns about workload adjustments. As misunderstandings accumulated, the candidate began to question her competence rather than the clarity of the system surrounding her.

Field placement systems include the procedures used to assign candidates to sites, communicate expectations to cooperating teachers and supervisors, coordinate accommodations, and evaluate performance. When these systems lack clarity or coordination, candidates may experience what appears to be individual difficulty but is in fact structural misalignment. For example, unclear delineation of responsibility between disability services and field offices may result in delayed implementation of approved supports. Similarly, inconsistent communication between university supervisors and school partners regarding workload expectations can create conditions in which candidates must negotiate expectations independently. Research confirms that cross-unit coordination failures disproportionately affect teacher candidates with disabilities during field placements, often requiring them to have to negotiate their own support across institutional departments (Bargerhuff et al., 2012).

Within disability-informed preparation, attention to field placement systems involves examining how placement decisions are made, how information flows between institutional units, and how supervisors are prepared to support candidates with disabilities. Placement inequities may arise when candidates are assigned to sites without consideration of accessibility, transportation demands, scheduling flexibility, or supervisor familiarity with accommodation processes. These inequities are often unintentional, but the effects are not, since candidates who require structured coordination often absorb the consequences of systems not designed with them in mind.

Field placements also intensify evaluative pressures. Observation protocols, performance rubrics, and professional disposition criteria are frequently applied in high-stakes contexts. If evaluative expectations are not transparently communicated or if accommodation implementation varies across sites, candidates may experience compounded stress that affects instructional performance and self-efficacy. In such cases, what is interpreted as individual underperformance may reflect environmental instability rather than instructional capacity.

Strengthening field placement systems, therefore, requires proactive coordination across program offices, structured communication with school partners, and explicit alignment between accommodation documentation and supervisory practice. Clear timelines for placement confirmation, pre-placement meetings that address accommodation logistics, and supervisor preparation regarding disability-informed evaluation practices are system-level design decisions that shift the burden of coordination from the candidate to the program.

Attention to field placement systems directly influences candidates' sense of belonging and persistence. When supervision is consistent and expectations are transparent, candidates are more likely to interpret challenges as part of professional growth rather than as signals of exclusion. Conversely, fragmented systems may undermine confidence at precisely the stage when candidates are consolidating professional identity. By stabilizing field placement processes, programs strengthen the relational and structural conditions that support successful transition into the profession.

The following section examines how mentorship and evaluation practices further shape these experiences, particularly regarding professional identity, disclosure, and perceptions of legitimacy within preparation programs.

Leverage Point 3: Disability-Affirming Mentorship and Evaluation Practices

During her practicum, a candidate disclosed her disability to a faculty supervisor who responded by collaboratively reviewing expectations, clarifying how accommodations would operate within

observations, and inviting ongoing dialogue about workload and pacing. The candidate later described this interaction as pivotal in affirming her professional legitimacy.

In contrast, another candidate reported that after disclosing, she was advised to “avoid drawing attention” to her disability and to demonstrate greater stamina in order to meet professional expectations. Feedback emphasized tone, eye contact, and physical presence without clarifying how these criteria related to instructional competence. The candidate began to interpret routine supervisory feedback as evidence that she did not belong in the field.

These contrasting scenarios illustrate how mentorship and evaluation practices shape not only candidate performance but also the development of professional identity among individuals with disabilities (Forber-Pratt et al., 2017). Within teacher preparation, faculty members and supervisors function as gatekeepers, interpreters of professional norms, and validators of competence. Their responses to disclosure, accommodation implementation, and performance feedback significantly influence candidates’ perceptions of belonging and legitimacy.

Disability-affirming mentorship extends beyond interpersonal warmth. It explicitly acknowledges disability as part of the professional landscape and recognizes that equitable evaluation requires careful attention to how programs define and apply performance criteria. In many preparation programs, faculty evaluate professional dispositions using broad descriptors such as “professional communication,” “appropriate demeanor,” or “responsiveness to feedback.” Although programs intend these constructs to ensure readiness for practice, they may inadvertently rely on normative assumptions about speech patterns, physical presence, eye contact, affect, or stamina. Critical scholarship has questioned how professional disposition frameworks may encode normative assumptions about ability and professionalism (Bialka, 2015).

A disability-informed approach encourages programs to examine how professional standards are operationalized. For example, when programs evaluate “professional communication,” they can clarify whether the construct refers to clarity of instructional explanation, responsiveness to student questions, timeliness of communication, or specific nonverbal behaviors. When programs define criteria primarily through normative presentation expectations, candidates whose disabilities affect voice, movement, processing speed, or sensory engagement may be evaluated on dimensions unrelated to instructional effectiveness.

Providing multiple means of demonstrating professional dispositions does not lower standards; rather, it refines evaluation to align standards with essential competencies. For example, candidates might demonstrate preparedness through varied artifacts such as structured lesson rationales, reflective analyses, family communication logs, co-planning notes, or recorded instructional segments that demonstrate pedagogical decision-making rather than physical presentation. Similarly, observation protocols can emphasize instructional clarity, responsiveness to student need, and collaborative practice rather than unexamined behavioral norms.

Mentorship also influences how candidates interpret challenge. When supervisors frame feedback as part of iterative professional growth and explicitly separate access barriers from instructional skill, candidates are more likely to maintain academic confidence and persistence. How candidates respond in these moments can be shaped by the complex risk–benefit calculus candidates must weigh when deciding whether to disclose (Valle et al., 2004), a decision that research shows is highly strategic and context-dependent (Cole & Cawthon, 2015). Conversely, when feedback conflates accommodation needs with competence or suggests that disability itself is incompatible with professional standards, candidates may internalize systemic friction as personal deficiency.

Disability-affirming evaluation practices, therefore, contribute directly to belonging and preparedness for professional practice. Candidates who experience transparent expectations and collaborative problem-solving are more likely to envision themselves as long-term members of the profession. They are also better positioned to navigate future workplace disclosure decisions and advocate for access in employment settings. By situating mentorship and evaluation within a disability-informed framework, programs can align professional standards with equitable assessment and identity affirmation.

Vignette: Disclosure Decisions During the Job Search

Elena, a wheelchair user completing her student teaching placement, begins applying for teaching positions with strong evaluations and a record of classroom success. Although she has been open about her disability during her preparation program, she has received little guidance about navigating disclosure during the hiring process. When Elena asks a mentor for advice, she is told that disclosure is a personal decision but receives no concrete strategies for discussing accommodations with potential employers. During interviews, she encounters mixed reactions—some administrators focus on her teaching experience, while others appear uncertain about accessibility

TABLE 2: Barrier ▸ Impact ▸ Opportunity Leverage Points for Disability Informed Teacher Preparation

BARRIER	IMPACT ON CANDIDATES/PROGRAM	OPPORTUNITY (PROGRAM-LEVEL ACTION)
Accommodation processes unclear	Candidates experience uncertainty and anxiety; faculty and field partners are unsure of roles and timelines.	Publish a standardized accommodation pathway with clear timelines and points of contact; revisit at key milestones.
Inaccessible course materials	Candidates spend disproportionate time remediating access, reducing time for learning.	Adopt an accessibility checklist for all courses and embed routine checks into course development.
Disclosure stigma	Candidates may hide access needs, delay requests, or experience burnout.	Create confidential consultation channels and normalize disability as a dimension of professional diversity.
Untrained mentors/ supervisors	Support varies widely; candidates may be evaluated on disability-related behaviors.	Provide brief micro-trainings on disability-affirming supervision and bias mitigation.
Inaccessible field placements	Access needs are misunderstood; placement quality and learning suffer.	Conduct preplacement accessibility checks and jointly plan supports with candidates and school sites.
System misalignment across units	Supports fall through gaps between disability services, programs, and field offices.	Establish a triad communication protocol (candidate–program–disability services).
Program culture favors nondisabled norms	Lowered belonging and pressure to mask disability.	Increase visibility of disabled educators and explicitly discuss disability as part of professional diversity.
Noninclusive evaluations/ dispositions	Candidates are penalized for irrelevant behaviors.	Redesign rubrics to center job-relevant competencies and allow multiple means of demonstration.
Low representation / isolation	Constrained identity development; candidates feel alone.	Create intentional mentorship networks and affinity spaces.
Field site resistance	Placements may break down when accommodations are resisted.	Use preplacement agreements clarifying legal/ethical responsibilities and problem-solving steps.

or accommodations. Without clear preparation for these conversations, Elena must decide independently when and how to discuss her disability. This vignette illustrates how disability-affirming mentorship extends to preparing candidates for the transition into the profession by explicitly addressing disclosure decisions and workplace advocacy.

Together with access infrastructure and field placement systems, mentorship and evaluation practices complete the interconnected structure of disability-informed teacher preparation. The next section considers how these leverage points collectively inform program-level implications and faculty practice.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION PREPARATION PROGRAMS

The Disability-Informed Teacher Preparation framework offers a systems-level lens through which special education programs may examine and redesign preparation structures. Rather than locating access challenges at the level of individual accommodation requests, the framework invites programs to evaluate how structural design, field coordination, and evaluative practices collectively shape candidate outcomes.

First, programs may examine access infrastructure as a shared responsibility across faculty, field offices, and institutional units. Establishing program-wide accessibility checkpoints, such as standardized syllabus expectations, prior review of digital platforms for compatibility, transparent timelines for accommodation implementation, and coordinated communication protocols with certification entities, can reduce variability across courses and supervisors. When access processes are predictable and proactively designed, academic readiness becomes a function of instructional engagement rather than administrative navigation. Programs that institutionalize clarity signal that disability access is anticipated and integrated rather than exceptional.

Second, programs may strengthen field placement systems by formalizing

coordination between university supervisors, cooperating teachers, and disability services. Clear delineation of roles, structured pre-placement conversations addressing accommodation logistics, and supervisor preparation regarding disability-informed evaluation practices can stabilize high-stakes clinical experiences. Because field placements function as both learning environments and gatekeeping contexts, alignment across institutional and school-based partners is essential to supporting persistence and belonging. Programs that proactively address accessibility considerations in placement assignments and supervisory training reduce the likelihood that candidates will interpret systemic friction as personal deficiency.

Third, preparation programs may recalibrate mentorship and evaluation practices to ensure that professional standards are defined in competency-based rather than norm-based terms. Clarifying the essential instructional competencies embedded within professional disposition frameworks, distinguishing presentation style from pedagogical skill, and encouraging collaborative dialogue around disclosure can strengthen candidates' professional identity development. By providing multiple, clearly articulated pathways for demonstrating competence, programs reinforce preparedness for professional practice while maintaining rigorous standards.

Across these leverage points, the framework underscores the importance of program coherence. When faculty share common language regarding access processes, field coordination, and evaluative criteria, candidates encounter consistency rather than fragmentation. Such coherence strengthens the interdependence of academic readiness, sense of belonging, persistence and retention, and preparedness for professional practice—factors that higher education research consistently links to student persistence (Tinto, 1993). Importantly, these implications do not require programs to create parallel structures for candidates with disabilities. Instead, they call for intentional examination of existing systems to ensure that equity principles embedded in special education philosophy are reflected in preparation practice.

Finally, the framework may serve as a reflective tool for continuous program evaluation. By asking how access infrastructure, field placement systems, and mentorship practices align with candidate outcomes, programs can move beyond episodic accommodation toward sustained structural alignment. In doing so, special education preparation programs not only support candidates with disabilities but also model the program-level equity they expect graduates to enact in P–12 settings.

CONCLUSION

Preparing special educators to design inclusive systems for P–12 learners requires parallel attention to the inclusivity of their preparation programs. Candidates with disabilities do not enter teacher education as peripheral participants; they enter as future colleagues whose experiences within preparation systems shape both professional identity and long-term engagement in the field. The Disability-Informed Teacher Preparation framework advances a systems-oriented approach for aligning preparation structures with the equity principles that special education programs espouse.

By identifying three interconnected leverage points (i.e., access infrastructure, field placement systems, and disability-affirming mentorship and evaluation practices), the framework situates disability access within the design of preparation systems rather than within isolated accommodation transactions. When these leverage points are intentionally aligned with the outcomes of academic readiness, sense of belonging, persistence and retention, and preparedness for professional practice, programs create conditions in which candidates can demonstrate competence without disproportionate administrative or relational burden.

Importantly, disability-informed preparation does not call for reduced expectations or parallel standards. Instead, it requires clarity in defining essential competencies, coherence in coordinating institutional processes, and consistency in mentorship practices. In special education programs, where candidates are simultaneously learning to advocate for inclusive systems and to navigate their own professional formation, this alignment is not only a pedagogical imperative but also an ethical one. Ultimately, disability-informed teacher preparation begins within the programs that cultivate future educators.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Amanda Lannan

Dr. Amanda Lannan is a Clinical Assistant Professor in the Visual Impairment Program at the University of Kentucky, where she prepares Teachers of Students with Visual Impairments and supports statewide initiatives to advance equitable access in education. She is blind and integrates lived experience as a disabled scholar into her teaching, leadership, and research. A former classroom teacher, her expertise includes low-vision services, functional vision assessment, MTSS, and accessible instructional design. She serves as President of the Kentucky AER Chapter and collaborates nationally on research related to tactile graphics, AI-supported accessibility tools, and inclusive STEM instruction for learners with visual impairments.

Shalece Kohnke

Dr. Shalece Kohnke is an assistant professor in the Department of Special Education, Rehabilitation, and Counseling at Auburn University. She teaches core special education courses focusing on secondary methods and transition for students with disabilities. She has multiple learning disabilities and integrates lived experience as a disabled scholar into her teaching and research. Dr. Kohnke's research primarily focuses on secondary and post-secondary Science, Engineering, Technology, and Mathematics (STEM) settings through the lens of learning sciences and the use of innovative technologies. She also researches the disability experience.

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Preparing Special Education Teachers to Support Autistic Female Students' Well-being

AUTHORS
Jennifer M. Macko
Jamie N. Pearson

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ABSTRACT
Educators are often unaware of the academic difficulties, sensory challenges, social isolation, and emotional distress many autistic female students experience within inclusive K-12 educational environments (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2024; Tomlinson et al., 2020; Urbaniak & D'Amico, 2025). Research indicates that autistic female students attribute many of these difficulties to their teachers lacking understanding and specialized knowledge regarding their specific experiences of autism, which often differs from those of male autistic people (Tomlinson et al., 2020; Urbaniak & D'Amico, 2025). Consequently, teacher training must move beyond traditional male-centric paradigms to address the distinct female presentation of autism and the educational needs of autistic female students (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2024; Tomlinson et al., 2020; Urbaniak & D'Amico, 2025). To bridge this research-to-practice gap, this article introduces the SAGEWell framework. The model emphasizes four key actions: (a) supporting understanding of autism in females; (b) advocating for equity in assessment and service provision; (c) growing inclusive practices; and (d) empowering collaboration with students, families, and other school professionals. Through a series of vignettes, an application guide, a visual model, and a practical checklist, this article provides teacher educators with a structured path to develop the competencies special educators need to recognize and meet the needs of autistic female students, thereby enhancing their overall well-being.

KEYWORDS
Autism, autistic females, inclusive education, special education, teacher preparation

Olivia, a special education teacher candidate in her final student teaching placement, was initially thrilled to work with Maya, an autistic fourth-grade student who shared Olivia's love of reading and creative writing. However, a few weeks into the semester, Olivia noticed that Maya was missing several days of school each week. When she reached out to Maya's mother, she was surprised to learn that when Maya came home from school, she was falling apart. Maya's mother described Sunday night stomachaches, morning meltdowns at the front door, and afternoons of tears and withdrawal at home. Olivia was stunned. She saw no signs that Maya was struggling in the classroom. Maya appeared to be thriving. She was quiet, consistently earned passing grades despite often taking longer than others to get started on work, and never asked for help. Earlier, Olivia even told her university supervisor, Dr. Woolf, that she was questioning Maya's diagnosis and her need for services. She based her skepticism on Maya's lack of externalizing behaviors, a historical hallmark of autism that her introductory coursework emphasized. Olivia wondered, "Do I really even know what autism is?"

The Hidden Reality of Autistic Females in Schools

Autism is a developmental disability that shapes how a person experiences the world due to differences in communication, social interactions, sensory processing, and cognitive style (Autistic Self Advocacy Network, 2024). Although it is formal-

ly known as autism spectrum disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2022), we use the term *autism* and identity-first language throughout this article to reflect a neurodiversity-affirming stance and respect the preferences of the autism community (Bottema-Beutel, 2021). While the presentation of autism varies widely (APA, 2013), autistic females[1] often manifest subtler core autistic traits (i.e., subjectively better communication and social skills than males based on societal standards) and possess a heightened social awareness (Harrop et al., 2024). This awareness frequently leads to them attempting to mask their autistic traits to gain social acceptance. Masking refers to the conscious or unconscious attempt to hide one's autistic traits to appear neurotypical in social settings (Cook et al., 2021). Masking is associated with increased psychological distress, including anxiety and depression (Beck et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2024), and can obscure the path to an accurate diagnosis (Lai et al., 2023). Understanding masking is critical for school-based teams, as autistic students who regulate their behavior and try to blend in with peers and adults may have their needs go undetected (Putnam et al., 2025). Researchers theorize masking may explain not only why teachers are less likely to identify and report concerns about autistic females, but also why caregiver and teacher accounts of these students' characteristics frequently misalign (Putnam et al., 2025; Sturrock et al., 2021).

Olivia's confusion reflects a documented trend where teachers, who often function as the gatekeepers to services, lack understanding of how autism can manifest in female individuals (Urbaniak & D'Amico, 2025). This knowledge gap contributes to the under-identification and inadequate levels of support for autistic female students (Zakai-Mashiach, 2023). Lacking access to needed services and accommodations often leads to emotional distress and school avoidance, which has been reported in first-hand accounts of autistic females' educational journeys (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2024). Left unaddressed, unmet needs in the educational environment can negatively affect these students' academic performance, mental health, and well-being (Jacobs et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2022).

Barriers to Success in Inclusive Environments

Synthesizing the findings from three systematic reviews, multiple barriers to inclusive educational environments for autistic female students were identified, many of which go unnoticed by teachers (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2024; Urbaniak & D'Amico, 2025; Tomlinson et al., 2020). Four themes emerged from the challenges autistic female students commonly face: academic difficulties, sensory and environmental challenges, social isolation, and emotional distress.

First, academic difficulties frequently relate to executive functioning demands, particularly in planning, organization, and task initiation (Jacobs et al., 2021; Sturrock et al., 2022; Tomlinson et al., 2022). Communication differences, such as varying capacities for listening comprehension and a lack of the verbal confidence required to self-advocate, can hinder autistic females' abilities to follow complex instructions or request assistance. Moreover, teachers' limited specialized knowledge on how to adapt materials or provide accommodations often compounds these academic challenges (Tomlinson et al., 2022; Zakai-Mashiach, 2023).

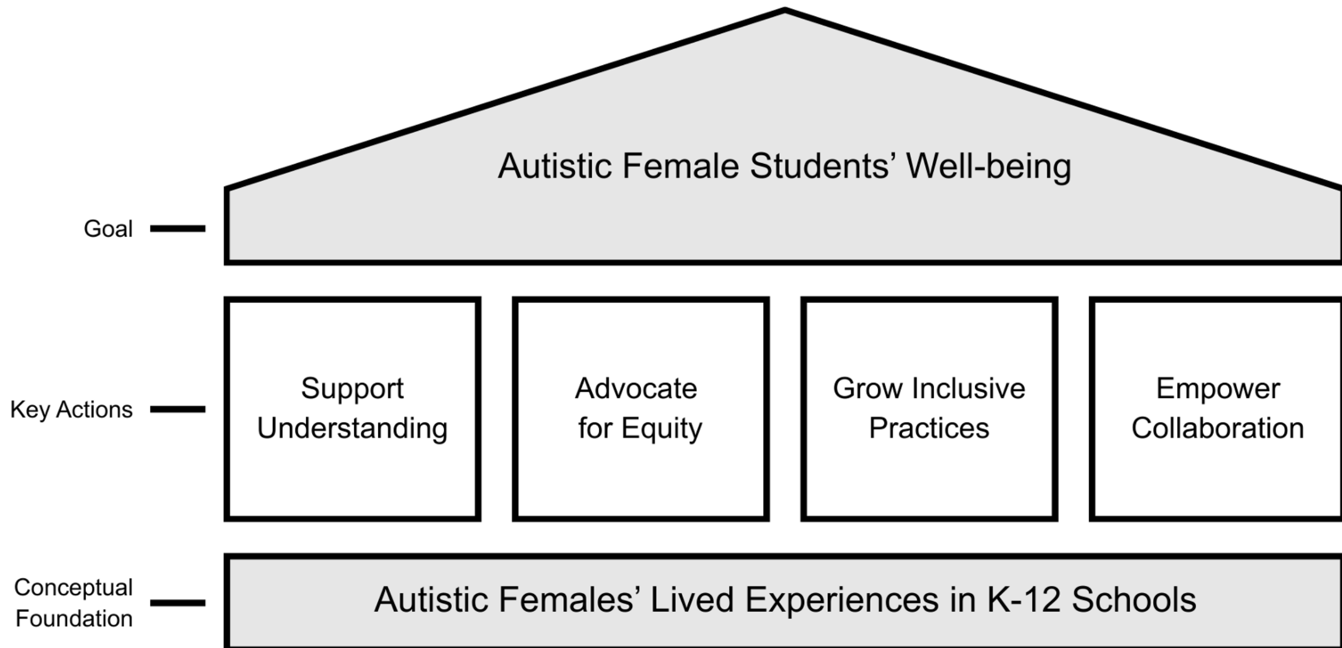
The school's physical environment also exacerbates academic struggles (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Jacobs et al., 2021). High noise levels, crowded spaces, and the unpredictability of staff or schedule changes create a persistent state of sensory overload that impairs learning capacity. For many autistic female students, the sheer size and social density of inclusive settings become significant impediments to feelings of safety and security (Myles et al., 2019).

For autistic female students, social isolation often heightens feelings of vulnerability in school (Myles et al., 2019). While many autistic females describe trusted friends as a vital source of security in chaotic school settings (Myles et al., 2019), they struggle to maintain these protective relationships (Jacobs et al., 2021). Instead, autistic females report profound difficulties fitting in (Sturrock et al., 2022; Tomlinson et al., 2022) and find themselves ignored, rejected, or bullied by peers (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Jacobs et al., 2021; Josefsson & Johansson, 2024; Myles et al., 2019). Common instructional practices intended to foster collaboration, such as requiring students to find a partner, can inadvertently reinforce feelings of isolation (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019) because such tasks depend heavily on existing social connections and peer acceptance. To navigate the social demands of the school environment and blend in with their peers, many autistic females resort to using the mentally and emotionally draining practice of masking (Zakai-Mashiach, 2023).

The combined academic, sensory, and social pressures produce significant emotional distress, including chronic stress, anxiety, and physical exhaustion (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2024; Jacobs et al., 2021; Urbaniak & D'Amico, 2025).

[1]We utilize the term "female" to refer to biological sex, reflecting well-documented sex-based differences in how autism manifests across the lifespan (Lai et al., 2023; McFayden et al., 2023). This terminology is intentionally inclusive of all gender identities among those assigned female at birth who share sex-influenced autistic traits and the associated risk of diagnostic bias (Lai et al., 2023; Uglik-Marucha et al., 2026).

FIGURE 1: The SAGEWell Conceptual Framework



Left unaddressed, these compounding burdens can lead to withdrawal and emotionally driven school avoidance (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Josefsson & Johansson, 2024). To address these barriers, the field must reimagine how special education teachers are being prepared to work with autistic students, including those whose presentations have been historically unrecognized.

The SAGEWell Framework

The documented experiences of autistic female students offer compelling evidence that current educational practices are insufficient to meet their specific but often overlooked needs, and yet teacher education has largely failed to keep pace. Specifically, there are growing calls for teacher training that moves beyond male-centric presentations to address the specific presentation and educational needs of autistic female students (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2024; Urbaniak & D'Amico, 2025; Tomlinson et al., 2022).

To bridge this research-to-practice gap and present teacher educators with a structured path forward, we introduce the SAGEWell framework. This four-pillar model offers special education faculty a structured approach to preparing the next generation of special education teachers with the competencies necessary to recognize and effectively support autistic female students. The framework emphasizes four key actions: (a) *supporting* understanding of autism in females; (b) *advocating* for equity in assessment and service provision; (c) *growing* inclusive practices; and (d) *empowering* collaboration with students, families, and other school professionals. We summarize the SAGEWell conceptual framework in Figure 1.

FOUNDATIONS OF THE SAGEWELL FRAMEWORK

The SAGEWell framework offers a strategic response to the documented barriers autistic female students face in K-12 settings by translating research into concrete teacher preparation goals. It was developed by synthesizing current literature on autistic females' lived experiences in K–12 schools with the *Initial K-12 Practice-Based Professional Preparation Standards for Special Educators* (Council for Exceptional Children [CEC], 2020), and is further informed by our collective experience in special education teaching, university instruction, and community advocacy. The first author, an autistic female, led this developmental process.

The following section introduces the four pillars of the framework and establishes their evidence-based foundation. Each pillar is mapped to the aforementioned professional standards, demonstrating how the key actions of the SAGEWell framework align with the essential knowledge and skills required of beginning special education teachers. Table 1 details this alignment.

TABLE 1: SAGEWell Alignment with CEC Initial Practice-Based Professional Preparation Standards for Special Educators

SAGEWell Pillar	Aligned CEC Standard	Key Learning Objective for Candidates
Support Understanding	Standard 2: Understanding and Addressing Each Individual's Developmental and Learning Needs	Identify the unique presentation of autism in females.
Advocate for Equity	Standard 1: Engaging in Professional Learning and Practice within Ethical Guidelines	Advocate for improved outcomes by recognizing and addressing disparities in assessment and service provision for autistic females.
	Standard 4: Using Assessment to Understand the Learner and the Learning Environment	Select appropriate data and apply it to standard measures to mitigate diagnostic bias rooted in male-normed autism presentations.
Grow Inclusive Practices	Standard 3: Demonstrating Subject Matter Content and Specialized Curricular Knowledge	Utilize specialized curricular knowledge regarding effective executive function and communication supports to select and implement accommodations that would be beneficial to autistic females.
	Standard 5: Supporting Learning Using Effective Instruction	Engage in effective instruction by adjusting instructional strategies and learning environments based on autistic female students' reported needs.
Empower Collaboration	Standard 6: Supporting Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Growth	Collaborate with school professionals to support the well-being of autistic females by addressing social exclusion and emotional stress.
	Standard 7: Collaborating with Team Members	Collaborate with professionals, students, and families to plan programs and promote autistic female student self-advocacy.

Note. Standards are quoted from the Initial K–12 Practice-Based Professional Preparation Standards for Special Educators (CEC, 2020).

Pillar One: Support Understanding

The first pillar, *Support Understanding*, addresses the critical need for teachers to recognize the unique presentation of autism in females as a prerequisite for fostering student well-being (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2024; Urbaniak & D'Amico, 2025). Although school-based awareness of autism has expanded significantly in recent years, teachers remain less informed about how autism manifests in females and frequently do not notice their support needs or refer them for a special education evaluation (Myles et al., 2019; Gosling et al., 2024; Urbaniak & D'Amico, 2025). Without these referrals, autistic female students cannot access important services. Neglecting these needs during school years often triggers long-term consequences, including chronic mental health issues and persistent social difficulties that continue into adulthood (Tomlinson et al., 2022).

Prevailing stereotypes of autism, which typically align with the overt, externalized behaviors often demonstrated by males, contribute to the limited number of referrals (Munroe & Dunleavy, 2023). In contrast, autistic females more frequently internalize feelings and mask their differences by mimicking peers and managing how they appear to others. Their repetitive movements, preferences for sameness, and focused interests may mirror those of non-autistic peers, though often at a significantly higher intensity. Additionally, autistic females have an increased likelihood of mental health concerns, such as depression or anxiety (Lai et al., 2023). Teachers and clinicians may misinterpret these symptoms as the primary cause of a student's struggles, which can result in a misdiagnosis and a failure to identify underlying autistic needs.

Because teachers regularly observe students' social interactions with peers and adults, they play a vital role in the timely recognition and identification of autism (Zakai-Mashiach, 2023). Supporting an understanding of how autism manifests in females allows teacher educators to equip candidates with the knowledge necessary to identify these distinct presentations and see past masking behaviors. Developing the capacity to recognize the female presentation of autism is necessary to meet professional standards that require candidates to leverage their understanding of individual differences to address each student's learning needs (CEC, 2020).

Pillar Two: Advocate for Equity

To mitigate the systemic bias faced by autistic female students, special education teachers must possess the skills to advocate for equity in assessment and service provision. While the ratio of diagnosed autistic males to females has decreased since 2000, significant disparities remain (Harrop et al., 2024). Autism prevalence among eight-year-olds is 3.4 times higher in males than

in females (Shaw et al., 2025), with females consistently diagnosed later than males—a delay that is particularly pronounced for females without intellectual disability (Harrop et al., 2024). These diagnostic disparities extend into the school setting, where autistic females are 26% less likely than autistic males to receive special education services (Menezes et al., 2023). These disparities are further shaped by race and ethnicity, as school psychologists demonstrate significantly less confidence in autism classification decisions for Black students and are less likely to consider an autism classification for Latine females than for Asian females (Golson et al., 2022). Because schools identify nearly 18% of autistic students through special education eligibility alone (Shaw et al., 2025), special education teachers occupy a unique position to advocate for and address these disparities.

In the absence of dependable biological markers, autism diagnosis relies on observing behavioral traits, a practice historically shaped by the male profile of autism (Cook et al., 2024). Diagnostic and eligibility criteria were developed primarily from male samples, meaning sex-based assumptions about autism are embedded in the very tools used to identify it (Menezes et al., 2023). These assumptions can influence how teachers and other school personnel interpret student behavior when making referral and eligibility decisions (Golson et al., 2022). When entering the field, new special education teachers may encounter multidisciplinary team members whose gendered perceptions of autism lead them to question whether an evaluation is warranted for a potentially autistic female student (Urbaniak & D'Amico, 2025). This hesitation may result in missed or delayed identification and the denial of special education eligibility. Such exclusion bars these students from accessing specially designed instruction and related services and predisposes them to depressed self-esteem, isolation, decreased educational success, and more significant mental health issues (Lai et al., 2023).

CEC (2020) professional preparation standards and ethics mandate that candidates advocate for improved student outcomes while remaining sensitive to social and cultural diversity. In addition, candidates must possess the technical skill to select and implement assessment procedures that provide a valid picture of a student's individual needs. This requires teacher educators to develop their candidates' ability to select data that account for the female presentation of autism and to apply these data to standard measures to meet eligibility criteria (Munroe & Dunleavy, 2023). Such preparation ensures that future teachers can fulfill their professional obligations to contribute to accurate eligibility determinations and secure the services necessary for student well-being.

Pillar Three: Grow Inclusive Practices

Growing inclusive practices involves teacher educators developing candidates' abilities to design learning environments and use instructional strategies that benefit autistic females. Currently, teachers in inclusive settings frequently misunderstand the needs of autistic female students and lack the knowledge to attend to their executive functioning, social-emotional, and communication challenges (Jacobs et al., 2021; Myles et al., 2019). Moreover, many teachers do not consistently provide individualized accommodations or adapt materials to suit autistic female students' needs (Tomlinson et al., 2022; Zakai-Mashiach, 2023). Insufficient specialized teacher competence and inadequate classroom adaptation leave autistic female students feeling anxious, stressed, frustrated, and sad, which can result in absenteeism and jeopardize academic performance (Anderson, 2020; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Tomlinson et al., 2022).

Research on autism-focused support is comprised of 84% male participants, which undermines claims of evidence-based practices being universally effective (Hume et al., 2021). This skewed representation limits generalizability to autistic females, whose experiences and needs differ from those of males. Consequently, to meet professional standards, teacher educators must train special education teacher candidates to critically evaluate the evidence base of any strategy and ground their practice in literature that centers autistic female experiences. Research specific to this population shows that autistic females value flexible yet structured learning environments aligned with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles (CAST, 2024; Jacobs et al., 2021; Josefsson & Johansson, 2024). Autistic females also respond favorably to personalized accommodations, including tools for subtle, non-verbal communication of their needs, such as signal cards or a digital/written check-in (Tomlinson et al., 2022). By teaching candidates to move beyond theoretical understanding to the technical execution of such instructional strategies, teacher educators enable them to provide effective instruction and create classroom environments that promote learning and emotional well-being.

Pillar Four: Empower Collaboration

Autistic female students' wellbeing depends not only on effective instruction but on having quality relationships with others at school. Teacher educators address the fourth pillar by preparing candidates to lead collaborative efforts that prioritize the social-emotional needs and well-being of autistic females.

FIGURE 2: SAGEWell Curriculum Integration Checklist

- ❑ Does the current curriculum that addresses characteristics of autism include content on the female presentation of autism?
- ❑ Is the history of male-aligned diagnostic criteria for autism and its impact on female identification discussed as part of the ethical and legal obligations of assessment?
- ❑ Are pre-service teachers required to analyze and apply informal data (e.g., student interviews, anxiety screeners) to eligibility criteria to mitigate bias in standardized measurements?
- ❑ Is Universal Design for Learning (UDL) utilized by course instructors to model its application in the classroom?
- ❑ Are pre-service teachers taught specific strategies for explicitly teaching the unwritten social rules and expectations of a classroom or school setting?
- ❑ Are pre-service teachers provided hands-on practice with accommodations and supports that address the expressed needs of autistic females?
- ❑ Is content included for teaching techniques for incorporating student voice and student-centered planning?
- ❑ Are candidates given opportunities to practice non-judgmental listening and empathetic communication with families regarding internalizing behaviors (e.g., school refusal, anxiety)?
- ❑ Is a mechanism in place (e.g., joint lecture, shared assignment) to facilitate collaboration between Special Education and School Counseling/Psychology candidates on student well-being (e.g., anxiety regulation)?

Because current school service models overlook the female presentation, standard interventions frequently fail to meet autistic females' actual needs (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2024). For autistic females, interpersonal connections within the school environment are vital for addressing emotional distress and academic concerns (Jacobs et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2022). Therefore, effective support must center relationship-based strategies (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2024; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019). Relational approaches deemed helpful by autistic females include access to trusted staff who understand their individual needs, assistance with conflict and anxiety management, and the provision of safe social spaces (Jacobs et al., 2021; Myles et al., 2019; Tomlinson et al., 2022).

Implementing these relational supports depends on candidates acquiring the skills to collaborate with autistic female students, their families, and school professionals. First, teacher educators must emphasize the need to prioritize collaboration with autistic female students. Positive student-teacher relationships alleviate some of the classroom difficulties and emotional burden this population faces (Jacobs et al., 2021). Listening to these students' thoughts and understanding their needs is fundamental to building trusted relationships and providing appropriate instruction and accommodation (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2024; Tomlinson et al., 2022). Second, teacher educators must train candidates to cultivate and maintain positive connections with families. These partnerships nurture the emotional well-being of autistic female students and help facilitate a return to the classroom for those with emotionally driven absenteeism (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2024). Finally, candidates must learn to coordinate valued interventions with school professionals. This involves working with school psychologists to explore coping strategies, speech-language therapists to support social communication, and school staff to schedule check-ins and to gain access to quiet areas where students feel safe (Myles et al., 2019; Tomlinson et al., 2022).

By developing these capabilities, teacher educators prepare candidates to meet professional expectations and implement a variety of proactive and responsive strategies to create caring environments that prioritize autistic females' academic and emotional well-being. Empowering students to voice their needs and participate in problem-solving recognizes them as essential members of their own support team. This approach drives responsive collaboration among all team members while promoting self-determination through the development of self-advocacy skills necessary for autistic female students to participate in their own program planning (Shogren et al., 2024; Shogren & Raley, 2022).

INTEGRATING THE SAGEWELL FRAMEWORK IN SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER PREPARATION

Building upon the SAGEWell pillars established in the previous section, the following application guide offers teacher educators explicit strategies for integrating these competencies across a typical special education preparation curriculum. Figure 2 provides a checklist for this process.

Instructional Strategies for Supporting Understanding

The first step in implementing the SAGEWell framework requires teacher educators to intentionally expand the curriculum so that candidates recognize the diverse ways autism presents in the classroom. When instruction contrasts the traditional, male-normed autism characteristics with the subtle profiles more common in females, candidates will be better situated to support students like Maya before they reach the point of autistic burnout. Raymaker et al. (2020), drawing from community-based

participatory research, describe autistic burnout as a syndrome characterized by prolonged exhaustion, loss of function, and reduced tolerance to stimuli due to chronic stress of unmet support needs. Professional preparation should explicitly cover the female presentation of autism, emphasizing that females commonly internalize their feelings and exert significant effort to control their behavior and emotions while at school (Munroe & Dunleavy, 2023). Teacher educators should explain that due to greater social motivation, autistic female students often mimic their peers' social cues in an intense effort to fit in, thereby camouflaging their differences (Hull et al., 2020; Munroe & Dunleavy, 2023). Instruction must also highlight that repetitive movements may appear more inconspicuous, and that focused interests in females regularly appear more typical or socially acceptable than those of their male autistic peers. Lastly, faculty should teach candidates about the increased likelihood of co-occurring mental health conditions, such as depression or anxiety, that can lead to a misdiagnosis or the complete overshadowing of the underlying autism (Lai et al., 2023).

Faculty can integrate content on the female presentation of autism into introductory coursework detailing the characteristics of exceptionalities to support an expansive understanding of autism from the beginning of their training. To provide candidates with a clear illustration of these traits, teacher educators can use comparative case studies featuring different presentations of autism. This enables candidates to practice identifying the hidden needs of students who mask their autistic traits alongside more traditional profiles. Faculty can also incorporate first-person perspectives to make visible the lived experiences of autistic females. While some faculty or candidates may bring their own autistic lived experience to these discussions, additional perspectives can be integrated through guest speakers, memoirs, or digital media. Finally, candidates can critically analyze how autism is portrayed in popular media, examining why male characters are more frequently represented and what that may signal.

Strategy Snapshot: Revisiting Dr. Woolf and Olivia

After her discussion with Olivia, Dr. Woolf realized that her current introductory special education course did not include content specific to the female presentation of autism. This omission left Olivia unprepared to recognize that Maya's quiet, compliant behavior was actually a form of masking that led to profound exhaustion. Prompted by Olivia's confusion regarding Maya's high-achieving but quietly struggling student profile, Dr. Woolf revised her autism module. As part of this revision, she invited an autistic female self-advocate to speak to her class. The guest speaker shared how her desire to belong led her to copy her peers, despite the deep internal distress it caused her. The guest speaker described the intense mental energy expended to conceal her passion for butterflies, which included the urge to flit about her classroom, and the collapse and withdrawal that occurred when she reached the safety of her home. Candidate feedback following the revised module indicated a meaningful shift in perspective, with many reporting increased confidence in recognizing autistic female students and their needs.

Instructional Strategies for Advocating for Equity

To implement the second pillar of the SAGEWell framework, teacher educators must prepare candidates to advocate for equity by addressing the diagnostic disparities that prevent autistic females from accessing services (Golson et al., 2022; Menezes et al., 2023). Instruction should explore how diagnostic tools developed primarily from male samples often fail to capture female presentations of autism, contributing to disparities in diagnosis and service provision (Rea et al., 2023; Tien et al., 2025). Professional training must also underscore the ethical and legal obligations to use technically sound assessment tools suitable for autistic females (CEC, 2020). In addition, teacher educators should teach candidates to supplement traditional diagnostic measures with informal data. For example, faculty can demonstrate how anecdotal notes, student reporting through interviews or questionnaires, and family stories yield the qualitative data necessary to build a comprehensive student profile (Benedict et al., 2022). Candidates must then learn to connect the specific traits of the female presentation of autism to existing eligibility criteria to prevent autistic female students' needs from being dismissed.

Incorporating advocacy for accurate eligibility determination into coursework on evaluation and assessment ensures that candidates can establish how autistic females satisfy the eligibility criteria for autism and defend their access to special education services. During instruction, faculty can encourage candidates to critically analyze how supplemental data, such as student interviews and anxiety screeners, can uncover masked difficulties missed by standard autism evaluation measures. To establish an evidence base for these discussions, teacher educators should assign readings on diagnostic inequities. Additionally, candidates can participate in a mock IEP meeting based on a case study of an autistic female student. By using both formal and informal data during this activity, candidates can practice using quantitative and qualitative information to advocate for necessary support.

Strategy Snapshot: Dr. Woolf and Dr. Catalani

Dr. Woolf shared her revised course content and her concerns about candidates misidentifying autistic female students when she met with her colleague, Dr. Catalani, who teaches the assessment course. Dr. Catalani agreed that ensuring accurate eligibility determination for this population was a critical professional responsibility. To address this as part of her curriculum, Dr. Catalani developed a simulation of an eligibility meeting for a high-masking female student being evaluated under the category of autism. During the activity, candidates received data, including a student interview, an age-appropriate anxiety self-assessment, observations, and traditional formal assessment data. Using this data, the candidates mapped the masked difficulties revealed in the interview and anxiety self-assessment to the eligibility criteria. This exercise demonstrated that informal, student-informed data can counter diagnostic bias and function as a critical tool for advocating for equity in the eligibility determination and service provision of autistic female students.

Instructional Strategies for Growing Inclusive Practice

The third pillar of the SAGEWell framework calls on teacher educators to develop candidates' abilities to design and deliver effective instruction to autistic female students. Instruction should focus on the practical application of UDL principles to proactively address diverse needs and to offer the flexible structure that benefits autistic females' learning (CAST, 2024; Jacobs et al., 2021). Rather than relying solely on reactive interventions delivered in a separate setting, candidates must learn to employ strength-based approaches that honor the specific interests and abilities of autistic females and respect their preferences to be supported in the general education classroom (Jacobs et al., 2021; Zakai-Mashiach, 2022). Professional preparation must also encompass the design and implementation of beneficial environmental modifications and accommodations for autistic females, such as sensory-safe zones or visuals to indicate the need for breaks (Tomlinson et al., 2022). Teacher educators can ground their practice in the scholarship and lived expertise of autistic female researchers and autistic self-advocates. For instance, Kathryn Urbaniak led a systematic review (Urbaniak et al., 2025) that provides critical insights into the secondary education barriers faced by autistic girls, while Botha et al. (2024) discuss appropriate language usage when working with or talking about autistic individuals.

Teacher educators must embed evidence-based practices within coursework on instructional methods to effectively transfer theoretical learning to the practical application of this knowledge (Juarez & Purper, 2018). Because UDL implementation can be complex in practice, teacher educators should model its principles within their own courses. By doing so, they demonstrate feasible ways to offer universal supports without compromising academic rigor. Additionally, candidates can perform a UDL makeover of a lesson plan, revising it to meet UDL principles. To address the hidden curriculum, faculty should use think-alouds to make implicit expectations explicit. In other words, by articulating the unspoken rules, values, and expectations inherent in their pedagogy, faculty can clarify how to align implicit expectations with clear instruction. Faculty can also ask candidates to complete a sensory and executive functioning audit of a cooperating classroom and create accommodations based on the findings to facilitate hands-on practice with adjusting environments and designing instructional aids.

Strategy Snapshot: Dr. Sabine and Inclusive Methods

After Dr. Woolf and Dr. Catalani shared the positive impact of their revised course content at a department meeting, Dr. Sabine decided to revisit how he taught UDL in his inclusive education methods course. He revised his approach to teaching UDL by centering the flexible, proactive scaffolding autistic female students need. Dr. Sabine modeled UDL principles throughout the semester and explained his pedagogical choices to make his thinking visible to students. For a major reflection assignment, he offered candidates multiple means of expression, including a traditional written paper, a video diary, a storyboard, or an interactive digital experience. Dr. Sabine gave chunked verbal and written instructions in class, along with a detailed rubric that made assignment expectations explicit. He explained to his candidates that this combination of flexibility and structural clarity was an intentional strategy that honors the strengths and interests of neurodivergent students while also accommodating for their executive function and communication needs.

Instructional Strategies for Empowering Collaboration

Empowering collaboration, the fourth pillar of the SAGEWell framework, calls on teacher educators to emphasize that supportive relationships are the foundation of well-being for autistic female students (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2024; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019). Faculty must teach candidates that collaboration is not merely an adult-centered process. To address internal struggles like anxiety and exhaustion while promoting self-advocacy, collaboration must extend to the student as an active partner. To prepare teacher candidates for these conversations, teacher educators must deliver explicit instruction on relationship-building communication strategies like

active listening, which was identified by autistic youth as helpful to successful inclusion (Bolourian et al., 2021). Active listening requires the listener to demonstrate engagement by paraphrasing the speaker's message, posing clarifying questions as needed, and maintaining open, attentive body language (Weger et al., 2014). For nonspeaking autistic students or those with higher communication support needs, speech-language pathologists (SLPs) can help facilitate these conversations through multimodal communication strategies, including augmentative and alternative communication (AAC; Donaldson et al., 2023). Multimodal, student-centered communication is indispensable when building trust with students and their families and understanding students' individual needs, which are integral components of positive relationships with autistic female students (Tomlinson et al., 2022). As a result, professional preparation must include techniques for initiating student-led planning and methods for interprofessional teaming. Faculty must specifically prepare candidates to work alongside school counselors, psychologists, and SLPs to provide autistic female students support at the intersection of anxiety, social-emotional regulation, and communication.

Within coursework focused on collaboration, policy, or classroom management, teacher educators should integrate purposeful activities that reflect the collaborative demands candidates will encounter in the field. Faculty can facilitate paired "turn-and-talk" discussions where candidates practice active listening skills. Candidates can rehearse this skill by interviewing one another about their current academic experiences, asking questions such as, "What is challenging?" "What supports are most helpful to you?" and "What do you wish your instructors knew about you?" During this activity, faculty should teach candidates how to solicit feedback from students across a range of developmental levels. This activity mirrors the student-centered collaboration candidates will need to facilitate in their own classrooms. Furthermore, faculty can demonstrate interprofessional collaboration by co-teaching a class session with a colleague from a school counseling or school psychology program. This joint session creates opportunities to discuss cooperative strategies for supporting emotional regulation and mental health in autistic females. Together, these experiences prepare candidates to build the relationships autistic female students depend on to thrive.

Strategy Snapshot: Returning to Dr. Woolf and Olivia

Recognizing that Maya's needs extended beyond Olivia's current training, Dr. Woolf called upon her university network to model interprofessional collaboration in action. She paired Olivia with Fatima, a pre-service school counselor completing a placement at the same school site, to create an interprofessional partnership in the field. Olivia crafted a student profile for Maya while Fatima collected resources on anxiety regulation. The two candidates then collaborated to merge their information, resulting in a co-designed, personalized action plan that Olivia could implement immediately. This interprofessional teamwork demonstrated that combining specialized knowledge creates a richer and more responsive support network for autistic female students.

CONCLUSION

Maya's narrative of unrecognized autism-related distress exemplifies a pervasive problem in K-12 settings: autistic female students whose needs remain invisible to even the most well-intentioned teachers. When special education teachers lack the specialized knowledge to identify the unique presentation of autism in females, they cannot provide the support necessary to prevent the anxiety, exhaustion, and school avoidance that threaten autistic females' academic engagement, mental health, and overall well-being. The SAGEWell framework gives teacher educators a research-informed response to this critical challenge. By organizing essential competencies into four action-based pillars, the framework translates research into practice in a way that is generalizable across a variety of teacher preparation programs and contexts.

Teacher educators hold a pivotal position in advancing the field's capacity to serve autistic female students. By supporting understanding of the female presentation of autism; advocating for equity in assessment and service provision; growing candidates' inclusive skills; and empowering collaboration with students, families, and professionals, special education faculty can prepare teachers capable of recognizing and addressing long-overlooked needs to enhance autistic female students' well-being.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jennifer M. Macko

Jennifer M. Macko, MAT, is an autistic researcher, instructor, and Ph.D. candidate in the Teacher Education and Learning Sciences program at North Carolina State University and a dual-licensed K-12 Special Education and K-6 Elementary Education teacher.

Jamie N. Pearson

Dr. Jamie N. Pearson is an Associate Professor of Special Education and Educational Equity in the Department of Teacher Education and Learning Sciences at North Carolina State University and the developer of FACES (Fostering Advocacy, Communication, Empowerment, and Support), an advocacy intervention for Black families raising autistic children.

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