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Identifying and disrupting ableism in educational systems to support transformation of teacher preparation and K-12 education

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Dissertation

IDENTIFYING AND DISRUPTING ABLEISM IN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS TO SUPPORT TRANSFORMATION OF TEACHER PREPARATION AND K–12 EDUCATION

by

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And we did it together. And what the 504 Sit-In did is it took all these people, D/deaf people and people with intellectual disabilities and learning disabilities and blind people. I mean, there was this really wide range of people. And we were all going, 'Well, I never heard that story before you, but I believe you, that's your experience of being locked up in a mental ward. I believe you that that's your experience in special ed. I believe you. We were witnessing each other's truths. We were giving each other 'I see you, and I believe you.'

—Corbett O'Toole, Crip Camp (2020)

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my fellow colleagues in the Boston University Graduate Workers Union (BUGWU). BUGWU's courageous fight for a fair and just contract that reflects and responds to the needs and lived experiences of graduate workers is not only historic—we are building a better BU together. Solidarity forever.

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IDENTIFYING AND DISRUPTING ABLEISM

IN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS TO SUPPORT TRANSFORMATION

OF TEACHER PREPARATION AND K–12 EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Ableism and other systems of oppression continue to be upheld and maintained in both university teacher preparation and K–12 schooling systems. Thus, there is an urgent need to examine and disrupt these oppressive forces and begin to (re)imagine teacher preparation and K–12 schooling so that disabled and multiply marginalized students and educators are supported, affirmed, and valued in their respective communities. Using TL Lewis (2022) definition of ableism and DisCrit Classroom Ecology as a conceptual framework for anti-ableism (Annamma & Morrison, 2018), this dissertation includes three papers focused on identifying and disrupting ableism in both systems. Chapter 1 introduces the aims of this dissertation, its conceptual framework, relevant literature, and the methodology of each paper. Chapter 2 is a critical qualitative research study that examined how self-contained special educators from one Northeastern school district reproduced and/or resisted ableism and white saviorism in their conversations about their working conditions. Chapter 3 is a community-based participatory research study where we examined the schooling experiences of eight disabled adults to inform recommendations for K–12 and teacher preparation. Chapter 4 is a conceptual essay

written with a practicing early elementary educator and four disabled educators. Together, we share how we developed and enacted curricula about positive conceptions of disability, anti-ableism, and disability histories with young learners. Finally, Chapter 5, provides future directions for research and practice that is rooted in criticality, community partnership, and justice.

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CHAPTER ONE – Introduction

Disabled people make up over 25% of the United States population (CDC, 2018); thus every school community is working, teaching, and learning alongside people with disabilities, whether it is realized or not (Mingus, 2017). Despite making up such a large proportion of the population, disabled and multiply marginalized people continue to experience serious harm, exclusion, and marginalization in schools (Annamma et al., 2013; Hehir, 2014; Mueller, 2021; Wong, 2022). Thus, disabled people navigate a deeply ableist education system that was built without their strengths and needs in mind. Disabled people are experts in their own lives, uniquely positioned to reveal these inequities and play a central role in making our world more just and equitable (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Wong, 2022).

Reflective of broader society, dominant educational systems continue to enact practices and approaches that often ignore the lived experiences of being disabled. In a world with ableism baked into its systems, structures, and policies, disabled students are commonly positioned as passive recipients in need of the expertise of a (nondisabled) professional expert in their school (Brantlinger, 2004; Connor & Gabel, 2013; Connor, 2020). This dynamic is further complicated by the reproduction of harmful binaries, which position disability as a deficit and problem to be fixed, with little to no attention to how it intersects with other interlocking systems of oppression (e.g., racism, classism, heterosexism, and more; Annamma et al., 2013; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Sins Invalid, 2019). In response, activists, educators, and scholars have both studied and strived to disrupt the ableism and oppression that has undergirded K–12 and higher

education settings (e.g., Annamma & Morrison, 2018; Erevelles & Minear, 2010; Mueller & Beneke, 2022; Siuty & Meyer, in review; Thompson, 2020).

Much of the research to date has explored how teacher education and K–12 education uphold and disrupt ableism (e.g., Beneke et al., 2022; Mueller, 2021; Siuty, 2019). Together, this work has served as both a reflection of the dominant status quo *and* a call to action to interrupt longstanding deficit perspectives that other and stigmatize disabled people in their schools. Thus, using extant scholarship as a grounding foundation, this dissertation argues that critical and action-based researchers must continue the urgent necessary work of identifying and actively disrupting these systems of oppression. If teacher preparation and K–12 schools are truly going to strive to be spaces that center and support the strengths and needs of disabled learners and educators, there must be a systematic and reflective evaluation of the status quo, so that there is movement toward a radical future where disabled and multiply marginalized people are embraced for being their full and complex selves.

As discussed above, anti-ableist and anti-oppressive scholarship and action has always been in motion (Hamraie et al., n.d.; Locke et al., 2022; Wong, 2020). Therefore, this dissertation is grounded in that prior work, using it as a foundational building block. There is much to be learned from the scholars, activists, and communities who are most impacted by ongoing systems of oppression (e.g., Disabled people color, LGBTQ+ people with disabilities and disability labels; Sins Invalid, 2019). As such, this dissertation drew on the work of researchers who have co-constructed and partnered with the communities in which they were conducting research. Collaborative approaches are

powerful and instructive because they help ensure that marginalized and multiply marginalized voices, perspectives, and insights are not misused, misinterpreted, or exploited (e.g., Hughes & Santinele Martino, 2023). A strong example is the work of the Rainbow Support Group (2023), a group of LGBTQ+ people with intellectual and developmental disabilities who partnered with Dr. Oscar Hughes during Hughes' doctoral training. Members of the Rainbow Support Group held powerful lived experiences that spoke to the ways in which LGBTQ+ people with disabilities are often marginalized, excluded, and erased from sexual education and many nondisabled support groups and LGBTQ+ communities. In response, they used community-based participatory action methods to develop and publish a guidebook that educators and community members can use to ensure they are centering and meeting the needs of people with disabilities who are LGBTQ+ (Rainbow Support Group, 2023).

Drawing on studies from school-based research, Beneke and colleagues (2022) enacted a critical and participatory qualitative study that also centered action and systemic change. In community with disabled and nondisabled educators, both the research team and participants, unpacked and examined how their school—including themselves—reproduced practices that privileged narrow conceptions of normalcy, ability, and whiteness. Once they recognized and troubled these practices, the participants developed accessible lessons for young learners using TL Lewis'(2022) definition of ableism as an anchor. This research, along with the work of Hughes and the Rainbow Support Group (2023), illustrates how research, when designed with action in mind, can be a powerful tool for systemic and structural change. I use this work as a foundation for

a dissertation that strives to understand and unmake practices that further oppress disabled and multiply marginalized students and educators in K–12 schools and teacher preparation programs.

Dissertation Aims

In this three-paper dissertation, I aimed to understand how ableism and ableist narratives undergird schooling, as well as identify ways for K–12 systems and teacher preparation programs to enact ant-ableist practices and curricula that center the strengths, lived experiences, and needs of people with disabilities. I focused on how ableism shows up in schools, because interrupting systemic and structural oppressions requires activists, educators, and researchers to deeply understand how it is manifesting in current schooling contexts. It is not just enough to know that ableism exists, they must deeply examine the way it manifests in their day-to-day lives.

To center disabled wisdom and disrupt the ways in which society marginalizes and harms those with disabilities, these three papers, respectively, aimed to: (Paper 1) critically analyze one educational context, (Paper 2) learn from those most impacted by ableism, and (Paper 3) engage in collective action toward anti-ableist practice. The first paper explored how self-contained special educators reproduced and resisted ableism and white saviorism when discussing their working conditions. The second paper used community-based participatory research methods (Israel et al., 2003) to explore disabled adults' past schooling experiences to help improve special education teacher preparation programs. The final paper was a co-constructed conceptual paper with a practicing early elementary educator and four disabled educators. Together, we drew on our experiences

developing and enacting curriculum and teaching about disability history, ableism, and access. All three papers were firmly grounded in critical frameworks and the lived experiences and practices of those currently or previously engaged in K–12 schooling as either learner or educators. It is my hope that these three papers can serve as a powerful example of why it is essential that educators and scholars listen and learn from disabled people and then act towards justice-oriented change.

Conceptual Framework: Ableism & Anti-Ableist Practice

To understand and work towards disrupting ableism and other systems of oppression in K–12 and teacher preparation systems, I ground these three papers in TL Lewis' (2022) definition of ableism and Drs. Annamma and Morrison's (2018) conceptualization of DisCrit Classroom Ecology. Developed in community with disabled people of color, Lewis' (2022) definition of ableism is intersectional and rooted in justice, whereas Annamma & Morrison (2018) provide a pedagogical framework for antiracist and anti-ableist praxis.

TL Lewis & Community's (2022) Definition of Ableism

Ableism is a pervasive and persistent system of oppression that is deeply engrained into the fabric of our communities and schools. For this dissertation, I am using a definition of ableism that was published by Talila "TL" Lewis' (2022):

> A system of assigning value to people's bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normalcy, productivity, desirability, intelligence, excellence, and fitness. These constructed ideas are deeply rooted in eugenics, anti-Blackness, misogyny, colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism. This systemic oppression

> leads to people and society determining people's value based on their culture, age, language, appearance, religion, birth or living place, "health/wellness", and/or their ability to satisfactorily re/produce, "excel" and "behave." You do not have to be disabled to experience ableism.

Ableism works together with other systems of oppression, drawing arbitrary but deeply consequential lines around who and what is so-called normal and worthy. Further, ableism upholds and is upheld by racism, capitalism, colonialism, cisheteropatriarchy, and more (Lewis, 2022). For example, racist and ableist scientists have used pseudoscience to falsely assert that Black and Brown people are intellectually inferior to white people, relying on ableist privileging of intelligence to justify racist enslavement, segregation, eugenics, and murder (Annamma et al., 2013; Schalk, 2022). Within an educational context, ability is racialized when children of color are disproportionately placed in special education and segregated placements (Annamma, 2018; Cruz et al., 2021; Hehir et al., 2014).

Lewis' (2022) definition of ableism rejects the notion that disability is a single identity marker, and that ableism exists in a vacuum (Annamma et al., 2013; Erevelles & Minear, 2010; Sins Invalid, 2019). Thus, practicing anti-ableism requires engaging with the disruption of intersecting oppressions (e.g., racism, colonialism, cisheteropatriarchy). Drawing on Disability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit),[1] I define anti-ableism as practices, policies, and actions that work to intentionally disrupt systems and structures that

[1] DisCrit (Annamma et al., 2013) provides scholars, educators, and activists a theoretical framework to examine the ways in which racism and ableism work together in mainstream society, systems, institutions, and individuals to uphold a status quo rooted in white supremacy.

privilege bodies and minds whose identity markers approximate what is so-called normal and valuable (e.g., white, nondisabled, neurotypical, cis straight men, English-speaking, Christian, and more; Annamma et al., 2013; Sins Invalid, 2019). Given that power to make decisions about disabled peoples' lives has been concentrated in the hands of nondisabled people, efforts to disrupt ableism must center the histories and lived experiences of disabled and multiply marginalized people, accessibility, and reciprocity and care (Annamma & Morrison, 2018; Annamma et al., 2023; Sins Invalid, 2019).

Anti-Ableist Practice: DisCrit & DisCrit Classroom Ecology

For this dissertation, I anchor anti-ableist practice in broader DisCrit praxis (Annamma et al., 2013) and DisCrit Classroom Ecology (Annamma & Morrison, 2018). DisCrit as praxis seeks to examine and disrupt how schools uphold and maintain racism, ableism, and other interconnected oppressions (Annamma et al., 2013). DisCrit Classroom Ecology is one example of such praxis. Building on the existing constellation of culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogy (e.g., Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012), it provides educators with an intersectional framework (Crenshaw, 1991) that centers how ableism works in tandem with racism and other systems of oppression. Rooted in resistance to white supremacy and the systemic and structural marginalization of disabled students of color, DisCrit Classroom Ecology empowers educators to enact three constructs: (1) DisCrit Curriculum, (2) DisCrit Pedagogy, and (3) DisCrit Solidarity.

DisCrit Curriculum privileges instructional content and materials that meaningfully center the histories, lived experiences, and contributions of multiply

marginalized and disabled people throughout history (Annamma & Morrison, 2018). This construct pushes back on an educational status quo that has erased these histories, lived experiences, and contributions in dominant classrooms. Educators and students are encouraged to teach and learn about how multiply marginalized people with disabilities and their communities have been leaders and drivers of justice movements (Annamma & Morrison, 2018). Not to be confused with racialized trauma or inspiration porn (Schalk, 2021; Young, 2014), DisCrit Curriculum is about (re)claiming these histories and holding space for how multiply marginalized people and communities have engaged in resistance, justice, *and* joy (Annamma & Morrison, 2018).

DisCrit Pedagogy is focused on building and sustaining classroom spaces and instructional practices that privilege the assets, wisdom, and access needs of multiply marginalized students with disabilities (Annamma & Morrison, 2018). Within this construct, educators (re)imagine the craft and practice of teaching and ground it in approaches that empower multiply marginalized and disabled students to be their authentic selves, giving them the space and tools to bring their knowledge and lived experiences into the classroom community. Teachers consider frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning (Rose & Meyer, 2002) and integrate it with practices that build students' critical consciousness, cultural competency, and academic growth (Annamma & Morrison, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Waitoller & Thorius, 2016).

Finally, DisCrit Solidarity is the formation of deep and authentic partnerships between educators and students (Annamma & Handy, 2019). Rooted in collective care, trust, and reciprocity (Sins Invalid, 2019), educators build strong relationships with

multiply marginalized and disabled students so they can work together to disrupt ableism, racism, and other systemic oppressions. Importantly, DisCrit Solidarity rejects deficit-perspectives about behavior, reframing it as a valuable form of resistance that can be leveraged to dismantle and disrupt oppressive systems and structures (Annamma & Handy, 2019; Annamma & Morrison, 2018).

Ableism and Anti-Ableist Practice in Teacher Preparation and K–12 Schools

This dissertation focused on two intertwined educational systems: university teacher preparation programs and K–12 schools. Teacher preparation programs train students to become licensed public-school educators who can design, enact, and reflect on instruction within an elementary, middle, and/or high school context. This training, however, is connected to a broader sociopolitical landscape that often upholds narrow and rigid standards related to teacher licensure (e.g., certification exams, siloed and linear professional standards; Beneke & Love, 2022; Love & Hancock, 2022). I argue that this common entry point to teaching, and the fact that ableism and other interrelated oppressions continue to persist, means that teacher preparation has a responsibility to provide educators with coursework, fieldwork, and mentorship that is rooted in anti-ableism and anti-oppression (Ashby, 2012; Lutkins et al., 2023; Zepp et al., 2022). In the section that follows, I will use my conceptual framework as a lens to review extant literature that has explored ableism and anti-ableism in teacher preparation and K–12 schooling.

Ableism and Anti-Ableism in Teacher Preparation

Understanding how ableism manifests in teacher preparation, and ways to disrupt

it, requires one to consider its historical origins. Originally named “normal schools,” colleges and universities’ educator training programs were built and designed to give future teachers the skills and tools needed to ensure that their students’ acquiesced to narrow academic and social norms (Silverman, 2023). For example, schools have often been used as a tool for ensuring white colonial assimilation, all while ensuring that the dominant social hierarchy is maintained (Annamma, Boelé et al., 2013; Anyon, 1981; Aronson, 2017; Meiners, 2022). Those that could not conform were labeled, segregated, and in some instances institutionalized or incarcerated (Annamma, Boelé et al., 2013; Erevelles & Minear, 2010). Though much has changed since the early beginnings of teacher training and public schooling, including legal mandates that prohibit barring disabled students from enrolling in public schools (Shapiro, 1994), disabled and multiply marginalized people continue to experience significant ableism in teacher preparation (Silverman, 2003). From narrow and disability-evasive curricula to rigid pedagogical approaches (Beneke & Love, 2022; Kulkarni et al., 2021; Love & Hancock, 2022), teacher preparation continues to reproduce and maintain ableism (e.g., Siuty, 2019; Strimel, Nagro et al., 2023).

A growing body of scholarship has explored how disabled teacher candidates experienced their programs (see Strimel, Nagro, et al., 2023 for a review). Despite the assets, strengths, and knowledge that disabled teacher candidates *already* bring to educational spaces (Anderson, 2006; Jacobs et al., 2021; Pritchard, 201), extant literature has found that disabled teacher candidates often experience stigma and inaccessible coursework and field placements (e.g., Strimel, Nagro, et al., 2023). Disabled teacher

candidates have reported a need to hide, mask,[2] or prove that their disability would not impede their ability to enact high quality pedagogy and instruction (Csoli & Gallagher, 2012; Jacobs et al., 2021; Riddick, 2003; Siuty & Beneke, 2020; Siuty & Meyer, in review). For example, in one critical qualitative study that engaged four disabled and multiply marginalized teacher candidates in a series of culture circles (Freire, 2000; Souto-Manning 2010; 2019), one participant described feeling like he needed to engage in deficit focused conversations about students so that he could live up to neurotypical expectations of his cooperating teachers (Siuty & Meyer, in review). The pressure he felt to conform and acquiesce to nondisabled and neurotypical norms aligned with other research where disabled teacher candidates engaged in undue and invisible labor, while also having to navigate the harm and stigma of feeling like their disability is shameful (Siuty & Beneke, 2020). Together, this body of work revealed a broader consequence of ableism, reproducing the idea that a "good teacher" is synonymous with being nondisabled and neurotypical (Siuty & Meyer, in review).

Critical scholars have also examined how teacher preparation has been shaped by dominant norms, policies, and practices that reproduce systems of privilege for those who are positioned at or in close proximity to dominant identity markers (e.g., nondisabled, white, English speaking, cisgender; Kulkarni et al., 2021; Love & Hancock, 2022; Siuty, 2019). Further, this work has revealed that educators across teacher preparation and K–12, must do more than recognize these dominant systems, they must also actively disrupt

[2] Masking refers to the extra labor and burden many autistic people take on to conceal or hide aspects of why they are. This often leads to burnout and negative self-perceptions of their disabled identities (Higgins et al., 2021; Raymaker et al., 2020).

them. Siuty (2019) conducted a critical qualitative study of four recently graduated teacher candidates. To understand how critical disability theories from their coursework shaped their teacher identities and practices, she reviewed course syllabi, observed at school sites, and interviewed participants. She found that participants engaged in a "partial interruption in their conceptions of dominant ideologies." (p. 46). Participants' oscillation between critical resistance *and* acceptance of deficit perceptions and practices, strongly suggested that teacher preparation programs must integrate more consistent opportunities for teacher candidates to apply critical lenses towards their own practices, positionalities, and identities. Through focusing on criticality as it relates to social structures *and* the self, educators can begin to think about the ways in which they are shaped by mainstream sociocultural forces that uphold ableism and then strive to resist and disrupt them in their own practice (Siuty, 2019).

Together, the literature strongly demonstrates that ableism continues to be baked into the fabric of teacher preparation. Thus, there is an urgent need for teacher preparation to simultaneously reconcile with its curricula, practices, and approaches to supporting disabled and multiply marginalized teacher candidates (Love & Hancock, 2020). Again, using DisCrit and DisCrit Classroom Ecology as foundations, this dissertation aimed to explore how teacher preparation programs can begin to build toward a more anti-ableist and anti-oppressive future that is reflective of and responsive to the strengths, wisdom, and needs of disabled and multiply marginalized people.

Ableism and Anti-Ableism in K–12 Schools

Many educators, researchers, and activists have used DisCrit as a lens to empirically explore how ableism and other systems of oppressions manifest in schools. In a mixed methods study, Hehir et al. (2014) found that rates of inclusion and graduation for students with disabilities in Massachusetts largely varied by their ethnoracial identities. They found that inclusive placements were associated with higher student achievement scores and graduation rates, yet Black and Latine high school students were three times more likely to be educated in self-contained classrooms than their white peers (Hehir et al., 2014). Hehir and colleague's (2014) findings spoke to a longstanding duality in special education, forcefully articulated by Artiles (2011): Those with proximity to whiteness were the most likely to experience special education as a pathway to access and support, while those with racialized identities were the most likely to experience it as a pathway to exclusion and limited opportunity.

Other scholars have explored how racism and ableism work in tandem to shape students' experiences with school discipline (Annamma, 2018; Cruz et al., 2021; Erevelles & Minear, 2010). Cruz et al. (2021) used DisCrit and critical quantitative methods to explore how punitive discipline is shaped by the intersecting positioning of race and ability in schools. They found that, when compared to the rest of the student body, Black students who qualified for special education were four times more likely to be suspended. Together, this research revealed deep inequities for students of color with disabilities and illustrated an urgent need for action-based research that is committed to disrupting these injustices.

This constellation of work has revealed how ableism, racism, and other systems of oppressions persist in our K–12 schools; in response, critical scholars have illustrated how researchers, educators, students, and community members are engaged in deep work to build more anti-oppressive and just schools (e.g., Beneke, Machado, Taitingfong, 2022; Hancock et al., 2021; Kulkarni & Chong, 2020; Locke et al., 2022). In a critical study using composite counternarrative methods, Locke and colleagues (2022) explored how early elementary educators' classroom practices aligned with DisCrit Classroom Ecology. They found that critical and emancipatory curricula and pedagogy must provide multiply marginalized educators and students meaningful opportunities to bring their identities, home and community practices, and brilliance into their classrooms. They found that linking multiply marginalized students' own experiences and histories with the very systems of oppressions that educators are striving to dismantle can support students' critical consciousness and facilitate a deep sense of belonging and inclusion in their classroom spaces.

Scholars have also used DisCrit to resist traditional and punitive behavior management systems (Annamma & Handy, 2019). They have conducted research to capture how educators of color have (re)imagined classroom culture and climate in their own practice (e.g., Kulkarni & Chong, 2020; Siuty & Atwood, 2022). For example, Drs. Kulkarni and Chong (2020) explored the experiences of two teachers of color enacting restorative justice practices (RJPs) in their elementary classrooms. They found that, while both educators were deeply committed to RJPs and reported that it provided them the tools and space to honor and affirm students' voices and needs, they struggled to fully

enact it due to structural and systemic barriers in their school (e.g., lack of time and resources). In another study, Siuty and Atwood (2022) used DisCrit Classroom Ecology and Positioning Theory to explore how a Black woman special educator resisted ableism and racism in her own practice. In the self-contained setting where she taught, she pushed back on oppressive norms and schools structures that pathologized, surveilled, and erased the strengths and needs of her students. For example, by implementing breaks during the day, she provided students opportunities to meet their needs (e.g., use the restroom) and explore interests and build relationships with each other. Both studies importantly shed light on how educators are engaging and enacting promising anti-ableist and antiracist practice. In fact, they are doing so in school contexts with many institutional and structural barriers.

Finally, scholars have also explored how teachers can employ critical and asset-based frameworks to support disabled students' academic growth (e.g., Ferrell, 2021; Lewis, 2014; Waitoller & King Thorius, 2016). Striving to disrupt how traditional special education often positions instruction as apolitical and neutral (e.g., Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011), Ferrell (2021) developed a model that intertwined critical literacy with strategy instruction (e.g., mnemonic strategies). In a qualitative case study, Ferrell (2021) examined instructional sessions with three girls of color receiving special education services. During one-on-one lessons where she used mnemonic strategies to support participants' critical thinking about how power, privilege, and oppression showed up in each text, she found students expressing deep insights as she reproduced hegemonic systems of power. Though participants demonstrated a nuanced and complex

understanding of the texts, Ferrell found that she (the white educator) often dominated with heavy teacher talk and the authority to determine what responses are "right." Aligned with Beneke et al. (2022), Ferrell's (2021) findings have illustrated how critical and emancipatory practices and aspirations do not live in a vacuum. To meaningfully enact anti-oppressive pedagogy, educators must reflect on *what* and *how* they are teaching, as well as how they are shaped by their identities and positioning in a deeply stratified world.

Together, the body of literature that has examined K–12 and teacher preparation has revealed both a stark status quo *and* great promise for the future. Ableism and other systems of oppression continue to privilege those positioned at, or in proximity to, what is considered "normal" (e.g., white, nondisabled, cisgender, English speaking; Lewis, 2022). However, people and communities—particularly those living at the nexus of such oppressions—have actively resisted this oppressive status quo, striving to (re)build educational spaces that embody justice and affirmation for all bodies and minds (Annamma & Morrison, 2018). To build on this promising scholarship, this dissertation aims to provide insights, implications, and practices for how those within these systems can continue to transform both K–12 and teacher preparation.

Introduction to Methodology

Broadly situated within my conceptual framework, the first two articles of this three-paper dissertation were qualitative analyses: the first was a critical analysis and the second was a community-based participatory research study (CBPR). The final article was a conceptual essay rooted in critical praxis. In the first article (Chapter 2), my

research team and I analyzed teachers' conversations about their working conditions to uncover how ableism and white saviorism manifested in their discussions about their working conditions. In the next article (Chapter 3), in partnership with a community advisory board, we centered the experience and wisdom of disabled people to give K–12 systems and teacher preparation programs insight into how to better prepare educators and teacher candidates to enact anti-ableist practices in schools. Finally, using DisCrit Classroom Ecology as framework, the third article (Chapter 4) provided practicing teachers with practices and examples for how to integrate disability history and anti-ableist pedagogy in their own classrooms. In the next section, I briefly introduce the theoretical frameworks and methodologies that undergirded each paper.

Individual Papers

Paper 1: Critical Discourses About Care Work in Self-Contained Special Education Classrooms

The first study linked extant scholarship that has explored how white saviorism and ableism pervade our educational systems (e.g., Aronson, 2017; Bettini, Meyer, & Stark, 2024; Meiners, 2002) with empirical research that has examined the challenging working conditions that many self-contained special educators experience in their school contexts (e.g., Bettini, Crockett et al., 2016; Stark et al., 2023). As a construct that has continued to undergird US schooling since its founding, we were interested in putting white saviorism in conversation with the challenging working conditions of many self-contained special educators. We grounded our analysis in the assumption that the discourses teachers engage in cannot be divorced from the sociohistorical forces that

undergird how they have understood teaching and learning. Therefore, we drew on the white savior archetype (Aronson, 2017; Meiners, 2002), and TL Lewis' (2022) definition of ableism to answer the following research question: *When talking about their working condition, how do self-contained special educators reproduce and/or resist exploitative discourses about labor?*

In our study, we conducted a thematic analysis of self-contained special educators' discussions about their working conditions (Braun & Clark, 2006). Findings from this study guided our recommendations to teacher educators and K–12 leaders. We provided prompts and potential points of resistance that can be used to disrupt and trouble discourses rooted in white saviorism and ableism. Together, our findings and implications for practice can be used to prepare a future and current teacher workforce to interrogate ableist cultural scripts rooted in saviorism.

Paper 2: Raising the Voices of Disabled People to Help Transform K–12 and Teacher Preparation Systems

The second study of my dissertation used community-based participatory research methods (Israel et al., 2003) to build on existing work that centers the voices, perspectives, and wisdom of disabled people to help shape research and enact systemic and structural change (e.g., Hughes & Santinele Martino, 2023). Using a participatory research design, this study positioned disabled people's lived experience as vitally important for transforming special education. In partnership with a community advisory board of disabled adults, we used interviews with adults with disabilities and disability labels, to learn about their schooling experiences. After examining plain language

summaries and analyzing excerpts from interviews, we searched for themes and recommendations that would help guide improvements to K–12 and special education teacher preparation programs. We concluded with implications for K–12 and teacher preparation. Privileging disabled people as valuable experts of special education, this study intended to push K–12 and teacher preparation systems to better align with the strengths, needs, and lived experiences of those most impacted by special education.

Paper 3: Creating and Holding Space to Celebrate Disability Histories & Disabled Communities in Early Childhood Classrooms

The final article of my dissertation was co-constructed with an elementary educator (Author 2) and four disabled educators (Authors 3–6). A conceptual essay written for early elementary practitioners who are curious and/or committed to enacting anti-ableist pedagogy and practices, we drew on our experiences building and enacting curricula about disability histories, accessibility, and positive conceptions of disability identity. Our work aimed to respond to disability justice organizers, critical educators, and scholars who have long written and spoken about school-based curricula's failure to meaningfully center disability as an identity with rich and ongoing histories (Mueller, 2021; Mueller & Beneke, 2022; Thompson, 2020). As such, we shared our individual and collaborative experiences teaching disabled and nondisabled children about disability history, ableism, and access. We asserted that when educators teach about disability as something worth affirming, celebrating, and honoring, they are building toward a more just world where every body and mind is valuable.

Our article includes three sections. First, we provided a brief of review of how

traditional K–12 schooling has upheld narrow conceptions of what is so-called normal, and how this has reproduced ableism, racism, and other systems of oppression (e.g., Annamma & Morrison, 2018; Mueller & Beneke, 2022; Thompson, 2020). We followed this with a discussion of how disabled activists, scholars, and allies have disrupted this status quo. Next, using DisCrit Classroom Ecology (Annamma & Morrison, 2018) as a frame and drawing on examples from our own practice, we described how disability history and anti-oppressive classroom practices can be an anchor for enacting asset-based pedagogies and fostering a strong sense of belonging for disabled, neurodivergent, and multiply marginalized children (e.g., Annamma et al., 2023; Annamma & Morrison, 2018; Waitoller & Thorius, 2016). Finally, we concluded with ongoing wonderings and a call to action for school administrators and district leaders to support educators, students, and families materially and intellectually as they take on this work.

CHAPTER TWO – Critical Analysis of Discourses About Care Work in Self-Contained Special Education Classrooms

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Teachers' working conditions are students' learning conditions.

- Hirsch et al., 2007, p. 1

Introduction

Hirsch et al.'s (2007) powerful assertion has been supported by countless educators, scholars, and community members whose research demonstrates that students are better served when their teachers are better supported. Together, their activism and scholarship push back on mainstream narratives that attempt to silo and pit teachers and students' working and learning conditions against one another (e.g., Billingsley et al., 2020; Billingsley et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2012; Kraft & Papay, 2014; Lipman, 2017; McAlevey, 2016; Ronfeldt et al., 2015; Wei et al., 2008). Instead, within schools' interdependent social ecosystems, working and learning conditions are interconnected. All community members (including teachers and students) are impacted by conditions that constrain teachers' ability to enact high quality instruction and support students' academic growth (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Master et al., 2013).

In special education in particular, teachers' working conditions often constrain their capacity to meaningfully support disabled students. Though special education was created to protect, affirm, and meet the needs of students with disabilities, educators working within this system are more likely to experience high demands with inadequate access to curricula, protected planning time, and social supports from colleagues and administrators (Bettini, Jones et al., 2017; Billingsley et al., 2020; O'Brien et al., 2019; Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977). Unfortunately, these poor working conditions have persisted since the passage of the first law mandating educational protections and services for

students with disabilities (Billingsley et al., 2019; Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977).

To be clear, poor and challenging working conditions in special education are not due to students with disabilities (Cokley, 2020; Métraux, 2022). Instead, special education, and schools more broadly, privilege those who meet dominant identity markers (e.g., white, nondisabled, cisgender, straight), providing more resources to these students and hence to their teachers (Annamma et al., 2013, Baglieri et al., 2011). As schools (re)invest in oppressive norms, policies, and practices, they also reproduce inequitable conditions for marginalized and multiply marginalized teachers and students (Mason-Williams et al., 2022).

Building on evidence that teachers' working conditions impact students' learning conditions, we assert that it is essential to consider the ways ableist norms, structures, and systems are reproduced for both educators and students. A system of oppression, ableism upholds and values conceptions of normalcy that are conflated with dominant markers (Lewis, 2022). Moreover, because ableism intersects with racism, cisheterosexism, classism, and more, it is vital to unpack how educators' working conditions are intertwined with these systems. In the sections that follow, we will briefly review studies that have examined special educators' working conditions, as well as literature that has used white supremacy and saviorism to analyze educators' work.

Special Educators' Working Conditions

Working conditions are the demands placed on educators, as well as the social and logistical resources provided to help them meet those demands (Billingsley et al., 2020). For example, special educators are expected to modify and deliver accessible

instruction to students who qualify for services (demands), yet many special educators lack both planning time and access to curricula (resources; Siuty et al., 2018). As a result, teachers and students are impacted. Without sufficient resources, teachers struggle to enact high quality instruction, deeply impacting their students' learning and academic growth (Bettini et al., 2016; Mathews et al., 2021; Leko et al., 2018).

Although special educators' working conditions impact all teachers and students, poor working conditions are more likely to manifest in schools that serve a high number of students who are marginalized based on race, class, and disability labels (Bettini et al., 2022; Fall & Billingsley, 2011). Fall and Billingsley (2011) found that, compared to low-poverty districts, special educators in high-poverty districts experienced poorer social supports from administrators and their colleagues. Their findings align with broader research that has shown teachers who work in schools that serve a high number of Black, Brown, low-income, and disabled students are more likely to experience negative working conditions than those working in schools with a more privileged student body (e.g., Bettini, Nguyen et al., 2022; Mason-Williams et al., 2022; Boyd et al., 2011; Johnson et al., 2012).

Research examining special educators' working conditions is clear and instructive: those who teach students who are multiply marginalized are likely to navigate high demands without adequate resources to meet those demands (Mason-Williams et al., 2022). With insufficient time and resources, special educators must work harder to compensate for the lack of those supports (Bettini, Wang et al., 2019). When teachers must work outside of school hours and work through the school day without a break or

without resources, they often sacrifice their personal needs and time to meet the demands of the job (Miesner, 2022). We argue that these conditions shape how teachers conceptualize their roles as educators, as well as how students experience teaching and learning. Thus, in the next section we review literature that examines how mainstream society equates "good teaching" with saviorism and how this harms both teachers and students.

White Saviorism in K–12 Education

Teaching is a paid form of care work, in which teachers are deeply engaged in complex social interactions and activities (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). Educators partner with students and families to guide, support, and advocate throughout their formal schooling (Warin & Ganerud, 2014). Their work is deeply shaped by invisible and endemic social and cultural scripts that are rooted in a mainstream status quo (Meiners, 2002). This status quo is entrenched in a long and ongoing history wherein educational systems privilege and reproduce whiteness, colonialism, and cisheteropatriarchy at structural and systemic levels (Annamma et al., 2013; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Miesner, 2002). In other words, teaching reflects dominant society's values, practices, and policies, all of which tend to honor people and communities who can approximate or acquiesce to white, Eurocentric, cisgender, straight, and English-speaking norms. Further, when students do not meet these dominant markers, they are often forced to take their place in a racialized hierarchy that violently erases and devalues their home and community practices. For example, Native and Indigenous children were sent to boarding schools, resulting in the violent erasure of their

home and community practices. This violence and cultural erasure was enacted to force Native and Indigenous communities to assimilate and acquiesces to whiteness (Woolford, 2015). Shaped by a broader culture invested in white supremacy and assimilation, teachers often engage in a type of work that strives to "save" and assimilate students who deviate from dominant norms.

Historically, society has constructed a narrow and gendered conception of teaching, rooting this conception in whiteness, colonialism, and sexism (D'Amico, 2017; Harper, 2000; Meiners, 2002). As public schools became more widespread in the United States, white women—before they marry and have children themselves—were often expected to use their so-called maternal instincts to care for school aged children (D'Amico, 2017). While misogyny prevented them from being seen as skilled educators, their whiteness was used to maintain the racist belief that they possessed moral superiority which could be imposed on children to their benefit (D'Amico, 2017; Meiners, 2002). This presumed moral superiority is deeply rooted in colonial logics, wherein Black, Brown, and Indigenous people are positioned as immoral and "uncivilized" (Harper, 2000, p. 131), thus creating a racialized binary where the "the white lady teacher is charged, implicitly, with colonizing her 'native' students and molding them into good citizens of the republic" (Meiners, 2002, p. 87).

To date, many critical scholars have examined how the white savior narrative is maintained and sustained in mainstream society. Recognizing how popular culture and media shape, and are shaped by, dominant values and beliefs, scholars have examined the white savior complex in television and film about teaching. Aronson (2017), for example,

analyzed how the presentation of the teacher, Erin Gruwell, in *Freedom Writers* perpetuates the false belief that white teachers are the "chosen ones" who can save children of color through their strong work ethic, creative teaching methods, enthusiasm, and dedication. Importantly, Aronson (2017) also unpacked how the white savior trope obscures policies that create and maintain macro-level barriers and injustices in the education system (e.g., economic austerity), instead reframing the problem as the learner and community (e.g., unmotivated student, "at-risk" population). In this analysis, we use white saviorism and ableism as lenses[3] to examine how teachers talk about their working conditions.

Study Purpose

U.S. schools are becoming more diverse across race, class, and disability, yet the special education workforce is overwhelmingly comprised of white nondisabled women (Billingsley et al., 2019; Loeppky, 2021; Mueller, 2021). The whiteness of our field is also rooted in classist and sexist conceptions of teaching (D'Amico, 2017). Historically positioned as an unskilled "calling" for cisgender nondisabled women to save and assimilate children to white Eurocentric norms (Aronson, 2017; Meiners, 2002), these assumptions and values persist today in K–12 classrooms (Bettini, Meyer, & Stark, 2024). Consequently, students, particularly those who are multiply marginalized, are incorrectly perceived as passive, deficient, and non-agentic (Annamma et al., 2013;

[3] At the final stages of writing this manuscript, Siuty et al. (2024) published a meta-ethnography where they conceptualized white ability saviorism to examine the ways in which white saviorism and ableism manifested in qualitative literature about teacher preparation. While we could not use this in the construction of our conceptual framework because of the timing this study relative to the publication of their paper, we want to recognize it as a critical contribution to the literature about white saviorism and ableism in educational systems.

Brantlinger, 2004). Educators are also held to unsustainable and inhumane working conditions under the guise that sacrifice and overwork are synonymous with "good teaching" (Bettini, Meyer, & Stark, 2024).

Self-contained educators who serve students labeled with emotional and behavioral disabilities (EBD) experience especially challenging working conditions as divestment from this disproportionately Black and Brown student population means that these special educators are more likely to lack resources and social support than their colleagues working outside of self-contained settings (Bettini, Brunsting et al., 2022; O'Brien et al., 2019). These poorer working conditions cannot be decontextualized from past and present histories where Black and Brown students labeled with EBD have been pathologized, criminalized, and segregated in schools (Annamma, 2018). As students experience oppression at the nexus of ableism and racism (Annamma et al., 2013; Erevelles & Minear, 2010), learning and working conditions are negatively impacted. In other words, both students and educators are expected to overcome the reality that they lack the necessary resources and supports to learn, grown, and teach (Mason-Williams et al., 2022). Thus, this study examines how self-contained teachers talk about their working conditions and the degree to which they reproduce or resist discourses rooted in white saviorism and ableism.

Research Question

When talking about their working conditions, how do self-contained special educators reproduce and/or resist exploitative discourses about labor?

Conceptual Framework

To define how special educators reproduce and/or resist exploitative discourses about labor, we constructed a conceptual framework that brings together white saviorism (Aronson, 2017; Meiners, 2002) and ableism (Lewis, 2022). As discussed in our literature review, white saviorism is a construct that has undergirded K–12 education for as long as schools have existed in the United States. Drawing on colonial logics wherein indigenous, Black, and Brown learners are seen as deficient and needy, white women educators are called to use their perceived maternal goodwill to fix, remediate, and save the students they teach, ensuring that they have tools and skills typically associated with whiteness (Aronson, 2017; Meiners, 2002). This discourse harms both educators and learners. Students' strengths, lived experiences, and their home and community practices, are erased and/or positioned as a problem with which to be dealt. The teacher then must give everything she has, often ignoring or suppressing her own physical, emotional, and mental needs—for the purported good of the children. Moreover, white saviorism cannot be divorced from how mainstream educational systems, including special education, have positioned students with disabilities and disability labels as in need of remediation, fixing, and intervention.

To center how educational systems reproduce both saviorism *and* the marginalization of disabled people, we included TL Lewis' (2022) definition of ableism in our conceptual framework:

> A system of assigning value to people's bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normalcy, productivity, desirability, intelligence, excellence,

> and fitness. These constructed ideas are deeply rooted in eugenics, anti-Blackness, misogyny, colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism. This systemic oppression leads to people and society determining people's value based on their culture, age, language, appearance, religion, birth or living place, "health/wellness", and/or their ability to satisfactorily re/produce, "excel" and "behave." You do not have to be disabled to experience ableism.

In this definition, Lewis' communal definition (2022) situates ableism in a broader constellation of oppressions, which all aim to disempower and marginalize bodies and minds that deviate from mainstream conceptions of what is considered so-called "normal." Specifically, ableism is an interlocking system of oppression that devalues, harms, and excludes those who deviate and fail to conform to white, nondisabled, neurotypical, English speaking, cis, and wealthy norms. As such, we systematically examined our data set to uncover how participants reproduced and/or resisted narratives rooted in white saviorism and ableism, two systems that we believe work in tandem with one another to uphold an oppressive status quo.

Methods

Because our research question was rooted in criticality and aimed to uncover the ways educators reproduce and/or resist narratives rooted in ableism and saviorism, we engaged in a collaborative thematic analysis that included both deductive and inductive approaches. Importantly, as educators committed to anti-oppression and justice, we aimed to focus this analysis on the ways in which systems and structures perpetuate or disrupt said narratives. In other words, this study was not about naming or labeling

individual participants as saviors or ableist educators. Instead, we strove to make visible the ways in which cultural scripts and narratives undergird educators' conceptions of K–12 working and learning conditions. As such, we first describe our positioning as it relates to this study, and then discuss data collection, participants and context, and analytic methods.

Researchers' Positioning

Throughout this study, we drew from Drs. Boveda and Annamma's (2023) call for moving beyond static researcher positionality statements. As a multiracial research team with both disabled and nondisabled identities, we consistently examined our own sociocultural backgrounds, lived experiences, and professional positioning within the academy and how it shaped and influenced our analysis. For example, centering our own unlearning journeys, we discussed the ways in which we have complicitly reproduced saviorism and ableism in our own practices, as well as the ways in which we have strove to disrupt it.

As educators with experience teaching in K–12 contexts as well as supporting learners labeled with EBD, we were keenly aware of the ways in which poor working conditions are normalized for special educators. We are also scholars who are committed to antiracist and anti-oppressive practices, so it was important that we did not ignore the ways in which white supremacy pervades all mainstream spaces in the United States, including schools. As such, our analysis embraced a both/and approach where we kept two truths in mind: educators have a fundamental right to supportive working conditions *and* ableism and racism is endemic to K–12 schooling and must be disrupted. We had

ongoing conversations about how to balance empathy for systemic and structural barriers that impede supportive teaching and learning conditions with a critical perspective that recognizes that all educators need to engage in deep unlearning and interrogation of oppressive narratives and cultural scripts that undergird our educational systems.

Finally, since our participant pool was entirely white and nondisabled, it was important to interrogate how whiteness and nondisabled norms and experiences pervaded our sample. For example, we have had many conversations around what it means to unpack and call out statements that reproduce harmful and oppressive narratives about working conditions and students labeled with EBD. In our discussions, we navigated tensions between naming ways in which individuals were reinforcing harmful and oppressive narratives as well as the ways in which those narratives are connected to systems and structures that privilege white saviorism and ableism. Therefore, to ensure that our criticality is not misunderstood as punitive shaming or calling out singular actors, we have consistently compared our codes and themes against our conceptual framework to ensure that we have meaningfully interrogated how racism and ableism work together to uphold a status quo that continues to benefit and reward those in proximity to white, nondisabled, cishet identity markers.

Participants & Context

Our sample was part of a larger study focused on improving the working conditions of self-contained teachers who work with students labeled with EBD. Though the larger study included three districts, we selected one district for our analysis so that we could examine their specific contexts and norms. The included district was a

convenience sample, and participants were notified about the study through the district's special education director. The director sent an email, which was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board, to all eligible special educators (i.e., self-contained teachers who serve students labeled with EBD). Educators who were interested in voluntarily participating in the study emailed Author 4.

Participants all worked in an urban district in the Northeast United States that serves over 5,500 students. While the educator workforce in this district was overwhelmingly white (86.6%), over 60% of the student body were students of color and/or Hispanic.[4] Nearly 60% of students' first language was not English, with just under 25% qualifying as English Language Learners. Seventeen percent of students qualified for special education supports and services.

Our participant sample included educators who worked in a self-contained classroom of students labeled with EBD. As previously discussed, all teachers included in this analysis were white and nondisabled. Eight participants were women and three were men. Please see Table 2.1 for a complete breakdown of participants' roles, schools, and sociocultural identities.

[4] We differentiated Hispanic to acknowledge the ways in which race and ethnicity intersect with racialized identities. For example, people who are Hispanic can be people of color and they can also be white.

Table 2.1. Study Participants from Hendrickson School District

Name	Job Title	School	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Disability Identity
Abby	Special Educator	High School	Woman	white	Nondisabled
Anna	BCBA	High School	Woman	white	Nondisabled
Monica	School Counselor	High School	Woman	white	Nondisabled
CA	Special Educator & Interventionist	Middle School	Man	white	Nondisabled
Tom	IEP Team Facilitator	Middle School	Man	Not reported	Nondisabled
Korgoth	Special Educator	Middle School	Man	white	Nondisabled
Wendy	Special Educator	Middle School	Woman	white	Nondisabled
Daisy	Special Educator	Elementary School	Woman	white	Nondisabled
Lisa	Special Educator	Elementary School	Woman	white	Nondisabled
Meg	Special Educator	Elementary School	Woman	white	Nondisabled
Carly	School Counselor	Elementary School	Woman	white	Nondisabled

Note. Names are all pseudonyms. Participants were given the option to choose their own pseudonyms, though some declined to do so, in which case, we selected pseudonyms for them.

Data Collection

This qualitative study engaged 11 educators and related service providers, all of whom worked in a self-contained classroom for students labeled with EBD (see Table 2.1). Part of a larger study funded by an Institute of Education Sciences grant to improve educators' working conditions, participants were grouped by school building and level (i.e., elementary, middle, and high school). Participants engaged in focus groups where they responded to questions about their working conditions, as well as how feasible and important structural and systemic changes would be in their school. Each session was structured with opened ended questions about the participants' working conditions and was followed by a presentation from the principal investigator (Author 4). In this presentation, the PI reviewed extant research about supportive working conditions in self-contained settings. After the presentation, participants were invited to rate the importance and feasibility of changing their working conditions. The working conditions they rated were grounded in empirical research about self-contained educators' working conditions (Mathews et al., 2021) and included:

1. Investing in strong teaching partners who can co-lead your school's program.
2. Commit to protecting teachers' daily planning and instruction time.
3. Provide access to strong curricular resources.
4. Create systems that allow for homogenous instructional grouping.
5. Develop a collaborative partnership between administration, teachers, & paraprofessionals that ensures adequate training and support for paraprofessionals.

Three separate focus groups were held at three schools (one at an elementary, middle, and high school, respectively). Author 4 facilitated each focus group and sessions ranged from 45 minutes to 2 hours long. All transcripts were cleaned, deidentified, and transcribed by an undergraduate research assistant for team analysis. Please see appendix A for our focus group protocol.

Importantly, focus groups were not originally developed or implemented for the purposes of this analysis. Instead, Author 1 and Author 4 observed that issues related to white saviorism and ableism were naturally unearthed in the conversations participants were having with each other about their working conditions. After revisiting the data and doing some brief initial memos, we decided to conduct this analysis with one district so that we could move beyond observations rooted in anecdotal hunches, which allowed us to analyze the data systematically with a clear conceptual framework to guide our analysis.

Analysis

All authors engaged in a collaborative thematic analysis of the data (Braun & Clark, 2006). We chose this methodology because of its focus on reflexivity and analysis that is rooted in fluid and social processes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Each author familiarized themselves with the data by reading through each transcript and taking brief notes about what was said, shared, and discussed. We then engaged in deep reading and collaborative discussions about our conceptual framework (i.e., white saviorism and ableism). This allowed us to develop deductive codes that were informed by our theoretical framing (e.g., Ravitch & Riggan, 2016). For example, to ensure that our codes

were connected to both our data and theoretical framework, we developed codes like "came in to 'fix' the students," "teaching as a moral calling," "privileging of productivity," and "changing hearts and changing minds," which came directly from the white savior literature (Aronson, 2017; Meiners, 2002). After reaching consensus on deductive codes, all authors engaged in a round of initial coding using one transcript as an anchor. During this stage, to ensure that we were not excluding important insights and perspectives from our participants, we engaged in deductive *and* inductive coding from the data. For example, "pitting teachers' needs against students' needs" was an inductive code that came directly from the data and reflected the ways in which savior and ableist narratives conflate good teaching with nondisabled norms that privilege overwork and sacrifice. Once we each completed initial codes for the selected transcript, we then discussed and reviewed them until we reached consensus. Author 1 then completed initial coding for the remaining transcripts, while Authors 2 and 3 reviewed all codes, providing feedback until we reached consensus.

Once all transcripts were coded and the team reached consensus, we looked across our results and explored the ways in which they related to one another. During this stage, we refined and collapsed salient codes into broader categories. For example, we collapsed (1) misalignment between what they need and what they have, (2) misalignment between what they are supposed to have and what they actually have, (3) scarcity of resources, sacrificing, (4) equating identifying poor working conditions with complaining, (5) and poor support into one larger code: normalizing scarcity resources. We then compared codes against and across one another, and Author 1 and 2 wrote

analytic memos related to our research questions. Through this memoing, we identified final themes that illustrated our analytic conclusions.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

To ensure that our findings where trustworthy and credible, Authors 1–3 engaged in peer debriefing and asked Author 4 to review our findings and search for disconfirming evidence. As discussed previously, we also considered our sociocultural and professional positioning throughout each stage of the research process, using meeting times to reflect and ensure that our analysis remained anchored in the data and conceptual framework.

Peer debriefing. As discussed in our analysis section, we regularly met as a team to ensure that our conclusions and assertions were reflected in the data and that we were in consensus. This included iteratively looking at excerpts, memos, and codes while reflecting on the ways in which they relate to our theoretical framework and research question.

Search for disconfirming evidence. The first author drafted initial findings and shared them with the second author to ensure that they reflected our memos, discussions, and analysis. The fourth author, who facilitated each focus group and was very familiar with the data, listened to each focus group again while reviewing our findings. Keeping our research questions and conceptual frameworks in mind, she then searched for disconfirming evidence, points of agreement, and areas where we might need more analytic elaboration. After completing her review, she shared a memo with Author 1 and 2 that allowed us to revise and refine our findings. For example, she suggested that we

more clearly unpack normalized scarcity logics by defining what is being normalized and what logic is flowing from the identified norm. After reviewing her memo and meeting as a team, we edited our findings to reflect her feedback.

Findings

We found that the ways in which participants discussed their working conditions were shaped by the norms of their school contexts and the logics that flowed from said norms. First, educators worked in schools that normalized scarcity. All participants reported a lack of resources (e.g., planning time, curricula resources/materials) and social supports from colleagues and/or administration. Second, educators worked in schools that normalized special education and general education binaries: Students receiving special education services and their teachers were positioned as uniquely different from their nondisabled peers and general education colleagues. Not existing in siloes or a vacuum, participants employed logics in response to these norms, often oscillating between accepting and pushing back on the poor working conditions that flowed from them. Further, these logics shed light on how teachers made sense of and understood their working conditions and students' learning conditions:

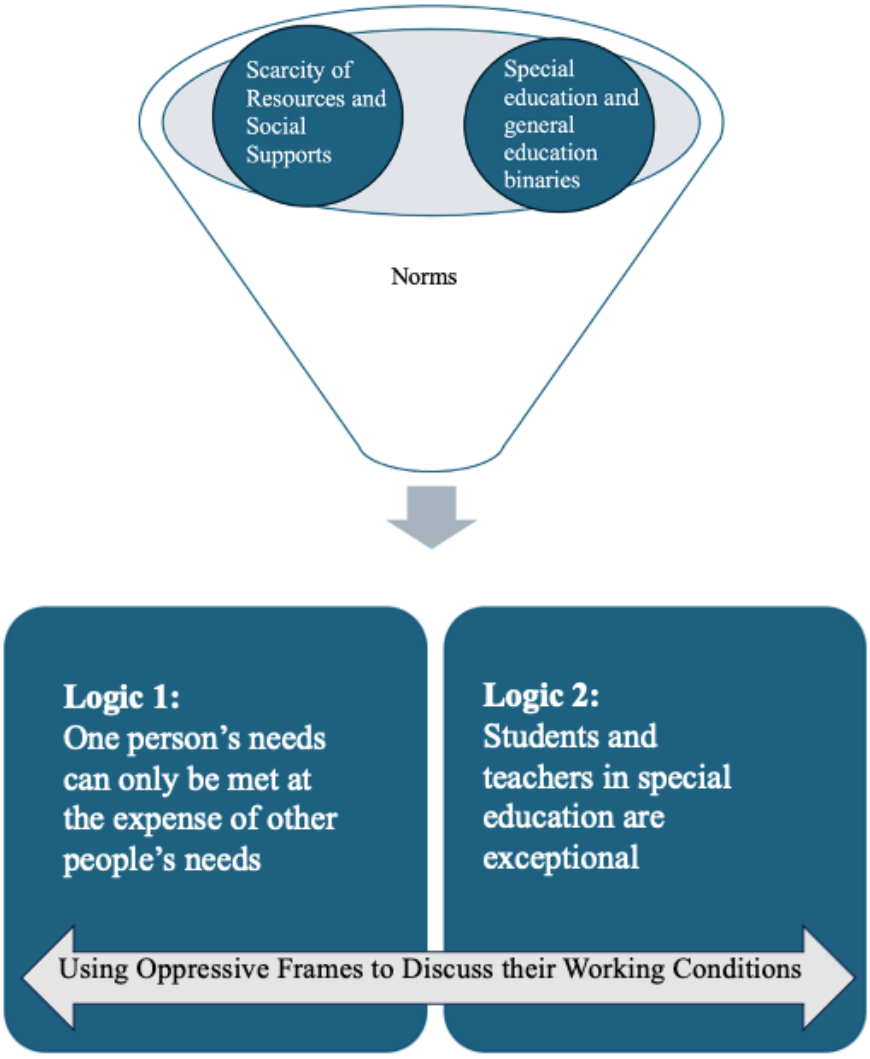
Logic 1: One person's needs could only be met at the expense of other people's needs.

Logic 2: Students and teachers in special education were exceptional.

Finally, within both participants' logics, we found that participants used oppressive frames that upheld ableist and sexist norms related to teaching and learning conditions. In addition, participants engaged in conversations that surfaced internalized oppression,

particularly when downplaying or deflecting critiques of their working conditions. In the following sections, we first briefly describe the norms upheld and maintained in participants' school contexts. We then articulate these logics, unpacking the ways in which racism, classism, sexism, and ableism cut across each. Please see Figure 2.1 for a visual representation of our findings.

Figure 2.1. Visual Representation of Findings



Note. The figure depicts a funnel with the word "norms" in the center. In the funnel, there are two circles that read: "Scarcity of resources and social supports" and "Special

education and general education binaries." An arrow below the funnel is pointing to Logic 1: "One person's needs could only be met at the expense of other people's needs" and Logic 2: "Students and teachers in special education were exceptional." At the bottom a bidirectional arrow reads: "Using oppressive frames to discuss their working conditions."

Normalized Conditions

Scarcity of Resources and Social Supports

Aligned with extant research about self-contained teachers' working conditions (e.g., Bettini, Cumming et al., 2020; Bettini et al., 2022), participants described working in school contexts where lacking logistical and social supports was the norm. This means that teachers reported little or no protected planning time, inadequate access to curricula, and limited social supports from administrators and colleagues outside of their self-contained programs. Abby, a special educator from Hendrickson High School, discussed the challenges related to teaching students without consistent social supports (e.g.., paraprofessional support) and curricula:

> I'm the only teacher in the classroom....We have a para 1 day a week, but not every time.…. And then on top of that, there's no curriculum. And I'm... just flying by the seat of my pants, trying to make it up. Because...you have all the grade levels in one room...So it's 10, 11, 12 [grade]. And... kids are gonna have [this class] every single year. So you have to make different curriculum every single year, different books.

Lisa, a special educator from the elementary school, also talked about working for

extended periods of time without a planning period or break: “I literally have not gotten...a lunch without a child, or a prep in so long...We literally have kids in here all day.....We don’t even use the bathroom.” Lisa and Abby both reflected norms that were evident across our sample: educators often worked in contexts where they taught students without support, access to curricula resources, or protected planning time.

Special Education and General Education Binaries

Across participants, we found that they worked in schools that (re)invested in and (re)produced binaries between special and general education. In other words, norms within the school situated and positioned special education as uniquely different from general education, perpetuating the idea that they were separate systems. Lisa and Meg from Hendrickson Elementary School explained that, while there was personal collegiality between general and special educators, there were fundamental differences between the two that created professional distance and disconnect:

> Lisa: And it's not...against their [general educators’]...personalities... As a community outside of school, I feel like all the teachers really get along...We do really nice things together, like social things and even just...in the building chatting, but I also think it just goes back to like the foundation of... not all teachers have special ed education. And... that's not gonna be something that we’re able to change, but, eventually I feel like it should be a requirement that all teachers have special ed training.
>
> Meg: I also think...it's ...the boundaries... whose student is it? Well, it’s both of our students. And I think sometimes, sometimes that can be solved with

> communication. Other times... it really is... the perception of the teacher that you're working with. In any special ed program, even if it's just academics. But I think there's times in our day where we get pulled away for a crisis and it makes us look less, less reliable, because maybe we're not upstairs for our... services or maybe...we were in the middle of a pull out, and a student is having crisis and all of us need to be there. And all of a sudden we look less reliable, and... flaky... I've had that mentioned to me like, "oh you know, I've tried to do like [push-in] units in the past." But... the TLC [Therapeutic Learning Center] student...even when we have the best intentions and we have it all planned out... TLC students can be so unpredictable that...the teacher I tried it with in the past just wasn't able to... so we just gave it up. I'm like, "okay well, I'm sorry."

In this quote, Meg highlighted how the needs of her students and the working conditions she experienced placed her in a uniquely different position than her general education colleagues, making it difficult for general and special education to build bridges and collaborate with one another.

Discussion between participants from the middle school also revealed norms that reinforced the idea that special education was exceptional and different from general education. Kilgore from the middle school, for example, explained how the students they served had a set of needs that distinguish his classroom from general education classrooms: "For the population we work with, it's...not your regular average everyday classroom, most students have a lot of needs, it can be a very stressful job. Not everybody is right for that." In addition, Kilgore explained that the individualized goals in each

student's IEP distanced general and special education colleagues from one another, especially when they did not fit into a clear content area:

> All of the departments, I feel, are...very self contained....Even right now, the math department is doing their own thing...And I feel for us, as special educators, it's like, "well what do I need this year?" You know, my first year I needed the social studies and science curriculum, and last year, I needed the science and math curriculum. So I feel, because that's not consistent, and that's not something we can control because that's based off student IEPs and stuff like that, but because of that, there are sometimes where...it feels like we are...the afterthought. Not for a malicious reason, but...you're not teaching science all the time, so you're not in the front of my brain.

In sum, special education and general education were viewed, understood, and framed in siloes, creating a distance between special educators and general educators, as well as between students with and without special education labels.

Logics

Across our data set, participants grappled with and responded to their challenging working conditions in varying, complex, and fluid ways. In some instances, lack of support was worn almost like a badge of honor. In other words, not only was poor working conditions the status quo, it was viewed as an essential part of the work. A teacher's willingness and bandwidth to accept these working conditions was a strong indicator that they were the "right" person for the job. In other instances, teachers resisted and spoke out against challenging working conditions. In discussing their working

conditions, they revealed two core logics: (1) One person's needs can only be met at the expense of other people's needs (2) Students and teachers in special education are exceptional. Whereas logic one pits participants needs against the needs of their students and colleagues, logic two is a form of ableist othering where the strengths and needs of students with disabilities are distinct from their nondisabled peers. Finally, even when oscillating between accepting and resisting their working conditions, participants were consistently invested in white savior logics, positioning students as subjects in great need of saving.

Logic 1: One person's needs can only be met at the expense of other people's needs

Our analysis revealed an underlying principle where people's needs were placed at odds with one another. Many discussed how pushing through poor conditions was often seen as a necessary part of the job to meet the needs of their students, and reflected a logic that pitted students' *and* colleagues needs against their own. Participants reproduced the logics that, if students' needs were going to be met, teachers must engage in overwork and sacrifice. This logic allowed participants to justify and rationalize the high demands and lack of support they often experienced. In other instances, educators revealed a stark reality: with unaddressed systemic gaps that fueled resource and social support scarcity, they were often required to rely on individuals to fill in these gaps. As such, participants reinforced a logic their needs could only be met at the expense of their colleagues' needs (and conversely, that their colleagues' needs could only be met at the expense of their own needs).

Checking Your Needs at the Door': Teachers' Needs Pitted Against Students' Needs. Despite research that states otherwise (Hirsch et al., 2007), mainstream society has often reproduced this idea that teacher and student needs are at odds with one another (Bettini, Meyer et al., 2023). As such, educators have internalized and reproduced this logic when discussing and making sense of their own working conditions. We found this logic manifested throughout the focus groups. Daisy, a special educator at Hendrickson Elementary said, "I think we're also all people who put the students' needs above our own, and... recognize, like 'Oh we have time later.'" Similarly, Wendy and CA, two middle school special educators, explained:

> Wendy: I think I can say this on behalf of the three of us; we will go to bat for those kids any time, any day, so we will give up our [planning] times to do it. I don't think every teacher is like that in the building, and…we can respect that contractually, but I do think, given our students and their needs, and we know what they need, we'll help them so we'll give up our times for them....I often feel like I just have to check my needs at the door....I feel like some days I just can't think about myself until the kids are gone.

> CA: I think—it doesn't matter...for us, because I think that no matter what was the math, and if there was something that needed to happen for the prep [i.e. planning] times, it would just go.... You've gotta understand what you're dealing with, and where you are as a professional…because if you're not comfortable with that, then this is the wrong [job]...

In this interaction, Wendy and CA agreed that part of their job required them to sacrifice their contractual benefits, such as planning time, to meet students' needs. Wendy, however, also acknowledged that this resulted in having to "check my needs at the door," ultimately pitting students' needs against her own. Notably, Wendy acknowledged that her needs were being deprioritized, which suggested that she recognized the negative impact this had on her wellbeing. Despite this impact, however, she also expressed that it was necessary and there was utility in maintaining the status quo so that students got what they required. CA further crystalized this logic when he asserted that being a good teacher in their program was related to teachers' willingness and ability to give up supportive working conditions such as planning time. In this dialogue, teachers reproduced a binary, wherein teachers' needs and students' needs were at odds with one another.

Other participants vacillated between resisting and minimizing their poor working conditions, which illustrated complexity in how educators experienced and responded to the lack of resources and supports in their program. Anna, a high school BCBA, said:

> Like oftentimes, for my first year, I didn't know there was such a thing as prep [planning period]...I didn't even know I could take a lunch break, ... no one actually told me that, so I never [got] either of those things. But, often your prep time was spent dealing with behaviors and the district's response to that is to sign up in the office for your miss[ed] prep money, which is not very much, right? And would result in you having to do work at home. And frankly, I used to just feel like my time was worth more than they were saying it was. I think one of the

more—and I feel like I'm just venting or b*tching and I don't mean to do that. In this excerpt, Anna spoke honestly about her experiences and pushed back on the consequences related to not having a lunch break or a planning period. As she critiqued the district's response, she clearly asserted that distributing additional compensation did not align with her worth, her needs, and the value of her time. Thus, we saw Anna pushing back on the notion that ignoring her worth was beneficial.

Importantly, while Anna might not have agreed with her working conditions and used the focus group to identify how it negatively impacted her and her colleagues, she also demonstrated hesitancy about pushing back. This was exemplified when she said, "and I feel like I'm just venting or b*tching and I don't mean to do that." In an education system that did not adequately acknowledge her worth, and within the broader context of women having to subordinate their needs to the needs of those they serve, Anna might not have felt empowered to fully assert her right to humane and dignified working conditions. As a result, she couched her self-advocacy in a deflection that was likely shaped by the ways in which women have historically and presently been positioned in mainstream society (Houston & Kramarae, 1991).

Used oppressive frames to discuss their working conditions. Participants demonstrated alignment with ableist beliefs and practices when they conflated being a good teacher with overwork and sacrifice. This was best exemplified when Wendy and CA equated good teaching with nondisabled norms (e.g., the expectation that teachers should be able to work without breaks) and the belief that teachers must overwork and sacrifice if they were going to make a positive impact on their students. This has serious

implications for all educators, but particularly those who are disabled, neurodivergent, and/or chronically ill. By equating "good" teaching with ignoring and erasing one's mental, emotional, and physical needs, participants perpetuated the idea that simply having needs makes someone less worthy, valuable, and appropriate for the profession (as when CA said, "if you're not comfortable with that, then this is the wrong [job]...").

Second, as previously stated, Anna reproduced sexist and misogynistic frames to deflect her concerns about overwork, referring to these concerns as "b*tching" and complaining. There is a long history of women being silenced and criticized when raising valid concerns about exploitation, oppression, and marginalization (Rich, 1978). While asserting her right to sustainable working conditions, Anna reproduced gendered stereotypes of women by devaluing and minimizing her experience and the impact it had on her professional and personal life. By doing so, she suggested, at times, that her poor work conditions were trivial and insignificant.

Relied on Individual Colleagues to Triage Systemic Gaps: Colleagues Pitted Against Each Other. When discussing their working conditions, participants also discussed their colleagues, including team members, co-teachers, and paraprofessionals, often oscillating between (a) advocating on their co-worker's behalf for improved working conditions and (b) upholding overwork and sacrifice as an indicator of their colleagues' worth and ability to do their job well. With programs and staffing models that leave everyone feeling stretched thin, their school settings were ripe for festering frustration and criticism when colleagues used their breaks, planning times, and paid time off. Without systemic solutions to ensure full coverage and staffing, participants often

relied on individual colleagues to triage systemic gaps, but pitted their needs against those of their colleagues' when colleagues were unable to meet the demand.

Educators from Hendrickson High School grappled with the decisions of colleagues who protected their planning period by going into the school library, and another who took time off to go to a doctor's appointment:

> Monica: ...If you have Abby, obviously, ...going above and beyond to... make herself present within the TLC program.... And then you have another teacher that during her prep, goes in and hides in the library. I can't lay fault for doing that, I guess, and setting [a] boundary and protecting her prep...Those two teachers...are not being treated very inequality [sic] in terms of the prep time and their planning time….If it's saying, 'I'm gonna set that boundary and I'm gonna just disappear during that time.' … Like if an issue comes up, where one teacher is actually teaching, Abby is on her prep, she's off in the library, I'm in a meeting or reading with a student, and the student has a major behavioral concern, or something happens… I guess you just...call the…admin in... ...And I think this... just makes it harder because again... that teacher signed a brand [new] class, which is 4 days, and then also took off today for a doctor's appointment. So that's 5 days we have to cover for her. So that's tough. But I don't think that's our business.

Monica asserted that she was not trying to lay fault on teachers who used their planning periods, yet she also used words like "hides" and "disappear" to describe using the library for a planning period and compared these colleagues with Abby who she believed went "above and beyond to... make herself present within the TLC program." In addition,

Monica also described the imbalance that occurred when a colleague took time off to see a doctor. She noted that, although it was not her business, it was not inconsequential to the demands placed on her and her fellow educators. Without existing infrastructure that truly protected all educators' planning periods and time off, those who did not take time off were left picking up the additional work when a colleague took planning time or a personal day. Further, educators like Monica were attributing problems related to unsustainable working conditions to the individual colleague, rather than blaming the system that placed their needs at odds with one another. Not only did this increase the likelihood of tension, frustration, and friction, it minimized and erased persisting systemic and structural inequities that were at the root of unjust and poor working conditions. In sum, their logic demonstrated how intertwined colleagues' working conditions were with one another. Further, this logic suggested that participants might have valued and valorized collegial overwork and sacrifice because it neutralized or potentially safeguarded their own working conditions. In other words, when co-workers gave up planning time or limited personal days and paid time off, it reduced extra demands placed on their colleagues. As such, this created a cycle that reproduced an ableist narrative: having support, health, and access needs and meeting those needs was going to negatively impact others in the work community, thereby undermining educators' perceptions that someone is "right for the [job]" (CA).

Relying on individual sacrifice, instead of systemic solutions that eliminate the need for individual sacrifice, also came up when participants talked about paraprofessionals. Overall, participants' conversations reflected complex views of these

colleagues. While many participants desired more training and higher pay for paraprofessionals, they also engaged in binary thinking where they either had what it took to do the job well or they did not. These binaries reproduced the logic that, for teachers to get what they need, someone else in their collegial ecosystem needed to sacrifice and engage in work with no breaks. For example, Anna and Monica praised Julie, a former paraprofessional in their program:

> Anna: And in previous years, Julie would have been a person that would… This is the para. Because she doesn't get a prep, so like she would be that person that was like dealing with whatever happened while teachers were having prep. Like she rose to that occasion, and she would follow kids, and she would know that stuff.… She's just was like super assertive and like you never see her like at a computer, just sitting down. And she had…
>
> Monica:…She had a relationship with kids.

Julie is valued as someone who was assertive and who built strong relationships with kids; at the same time, participants also centered her willingness to "deal with whatever happened while teachers were having prep." Anna further stated that Julie "rose to that occasion and would follow kids." In this excerpt, Julie worked through the school day without planning periods, without sitting down, and presumably without taking any time for herself. As Anna noted, Julie's ability and willingness to do whatever it takes allowed teachers to protect their planning periods. Julie's physical, emotional, and/or mental health needs were backgrounded, and her work ethic valorized, based on logics that someone needed to sacrifice and overwork to meet students' needs and protect teachers'

working conditions.

Though we found that participants often pitted their needs against those of others, there were also times in which they pushed back on inadequate staffing models that perpetuated overwork and sacrifice. Instead of putting the burden on other colleagues, Meg, Daisy, and Lisa from the elementary school advocated for a systemic solution that would provide more personnel and give educators more opportunities to collaborate and share labor:

> Meg: I could see...having that co-teacher, either like a float or a lead person... I could see how....having another person...[could] give me back planning time. Or like trickle down and give me back more collaboration with my para or training with my para. Whatever buys me the most time at school....Even with curriculum resources...if there's another person, and we're collaborating to create worksheets or... modified... worksheets, modified tests, anything like that...I all of a sudden have more things available to me because we have two people. Like, I have another person to say "oh we really, you know, need this for x y and z." And if that person has time, then, you could be like, "oh I can make that or I can cover your kids while you make that." That would be wonderful. I feel like I could see having another person trickling down to... giving us our planning time back...
>
> Daisy: It also kind of works together.
>
> Lisa: It really does.....
>
> Daisy: ...It also gives us a minute to step back.

In this excerpt, Meg responded to a school context where scarcity of personnel and the reality of having to do their job with limited resources and support was a norm. As such, she responded to this scarcity with assertions that valued and centered the importance of collaborating and partnering with a hypothetical co-teacher. For example, she named how they could share labor to modify academic tasks. Importantly, this excerpt revealed the complexity in which participants not only reproduced exploitative discourses around their working conditions, but that they also resisted and proposed systemic solutions that centered both their own needs as well as their colleagues'.

Used oppressive frames to discuss their working conditions. Though occasionally reticent to criticize those who used their planning time or paid time off, participants used ableist logic when expressing their frustration with the consequences of colleagues' choices to use their contractually and legally protected planning time and paid time off. Their perspectives privileged educators who dropped everything to be fully present for whatever was needed during the school day, even when it meant sacrificing a necessary break or planning period. This was illustrated when Monica problematized the need to take time off to go to the doctor, and when Anna and Monica valorized Julie, a paraprofessional, for working through the school day without sitting down. Importantly, these logics did not just flow from the identified school norms, but also from larger systems of oppression that reified and reproduced narrow conceptions of what it meant to be a good colleague, educator, and worker. In other words, when educators pitted their needs against the needs of students and colleagues, it was in part due to policies, structures, and practices that positioned this falsehood as a necessity, deflecting attention

away from the systemic austerity that necessitated sacrifice in the first place. Since educators were teaching and working in a system that upheld and accepted overwork and sacrifice, they were compelled to accept these norms if they wanted any short-term relief from their working conditions.

Logic 2: Students and Teachers in Special Education Are Exceptional

Across participants, we also found that there were times when they critiqued and expressed concern with the binaries and professional distance that manifested between special and general education systems. For example, educators from the elementary school pushed back on the idea that they were solely responsible for students in their program. Instead, they emphasized the importance of sharing the educational responsibilities with general educators so that their students became "our students." There were also times, however, where educators positioned special education as a system with approaches, practices, and training that were distinct from those employed within general education. For example, participants' conversations revealed a stronger affinity with clinical practitioners who focused primarily on supporting social-emotional skills and positive behavior supports (e.g., school counselors, BCBAs). Their positioning of special education as something "special" or "different" from general education was often justified by logics that characterized students in special education as exceptional. Importantly, such positioning is not neutral. In fact, many disabled people have discussed how it is an ableist form of othering, which can absolve mainstream society from striving for truly accessible and inclusive structures, systems, and practices (Cokley, 2020; Métraux, n.d.).

In our analysis, reinvesting in norms that siloed general and special education from one another *and* perpetuating logics that exceptionalized and othered students in special education shaped how participants understood and talked about their working conditions. More specifically, their conversations revealed that the perceived differences between the two systems were rooted in deficit and monolithic conceptions of students' needs and narrow conceptions of special educators' roles and responsibilities. Participants engaged in conversations where their working conditions were rooted in their capacity and ability to monitor, intervene, and save students from their perceived circumstances. We also found participants rationalized scarce resources and social supports because they believed special education was exceptional from general education and, at the same time, sometimes rationalized their need for better working conditions on the basis of their students' exceptionality from "normal."

Worked to Intervene, Monitor, and Save Students. Educators also discussed the implications of not having access to curricula or curricula resources and how this impeded their ability to intervene and save students from their perceived deficits. For example, Meg, an elementary school special educator, explained how a lack of planning time and curriculum inhibited her ability to plan and implement high quality instruction, as well as the perceived consequences this had on students:

> Meg: Yeah, and I was like, also just even think about the future.... If his...family system is really off, which it is, and he doesn't have great relationships, which he doesn't, because he doesn't have those skills yet...at least he can have academics as a source of, like, "I'm really good, like, I'm good at this. And this is, like, I get

some self-worth from this, and self confidence from this." And...I was just really sad when I felt like he was losing his academics, and his success too.

In this example, Meg relied on deficit conceptions of students and families as a frame for why their programs needed more resources and supports. More specifically, she believed that this student lacked skills which impeded his ability to form meaningful relationships. Thus, from her vantage point, having access to high-quality curricula and planning time would have allowed her to save the student from himself. Further, by saying that his family system was "off," she also positioned academics, including curriculum, as a tool to safeguard against a family system that she perceived as unfit, insufficient, and even harmful. In sum, the student and family were seen as not having valuable strengths, assets, or lived experiences. As such, resources for academics were positioned as important tools to fix and remediate the innate problems within the child and the child's family. In other words, her rationale for why she needed supportive working conditions was rooted in ableist perspectives of the student and the student's family, reproducing savior logics about education and its purpose for disabled and multiply marginalized students.

Participants also believed that a central part of their job was responding to and being present for when students were in perceived crises. As such, they advocated for more social supports through the hiring and retention of additional personnel. Educators from Hendrickson Elementary, for example, envisioned a well-run program where an extra person, possibly a paraprofessional, could seamlessly take on a teaching role so that the classroom educators and service providers could follow and intervene when students

were perceived to be in crisis:

> Meg: I think we all feel a little bit of a control aspect...If it's about our student...we want to know what's happening. We want to take the data....know what happened, know what was said [to] be able to follow up properly.

> Daisy: I think that's when having the extra body, even if it was a para, who doesn't need to be as hands on, in a crisis would be helpful. Because if you have that para in the classroom, knowing exactly what they're learning and having previewed the lesson review, then, I think having that person who is ready to take on that teacher role would be helpful, too. So, we could follow our student around for whatever they need.

> Lisa: Yeah, you could also split the, like in the case of it being two grade levels, if there were two teachers, you could split, like, one 2nd, one 3rd, and if it's, like, a third grade crisis, then that teacher goes to the crisis. And, like, the other person just takes over. Or opposite, like if it's a third grade crisis and you have third graders in the room, and it's their learning period, the second grade teacher goes.

In this quote, all three special educators reproduced logics that position special education and the students and teachers within this system as uniquely different from the broader school community. First, expressing a desire to have an "extra body" so that they can follow the student while the extra person takes on their teaching responsibilities, participants perpetuated a logic that more personnel were necessary because they

perceived their students as exceptionally difficult and dangerous. While we recognized there might have been situations in which students must be supported, especially when leaving school grounds, Meg, Daisy, and Lisa failed to acknowledge the ways in which concerns about safety have been used to monitor, surveil, and gatekeep disabled and multiply marginalized students from participating in general education and their communities (Annamma, 2018; Siuty, 2019). Further, without attention to or acknowledgement of the root cause of students' behavior, as well as how addressing it might lead to growth, participants reproduced a logic that stigmatized and labeled students in their program as in need of constant oversight and surveillance.

In addition, the perceived exceptionalities of their students also drove a perceived need to maintain control over what participants believed to be inevitable crises. Taking ownership of the student with words like "our student," they went further than just wanting to be deeply aware of what was happening and collecting data. Not only did this suggest that Meg, Daisy, and Lisa viewed themselves more as crisis responders than instructors of academics, but it also implied a belief that crises were a normal part of the job. Moreover, operating under the expectation that crises were inevitable, they situated themselves as the ones that must be available to intervene and respond. While contradicting previously discussed critiques and calls for more shared responsibility from general educators, they reinforced the idea that special educators must be prepared to swoop in and save the day during times of crisis, even if it meant interrupting academic instruction.

Similarly, Abby, a special educator at Hendrickson High School, also discussed

how she and her colleagues often needed to be ready and available to respond to unexpected student behavior. When asked about her working conditions, she said:

> I think I would talk a little bit about our new schedule we have this year, which is longer blocks. Therefore, you only have one...[prep] at a given time during the day. And that's just an added challenge. Then on top of that, I think in special education at this school, you have far less time to do work to prep than general education teachers. A lot of our time, especially in the TLC program, is... chasing students down, dealing with things when you're on your prep, covering other teachers, because our students need coverage....I think a lack of prep time is a big struggle for us.

While Abby identified lacking protected planning time as a challenge and struggle for herself and her colleagues, like in Finding 1, she also named students' needs as the reason they did not get proper planning and prep times. She stated that her and her colleagues spend time "chasing students down....covering other teachers, because our students need coverage." Here, Abby bracketed students in the program as "our students," and also monolithically labeled them as requiring coverage, suggesting that their needs were exceptional from nondisabled peers and a central driver in reproducing working conditions that made their jobs unsustainable.

Finally, we found that educators relied on savior logics when responding to the lack of available resources and the demands placed on them. Participants' decisions on what to teach were shaped by more than just their access to curricula and the distribution of students' grade levels in each class. They also relied on logics related to deficit

perceptions of students' needs. Lisa from Hendrickson Elementary, for example, spoke about what guided her decision to enact specialized instruction instead of core curricula in her small group pull-out. She also explained why she believed that she did not need curricula:

> I feel like all of my lessons, well I mean, all of my kids right now are either new or have limited/no demands. Like, we're just working on compliance. So right now, it's fine. Like, a lot of my lessons are just, like, getting them sit on the rug or learning, like, literally how to be a human being. Like, how to sit and how to keep your hands to yourself. Tomorrow, we're learning about how to draw people that aren't stick figures, which might be very triggering. One of my friends will be very angry. But, like, I don't know, because with my two first graders now, they're at very different levels. So I don't know how I'm gonna do it. I mean, I'm gonna give them the same work.

Lisa's assertion that her students need to learn "how to be a human being" was used to justify the lack of curricula. Rooted in ableist conceptions, Lisa believed that her job was to teach compliance, which equated being human with sitting on the rug and keeping your hands to yourself. In this quote, her students were not provided agency, nor a voice in their instruction. Their strengths and assets appeared unrealized, and their perceived needs were privileged over core academic instruction. For Lisa, specialized instruction rooted in "fixing" students was prioritized as essential, and ultimately used to deflect tensions related to curricular resources and access to general education content vs. specialized instruction.

Used oppressive frames to discuss their working conditions. We found that participants used and upheld oppressive frames when talking about how their working conditions related to their students' perceived needs, as well as participants' conceptions of themselves as educators. While participants evaded explicit conversations about race, class, gender, and—to some extent—disability, white supremacy was baked into many of their discussions. This was best illustrated when Meg positioned a student in her program, and his family, as a blank slate who needed school to overcome what she perceived as a broken self-concept and family system. Meg did not explicitly name race, class, or disability in this excerpt, however her words cannot be siloed from past and present histories that have continued to position multiply marginalized and disabled students as less valuable, worthy, and human than their more privileged peers (Lewis, 2022). Further, these frames were likely not just being reproduced by the individuals sampled in this study. Since ableism and racism is firmly embedded in the foundation of K–12 systems (Annamma et al., 2013), it is more than likely that these frames pervade beyond single actors and reflect larger systems and structures.

Participants also discussed and accepted crises as if they were an inevitable given and a central part of their job. Normalizing crises and their role in responding to them is problematic for several reasons. First, it pathologized and stigmatized students labeled with EBD, characterizing them as young people in constant need who were on the brink of a dangerous crisis. Second, it positioned teachers in the program as the individuals who were uniquely equipped to swoop in and save the student from their perceived deficits. Their students were dehumanized, and their actions were decontextualized from

how the schools' practices might be disabling and harmful to them. In another example, Lisa characterized students as needing to be taught "literally how to be a human being." There is a long and ongoing history of racially and multiply marginalized students with disabilities being characterized and labeled as criminals, subhuman, and deviant (Annamma et al., 2013; Beneke, Machado, Taitingfong, 2022; Erevelles & Minear, 2010). With the overrepresentation of Black and Brown learners in self-contained settings (Annamma, 2018; Erevelles & Minear, 2010), it was critically important to examine the ways in which Lisa's words upheld racist and ableist conceptions of students who do not match or acquiesce to privileged identity markers. In this quote, Lisa's perception of herself as savior was dependent on narrow and harmful views of students. In other words, for her academic instruction to have worth, she had to rely on preconceived notions that erased the humanity and dignity that her students *already* brought to her classroom.

Binary Manifested in Co-Teaching Models. Participants discussed the benefits of having a general education co-teacher, citing that this partnership was necessary to fill in content knowledge gaps. Dichotomizing general education from special education, however, also reified binaries that suggested that general education teachers lack the necessary pedagogical skills to support students with disabilities, whereas special educators often lack deep academic content knowledge. This logic shaped how they talked about their general education colleagues, and it was considered an anomaly when they worked with teachers who were not trained in special education, yet could effectively both teach *and* build relationships with students in their program:

> Abby: [Co-teaching] is the best part of my day…. It's a bio teacher and then me as a special education teacher. And it's six kids….our TLC kids have had her a few years. They really, really like her. Even though she's not special ed trained, but she just has the right mindset to work with her students. And it's amazing because the other day, a student stormed out and...left without permission... I was able to leave the class, follow the student, follow up, grab an AP, do everything that I needed to do that I'm not able to do when I'm just teaching the class. ...And she handles the instruction because... I'm not a bio person, but...I can go around and check in with the students. I will kind of be able to figure out the answers. It's truly like a joyful class, because the kids, I think just feel supported and... they can have a teacher next to them….It just feels so much more manageable, even though I have... basically no idea what the... science [is] sometimes I guess.

When talking about how she experienced co-teaching with a general education science teacher, Abby appreciated how adequate staffing allowed her and her colleagues to meet their students' needs; an experience she described as “the best part of my day” and "joyful." At the same time, in describing their division of responsibilities, Abby identified and reinforced a clear dichotomy between their roles: the general educator enacted academic content while Abby, as the special educator, intervened and responded to student behavior (i.e. follow students when they leave the classroom). In this excerpt, Abby surfaced a division of labor between general and special educators that is reflective of our larger data set, and a broader system of licensure, preparation, and in-service compartmentalization of special vs. general education (e.g., Blanton et al., 2018; Blanton

& Pugach, 2011; Narian, 2010; Siuty, 2019).

Importantly, when Abby identified that her co-teacher "handles the instruction," she did not just see this as a neutral outflow of a binary system; she instead connected the division of labor to her own perceptions of herself as an educator ("I'm not a bio person"). In addition, Abby did not connect her co-teacher's instructional knowledge with her ability to connect with and effectively teach students in the TLC program. Instead, she recognized that her co-teacher has "the right mindset," despite not being "special ed trained." While a positive and strengths-based mindset is an important component in all educators' practice, Abby perpetuated a narrow assumption that special education training was the only kind of training that could prepare someone to connect with "her" students. In sum, we found that when educators silo general and special education from one another, they disempowered themselves as efficacious instructors of academics, while also disempowering general educators as efficacious educators who have pedagogical skills and approaches that were supportive of students in their program.

Used oppressive frames to discuss their working conditions. We found that participants surfaced internalized oppression when talking about their working conditions. For example, Abby's assertion that she is not a "bio person," as well as her characterization of her biology co-teacher as having "the right mindset," was a complex reproduction of gendered logics that erased many of the skills and expertise women educators possess and continue to refine in their practice. Abby statically positioned herself as someone who does not do science. This is a common trope used to justify deficit perspectives of women, as well as other marginalized and multiply marginalized

people. When discussing her co-teacher, she focused on her colleague's mindset without coupling it with her pedagogical skills. Without this both/and, there is risk of implicitly perpetuating the idea that women are successful educators because of their instincts, attitudes, and qualities.

Used IEP Mandates to Reinforce Binaries. Lastly, we found that participants also reproduced binaries between special and general education when making sense of poor curricula access. At the middle school, participants discussed the complexities of providing differentiated instruction guided by students' individualized education programs (IEPs). In one instance, Tom problematized the limitations of most curricula:

> Tom: I think...the burden is still on the teachers, because they can get all the curriculum, but the needs of these students, it needs to be modified down to their level anyway, and I think a lot of teachers lack that in their curriculum. So they could have all the curriculum, but then it's going to be significantly modified anyway, where they're making the resources for the students as well.
>
> CA: That's exactly what I was thinking about...
>
> Wendy: That's... an ever-changing piece that...we'll never be able to pinpoint.
>
> CA: You could have everything you wanted, but there could be one student that's coming next year that it's not going to work for.

Tom surfaced an important point: having access to curricula was not a magic fix. Teachers will always have to be mindful and reflective of the ways in which curricula and its resource materials are meaningful and relevant to students' strengths, lived experiences, and support needs (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This is a reality, however, for *all*

educators—not just special educators and the unique IDEA mandates placed on them. Further, CA's assertion that special educators "could have everything you wanted, but there could be one student that's coming next year that it's not going to work for," once again pitted teachers' needs against students' needs. In this case, a seemingly "perfect" curricula could be disrupted by a student who might have needs that extended beyond what it offers. Here, CA constructed an ableist dilemma wherein the student is positioned as the problem, ultimately interfering with the teacher's accessible and desirable instructional resources. Instead of advocating for universally designed and culturally relevant curricula that would affirm and support disabled and multiply marginalized students, CA and Tom reproduced a narrative that questioned the utility of curricula access when teaching within special education systems.

Used oppressive frames to discuss their working conditions. We found that when participants siloed special education from general education, it often reinforced a dichotomy that positioned students in special education as exceptional; a binary that was likely not neutral for many of their students. When positioned as special or exceptional, students with disabilities were viewed as a deviating from what is considered normal (Baglieri et al., 2011). This was exemplified when Tom questioned the importance of having access to curricula in special education, and CA affirmed, identifying students' needs as a barrier. When CA named disabled students as the problem, instead of a system that reproduced standardized curricula without learner variability in mind, he asserted an ableist and deficit-driven logic that devalued disabled students. Moreover, this logic also assumed that the only learners with needs for greater academic supports and more

responsive curricula were students who qualified and received special education. When accessibility was only seen through a rigid disabled/nondisabled binary, students at the nexus of other intersecting oppressions were erased, leaving their strengths and needs potentially unrealized.

Discussion

Our participants experienced poor working conditions, which resulted in serious overwork and sacrifice; often at the expense of their own needs. Yet, when discussing these poor working conditions, educators relied on logics that perpetuated binaries that pitted people within their schools against one another. For example, participants often positioned overwork as something that must happen to meet the needs of students in their program. They also (re)invested in logics that upheld a dichotomy between special and general education systems, positioning them as uniquely separate. Both logics were undergirded with oppressive frames that upheld ableist and sexist conceptions of teaching and learning, failing to recognize how systems of oppression shaped their working and learning conditions. Our findings align with multiple lines of research that, to our knowledge, have not been brought together and studied empirically. This includes scholarship that has examined the challenging working conditions of self-contained special educators' experiences (e.g., Bettini, Cumming et al., 2020), the pervasive ableism and other systems of oppression that continue to undergird K–12 schooling (Annamma et al., 2013), and the ways in which white saviorism continues to manifest in traditional K–12 classrooms (Aronson, 2017, Meiners, 2002).

We found that participants reproduced logics that upheld ableist conceptions of

students' needs. They did so while pushing back on, and while justifying their poor working conditions. As discussed earlier, ableism is an interconnected system of oppression that upholds narrow conceptions of who is considered worthy, valuable, and fully human (Lewis, 2022). While created to meet federal mandates that prohibited the exclusion of disabled children from public schooling, special education has not always historically or presently attended to the ways in which the system has upheld ableism, racism, sexism, and other oppressions (Artiles, 2011; Annamma et al., 2013). As such, without critical examination and intentional disruption of these systems, educators are vulnerable to reproduce logics and practices that position disabled students in harmful and problematic ways. For example, educators in our sample statically and monolithically described students as dangerous, in perpetual crisis, and in need of being taught how to be human beings. When educators justify poor and unsustainable working conditions for what they perceive to be in the best interest of the children, it portrays students as blank slates in dire need of a teacher who can save and intervene so that they can be fully human, thus failing to acknowledge the ways in which they already are. Not only do these assumptions harm students, but they also harm educators, fueling logics that encourage pushing through unsustainable working conditions.

Teachers also reproduced ableist conceptions of work when talking about themselves and their colleagues. As they experienced working conditions that required skipping lunch breaks and planning periods, teachers reported being acutely aware when their colleagues did not make the same sacrifices. While some participants were at times wary of fully criticizing those who committed to protecting their planning and breaks,

they expressed frustration and, at times, disagreement with this choice. For example, CA in the middle school suggested that those who were not willing to do what it takes (e.g., work through the day) are in the "wrong" profession. Monica more cautiously used words like "hides" and "disappears" when discussing colleagues' decision to use their preparation period. Aligning with Lewis, (2022), ableism is systemic and structural. Its impact is not just felt by disabled people (although they are more likely to experience its harm in more acute ways than those who are nondisabled; Yancy & Lewis, 2023). Throughout our study, we found that participants relied on logics and binaries that valorized nondisabled norms and overwork, often equating them with what it means to be a "good teacher" (Siuty & Meyer, in review). While rooted in a harmful system of oppression, these binaries may serve as a form of self-preservation in a system where educators have limited access to resources and unsustainable demands (i.e., working through a break or planning period). At the same time, this self-preservation might come at the expense of disabled educators, whose needs are framed as disqualifying them from being effective educators.

We also found that participants often positioned special education as a system uniquely different from general education, creating a distance that suggested students' needs were so intense and "exceptional" that they required significant oversight, surveillance, and sacrifice. Disabled people have long questioned and criticized the term "special needs" and recent discourse has even called into question using the term "special education" (Métraux, n.d.). People with disabilities and their allies have pointed out how, when disabled people are characterized as "special," it often creates stigma, harm, and

isolation that excludes them from communities and classrooms (Cokley, 2020). In this study, participants often characterized students with disabilities in self-contained setting as having needs that were so intense, and at times dangerous, that they required exceptional support and instruction, a belief that was deeply rooted in white savior and ableist logics. Again, we argue that this framing is harmful to both students *and* teachers. Such framing perpetuates deficit perspectives of students, erasing the strengths and full humanity they already bring into the classroom. Further, it reinforces the idea that good teachers drop everything for their "needy" students (Meiners, 2002; Aronson, 2017). Aligning with research that asserts that teachers' working conditions are interrelated to students' learning conditions (Hirsch et al., 2007), our findings indicate a need for teachers to not only believe in this interdependent relationship, but to also live it as praxis.

Limitations & Future Directions for Research

Our findings centered the perspectives of a small sample of participants who all held many dominant and privileged identities (i.e., white, cis, nondisabled). We recommend that future studies include perspectives and insights from disabled educators, teachers of color, and those who are multiply marginalized. In addition, our focus group protocols were not developed with our conceptual framework in mind. Therefore, we did not ask questions related to the white saviorism and ableism. Despite this limitation, since white saviorism and ableism are deeply engrained in mainstream social and cultural systems (Meiners, 2002; Aronson, 2017), we still believe that there was significant value in analyzing the dataset for ways in which teachers resisted and normalized these

systems. Future research is well-positioned to build on our research question and findings, with the potential for scholars to design a study that uses white saviorism and ableism as a framework from its conception.

Beyond participating in focus groups, our study also lacked authentic community engagement and action. More specifically, participants and other stakeholders were not engaged in the analysis, nor in the sharing of our findings. Drawing on extant critical scholarship (e.g., Beneke et al., 2022), we recognize that there is great promise in future research that takes a participatory action approach to this work. In other words, researchers can include participants in the analysis to reflect, identify, and dismantle the harmful logics our participants reproduced. In addition to increasing participants' engagement throughout the research process, there is also potential to include racial and disability justice activists and organizers. Building a broader team that extends beyond the academy can bring in new insights, perspectives, and uncover salient issues and themes that our original research team may have missed. We hope that our results can serve as a foundation and call-to-action for researchers to examine the ways in which white saviorism and ableism pervade understandings of special educators' working conditions.

Implications for Practice

We recommend that teacher educators create opportunities for pre- and in-service educators to reflect and examine how school systems, and they themselves, uphold and reproduce saviorism and ableism in all aspects of their work. This should also include intentional reflection about the ways in which they think about their working conditions

and students' learning conditions. As such, they can then begin to unmake and disrupt logics that further marginalize students and teachers. Reflective prompts might include: *What are my personal and professional needs? How are my needs, and the needs of my colleagues, being positioned in my school context? When I engage in overwork or sacrifice, or feel like I need to, what assumptions am I making about my students? How am I perceiving their strengths, lived experiences, and support needs? How are my students' needs being perceived in relationship to my own needs?*

We also draw on the solutions developed by Lisa, Daisy, Meg, and recommend that school and district leaders push back on policies that sustain austerity and personnel scarcity. Instead, we assert that schools must fully invest in staffing models and policies that center the full humanity and dignity of all workers; including paraprofessionals and educators with disabilities and chronic illnesses. Our findings revealed that educators often relied on individuals to solve systemic and structural problems that perpetuated unjust working and learning conditions. Not only was this reliance a band-aid, it also placed undue pressure and labor on colleagues who were also likely experiencing unsustainable and poor working conditions. All educators deserve to have time and space in the school day to meet their needs and meaningfully engage in planning and training that will build their skillset and craft.

Conclusion

In this study we found that special educators worked in school contexts that (re)invested and (re)produced norms rooted in resource and social support scarcity and binaries between special and general education. As such, to make sense of their working

conditions, educators relied on logics that (1) pitted their needs against the needs of their students and colleagues and (2) positioned students and teachers in special education as exceptional. Further, within these logics, participants used oppressive frames rooted in ableist and sexist perspectives of teaching and learning. We call for teacher educators to intentionally disrupt the norms that fuel these logics by providing time, space, and curricula in teacher preparation to examine and interrupt white saviorism and ableism in their practice. We also call for school and district leaders to invest in a workforce that is fully supported to meet their professional *and* personal needs.

CHAPTER THREE – Raising the Voices of Disabled People to Help Transform K–12 and Teacher Preparation Systems

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Introduction

People with disabilities have been organizing against ableism and discrimination for as long as humankind has been in existence (Wong, 2020), including in schools. Proclaiming, "Nothing about us without us," (Charlton, 2000), disabled people have asserted that their needs are not special and that, like all humans, they deserve to have full access to their communities (Heumann, 2020; Wong, 2020; Cokley, 2020). Unfortunately, mainstream society, and K–12 schools, have often failed to recognize and respond to these assertions. Rooted in a narrow nondisabled/disabled binary, educators are largely assumed to be both nondisabled and experts of disability, while students who qualify for special education are assumed to be in dire need of said expertise (Brantlinger, 2004; Connor, 2020; Connor & Gabel, 2013). These deficit and narrow assumptions have shaped traditional special education practices and approaches (e.g., Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011), which have had harmful impacts on multiply marginalized students with disabilities and disability labels (e.g., Annamma et al., 2013; Artiles, 2011; Baglieri et al., 2011; Brantlinger, 2004; Erevelles & Minear, 2010; Ferri & Connor, 2006).

Though this dominant status quo pervades society, disabled people and allies have continued to question, push back, and resist practices and approaches that erase, devalue, and ignore the strengths and contributions of disabled students (Annamma et al., 2013; Brantlinger, 2004; Connor, 2020; Connor & Gabel, 2013). For example, Autistic and neurodivergent people have condemned Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) as an inhumane and violent practice (ASAN, 2017, 2022; Shkedy et al., 2021). Drs. Annamma & Morrison (2018) have theorized critical pedagogy to include teaching and learning that

is responsive to the strengths, assets, contributions of multiply marginalized learners with disabilities. These brief examples showcase how activists and scholars—many of whom are disabled themselves—have continued to subvert the narrow and ableist norms and assumptions that are baked into schooling. Drawing on this activism, we conceptualized this empirical study as a call to action. Using community-based participatory research methods (Israel et al., 2003), we centered and amplified the experiences and wisdom of disabled people to make key recommendations for K–12 schools and teacher education programs.

Drawing on the work of scholars in (critical) disability studies and inclusive research, we ground this research in the meaningful and authentic inclusion of disabled people in scholarship (e.g., Hughes, 2024; Hole & Schnellert, 2024; Walmsley & Johnson, 2003). We privilege the knowledge, insights, and wisdom of people with disabilities because past and present history has shown that disabled people have always been leaders and drivers of important structural and systemic changes that have made our communities more just, inclusive, and accessible (Heumann, 2020; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2022; Schalk, 2023). Given the systemic and structural inequities that pervade K–12 schooling and the systems' failure to recognize the critical contributions of disabled and multiply marginalized people (e.g., Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011), we interviewed disabled adults to inform recommendations for K–12 and teacher preparation systems. In the following section, we review literature that has (re)affirmed and (re)claimed disabled people and communities as key leaders in building more accessible and affirming communities and schools.

Disabled Activism to Transform Educational Systems

For the purposes of this paper, we focus on activism within the context of the United States, and specifically, how movements toward equity, justice, and access for disabled people in schools have been a direct result of disabled people's organizing and action. To be clear, this section is not meant to be comprehensive of US disability or educational histories, but instead a brief primer on key moments that illustrate the power of disability activism and how it connects to current pursuits for justice in education.

In a defining moment in the modern disability rights movement in the US, disabled people organized to demand the enactment of regulations that would enforce Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act (Schalk, 2022). Section 504 specifically prohibited federal buildings, programs, services, and agencies from discriminating against or excluding anyone based on their disability or disabilities. The first legislation of its kind to enshrine civil rights to people with disabilities on a national level, disabled activists recognized Section 504's potential to transform how they navigated, participated in, and engaged in their broader communities (Heumann, 2020). Further, the act had significant implications for education, as it prohibited public schools from discriminating and excluding students based on their disability (Hehir, 2002). By 1977, however, one glaring problem remained: despite the signing of the 1973 Rehab Act into law, Section 504 lacked regulations that would facilitate the enactment and enforcement of these protections. In response, disabled activists and their allies organized sit-ins across the country, including a 26-day occupation of a federal San Francisco building. During this sit-in, activists demanded that the regulations be signed without altering or watering them

down (Shapiro, 1994; Schalk, 2022). One important demand was ensuring that students with disabilities have opportunities to be fully included—and not segregated—in their school communities (Hehir, 2002; Shapiro, 1994). Finally, in April 1977, Secretary Califano signed regulations for Section 504 *and* the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA; Shapiro, 1994).

Since passage of the EHA, subsequently renamed The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), many people with disabilities have continued to fight for its full enforcement *and* for it to be responsive to the needs and practices of disability communities. Disabled activists, for example, have long pushed for IDEA legislation to reflect the communication, language, and literacy needs of their communities. The inclusion of mandates in the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA that required schools to consider Deaf children's communication and language development in the IEP process was a result of Deaf people's organizing and advocacy (Hehir, 2002). In addition, the National Federation of the Blind has pushed for states to pass "Braille Bills," which encouraged schools to teach students how to read Braille, as well as provide orientation and mobility services (Hehir, 2002).

In addition to the strong role Deaf activists played in the 1997 IDEA reauthorization, there have been many Deaf people who continue to push for special education law to reflect the communication and language needs of their community. Their work is connected to ongoing lived experiences of many Deaf students, who have reported lacking meaningful access to American Sign Language (ASL) and ASL instruction, despite laws like IDEA (Hehir, 2002; Rowley, 2019). Ann Rowley (2019),

the student at the center of *Rowley v. Board of Education (1982)*,[5] has used symposiums and addresses to pull the veil back on the commonly cited Supreme Court decision (e.g., Rowley 2008; Rowley, 2019). Through sharing her own lived experiences and connecting it to ongoing systemic inequities that Deaf students experience in school, Rowley (2019) has urged for people to not rely on legislation alone to ensure equity. She has continued to advocate for communities to take an active role in pushing for educational systems that meet the needs of the children they serve. Further, when *Endrew F v. Douglas County Schools* was interpreted by many as a decision that would set precedents ensuring a higher standard of educational benefit for students with disabilities, Rowley cautioned against putting too much weight on a legal decision. She poignantly asked:

> *Endrew F*. has the potential to raise the bar for special education quite a bit, but it won't happen automatically. It's up to people to advocate for special education, to raise the bar and hold it strong and high for all deaf children, for children with all disabilities, so all of them can reach their potential. If we don't continue to fight for these students, who will? (Rowley, 2019, p. 27).

Rowley's activism, and the activism of many other people with disabilities, highlighted how many disabled people cannot expect or assume that legislation will ensure that their educational rights and needs are being met. As such, many people with disabilities have

[5] In the *Rowley* decision, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the school district did not violate IDEA when they decided to withhold Rowley's access to an ASL interpreter. Their ruling was based on an interpretation of the law that students only need to show some educational benefit under IDEA. In 2017 the courts rejected this interpretation in *Endrew F v. Douglas County Schools.* The judges ruled that the standard must be more ambitious than simply some or minimal educational benefit.

responded with approaches and organizing strategies focused on their humanity and not the law itself. This work continues today and is led by many people who are multiply marginalized and disabled (Sins Invalid, 2019).

IEP meetings have been intended, and legally mandated, to include the strengths, experiences, expertise, and knowledge of families and students (IDEA, 2004). Many families and students' experiences, however, have been far from what the law purports; this is particularly true for those with multiply marginalized identities (Artiles, 2011; Harry, 2008). Disabled Afro-Latina artist, activist, and parent of an Autistic boy, Jen White-Johnson, has used her art to (re)claim the IEP process so that it truly centers her son Knox's voice. In her "Hack the IEP Zine," which is widely available to families online, White-Johnson uses vibrant and colorful images to give disabled students an opportunity to authentically share who they are with the IEP team. She explained:

> The zine introduces itself as a "zine about me," with Knox's name written in his own hand below his smiling picture...He gets to talk about things he likes and how he likes to interact with the world. He lists how he soothes himself when he is anxious and how he wants to be supported by school staff (Oluo, 2024, p. 288).

White-Johnson's zine serves as powerful example of how disabled people and their families continue to subvert norms and policies to ensure that their strengths, lived experiences, and knowledge are authentically privileged in schools.

Along with activism intended to expand and improve special education law, many disabled people have also engaged in organizing around broader policies that impact the experiences of many students with disabilities in schools. Though many people discuss

the institutionalization of disabled and multiply marginalized as a relic of the past, many people with disabilities continue to assert that its legacy continues to manifest in our educational and community systems (Annamma et al., 2013; Erevelles & Minear, 2010; Shapiro, 1994; Thornton, 2020). A recent example is the #StopTheShock a campaign, which has fought to end the use of aversive shock devices at the Judge Rotenberg Center. Students with disabilities are often subjected to violent restraint, seclusion, and expulsion under the guise of so-called safety (Smith Richards et al., 2019). When the D.C. Circuit Court overturned the Food and District's Administration's ban on the devices in 2021 (Pierson, 2021), organizations like Massachusetts Advocates Standing Strong (MASS) and the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN) engaged in legislative hearings, political education, and direct actions (e.g., protests). As a result of their organizing, the FDA has proposed a new ban (ASAN, n.d.; MASS, n.d.). As in this example, when policy has failed to protect and treat disabled people with humanity and dignity, activists have organized and acted in response.

Though electric shocks might seem like an extreme example of present-day torture and abuse, it is part of a larger sociohistorical context wherein harm and control of disabled people is normalized (Annamma et al., 2013; Erevelles & Minear, 2010). In fact, disabled people have long organized against other violent practices that remain common in neighborhood schools. Rooted in a long history that privileges narrow conceptions of normalcy, disabled students are often excluded because it's considered necessary and fair for their nondisabled peers (LaNear & Frattura, 2007). This can include placement in segregated settings (e.g., self-contained classrooms; Siuty, 2019), and it can also result in

harmful physical restraint and seclusion. Though policies have aimed to reduce the use of restraint and seclusion in schools, disabled activists, families, and allies have taken action to ensure that policy aligns with what is happening in schools (Smith Richards et al., 2019a; 2019b). For example, the Alliance Against Seclusion and Restraint (ASSR), founded in 2019, currently works to shape and enforce policy, amplify the lived experiences of survivors, and provide education through book studies (AASR, n.d.). Like activists from the 504 Sit-In and #StopTheShock, this serves as another example of disability communities not waiting for policy or the law to change the lives of disabled students. Instead, centering the leadership and experiences of those most impacted by violent ableism, disabled organizers intend to play a key role in structural and systemic changes that will make schools and communities safer and more responsive to students with disabilities and disability labels.

Together, this brief review of disabled activism and leadership and how it has shaped a more just education system serves as both the impetus and foundation for this research study. The past and present history of disability activism has illustrated that when disabled people lead, our world becomes a more just place for disabled people. In the following section, we will discuss how we designed and enacted a study that aimed to privilege the lived experiences and wisdom of disabled and multiply marginalized people to help transform teacher preparation and K–12.

Study Purpose

From broader community work to educational policy, disabled people have always been fighting for students with disabilities to have access to a meaningful and

inclusive education. As such, we used collaborative participatory research methods (Israel et al., 2003) to explore and examine the experiences of disabled people in school and how their lived experiences can shape improvements in special education and special education teacher preparation. By centering the lived experiences of disabled and multiply marginalized people, this study positions disabled people's expertise as vitally important for transforming and improving special education systems.

Research Questions

1. When asked about their K–12 schooling, what supports, barriers, and experiences do people with disabilities identify?
2. What recommendations do disabled people make to improve K–12 schooling?

Methods

Community-Based Participatory Research

This study employed community-based participatory research (CBPR) methods (Israel et al., 2003). After learning that the Boston University special education program was planning to undergo a series of program revisions to improve their teacher preparation for teacher candidates seeking special education licensure, Author 1 formed a community advisory board of five people with disabilities interested in working to improve university education programs. Rooted in the Israel et al. (2003)'s principles of CBPR, this study was founded with the belief that when researchers center and honor the wisdom and knowledge of disabled people, we can generate studies that are reflective and responsive to the communities with whom we work (e.g., Hughes, 2023). In addition to disrupting dominant binaries where people with disabilities are often researched and

seldom positioned as researcher (Lester & Nusbaum, 2018), this project served to illustrate the important assets that disabled people bring to the research process (Hickman & Serlin, 2019; Johnson & McRuer, 2014). At the same time, because disability is not a monolith nor a single marker of one's identity (Annamma et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1991; Erevelles & Minear, 2010), the communal nature of our work provided opportunities to generate knowledge that would have likely been missed had Author 1 conducted the study alone. As such, CBPR methods facilitated a richer and more robust analysis, allowing us to identify important ways to transform K–12 and teacher education so that it was better centered around the assets, lived experiences, and needs of people with disabilities. To meet this aim, we partnered with one another throughout the entire research process and all members were paid for their contributions using a grant awarded to doctoral students completing their dissertation and department level funds.

Because CBPR centers participation and shared labor with those most impacted by the study's area of focus, Author 1 will first describe her own positioning as it relates to this study and how she strove to center the insights and perspectives of the community advisory board. We will then discuss data collection, participants and context, and analytic methods.

Academic Researchers' Positioning

As a white disabled doctoral student-researcher, I consistently examined the ways in which my own sociocultural identity markers were positioned at the nexus of privilege and marginalization. In other words, I contended with the duality of experiencing ableism and privileges within K–12 schools and the academy. For example, I considered my own

experiences as a disabled learner and educator, while also keeping in mind the ways in which my white middle-class identity within broader disability communities afforded me social and academic currency that is not accessible to all people with disabilities. As such, I aimed to decenter myself and incorporated protocols that would afford my community advisory boards the opportunity to meaningfully lead and contribute to the analytic process (see Analysis section for each protocol).

Throughout the research process, I also remained open to feedback and expanded access to strive for the full participation of community advisory board members. This included: refining plain language summaries to clarify what interview prompts participants were responding to, including asynchronous opportunities to participate in analysis, and sending out excerpts for analysis in advance of our meetings.

Study Participants

Recruitment

With the support of the community advisory board and approval from the Boston University IRB office, Author 1 recruited and interviewed 8 participants. A recruitment flyer was shared on social media and via email to our professional and personal networks and communities. To be eligible for the study, participants must have attended school in the United States and met one of the following criteria: (a) identify as a person with a disability, (b) formerly have received special education supports and services when in school, and/or (c) received accommodations on a 504 plan. To facilitate a diverse participant pool across race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, anyone interested in participating was asked to complete a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B).

After purposively selecting participants and prioritizing those with multiply marginalized identities (e.g., Black, Brown, and/or LGBTQ+), participants were invited to schedule a meeting to review and provide consent. All participants who consented to the study then scheduled a one-hour virtual Zoom meeting with Author 1.

Participants' Sociocultural Identities

Participants all identified as disabled or having a disability, and seven participants identified having multiple disabilities. Two participants identified as Black and/or African American, three identified as Latine and/or Hispanic, two identified as multiracial, one participant identified as white, and one participant chose not to disclose. Our sample included diverse gender and sexual identities. Ages of our participants ranged from people in their 20s into their 50s. Please see Table 3.1 for a detailed breakdown of our participants' sociocultural identities.

Throughout our analysis, we also discussed the ways in which participants' positioning at the nexus of multiple oppressions and privileges shaped their schooling experiences, and thus recommendations. For example, participants discussed the ways in which gender identity shaped school professionals' assumptions about autism. Drawing on mainstream conceptions that autistic people are cis boys, participants experienced gatekeeping which led to qualifying for eligibility categories that seemed misaligned with their lived experience and disabled identity. Participants also discussed the ways in which class privilege shaped their family's ability to move to communities where schools had more resources and program and improving their schooling experiences (see our discussion section for a more in-depth examination of how intersectionality likely shaped

participants' schooling experiences).

Table 3.1. Summary Table of Participants' Identities

Identity	Number of Participants	Identity	Number of Participants
Race/Ethnicity		Gender	
Black and/or African-American	2	Nonbinary Woman	1
Latino/a/x/e and/or Hispanic	3	Gender Queer, Gender Fluid, and/or Queer	2
Multiracial	2	Man	2
white	1	Woman	3
Chose not to disclose	1		
Disability		Sexuality	
ADHD	4	Gay	1
Autism	4	Queer	1
Deaf and/or Hard of Hearing	1	Demisexual	1
Ehlers Danlos Syndrome	1	Bisexual	2
Intellectual Disability	1	Polyamorous	1
Mental Health Disabilities	3	Straight	3
Myalgic Encephalitis/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome	1	Age Range	
Visual Impairment	1	20–29	4
Multiple Disabilities	7	30–39	1
Physical Disabilities	3	40–49	2
		50–59	1

Note. Names are all pseudonyms. This table reflects participants' multiple identities; thus each identity category does not necessarily equal the participant total.

Data Collection

The community advisory board began meeting in April 2023 to co-construct community values, discuss the goals of the project, and develop semi-structured interview protocols and recruitment plans so that Author 1, the principal investigator, could submit an Institutional Review Board application to Boston University. During our meetings, we discussed ways to ensure that our interview questions were written in accessible and clear language with multiple ways to respond (e.g., using spoken words, American Sign Language, or in writing). We also had discussions about how to ensure that the interviews were supportive, particularly when participants might be sharing harmful and/or traumatic experiences and memories. This resulted in adding clear language in the interview protocol about taking breaks when needed. In June 2023, we finalized our interview protocol and decided to focus on four main areas: (1) participant's identities, (2) identifying barriers and access in school, (3) experiences with teachers and administrators, (4) and support, self-determination, and self-advocacy. Please see Appendix C for the full protocol. The IRB application was approved in September 2023.

After participants consented into the study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with participants that followed our approved protocol. A semi-structured approach allowed me to focus on questions that aligned with our research questions, while also leaving important space to respond to participants' insights, perspectives, and wisdom. For example, during the interviews, I was able to ask participants to expand and explains things they shared, resulting in a richer data set that centered the lived experiences and voices of our participants. Interviews ranged from 38 minutes to 1 hour

in length. Participants were paid $25 using funds from an internal doctoral student dissertation grant. Author 1 cleaned, deidentified, and transcribed each interview for team analysis.

Analysis

Drawing on the work of inclusive researchers who have worked with community members, including those with disabilities (e.g., Rainbow Guidebook, 2023), we conducted a systematic and access-centered analysis. As Author 1 completed interviews, each audio file was uploaded into Otter Transcription Services, cleaned, and deidentified. This process had two primary purposes. First, it allowed Author 1 to gain a deeper familiarity with the data (e.g., Scott & Anderson, 2020). Second, it allowed her to draft a plain language summary (Pulrang, 2020) to share with the community advisory board.

In our first phase of analysis, we discussed each summary with attention to what stood out to us, what recommendations participants made, what we wondered, and what connections we could see across the data. Our analytic protocol included the following prompts:

1. What stands out to you in these summaries?
2. What recommendations are participants making?
3. What do you wonder?
4. What connections do you see across summaries?

Author 1 took notes during all meetings and looked across our initial analysis for emergent themes. Our initial analysis yielded four emergent themes: (1) critiquing IEP meetings and transition planning, (2) pushing back on imposed labels and assumptions,

(3) valuing humanizing and student-centered teaching practices, (4) and finding and valuing disability culture & community. In our second phase of analysis, Author 1 relistened to each interview and followed along in the cleaned transcript so that she could select salient quotes that aligned with our findings. Excerpts were shared with the community advisory board in advance. Following a similar protocol to Phase 1, we focused on how the excerpt related to the theme, other important issues being raised, and how the excerpt might help teachers improve their practices and better support students with disabilities. Our protocol included:

1. How does the excerpt relate to the theme?
2. What other important issues are being raised in the excerpt related to the participants' schooling experience?
3. How might this excerpt help teachers improve their practices and better support students with disabilities?

Once all excerpts were reviewed and analyzed by the team, Author 1 then engaged in a final round of coding to ensure that our themes and recommendations were firmly reflected in the data. For example, “pushing back on imposed labels and assumptions” was revised to “pushing back on narrow and rigid conceptions of disability and support.” After writing an initial draft of our findings, Author 1 shared it with community advisory board members to ensure that it reflected our analytic process and findings. After the community advisory board provided feedback, Author 1 edited and revised the memo accordingly and finalized our results. For example, one community advisory board recommended that we include more explicit discussion of how

participants' identity markers and positionality shaped their experiences and recommendations (Crenshaw, 1991). In response, Author 1 revised the manuscript to make clearer connections to participants' intersecting oppressions and privileges, particularly in regard to gender and disability.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Peer debriefing. As discussed in our analysis section, we regularly met as a team to ensure that our conclusions and assertions were reflected in the data and that we were in consensus. This included iteratively looking at summaries, excerpts, and memos, and reflecting on the ways in which they relate to our data and research questions. The team provided feedback during meetings, via email, commenting on Google Docs, and by writing their own feedback memos.

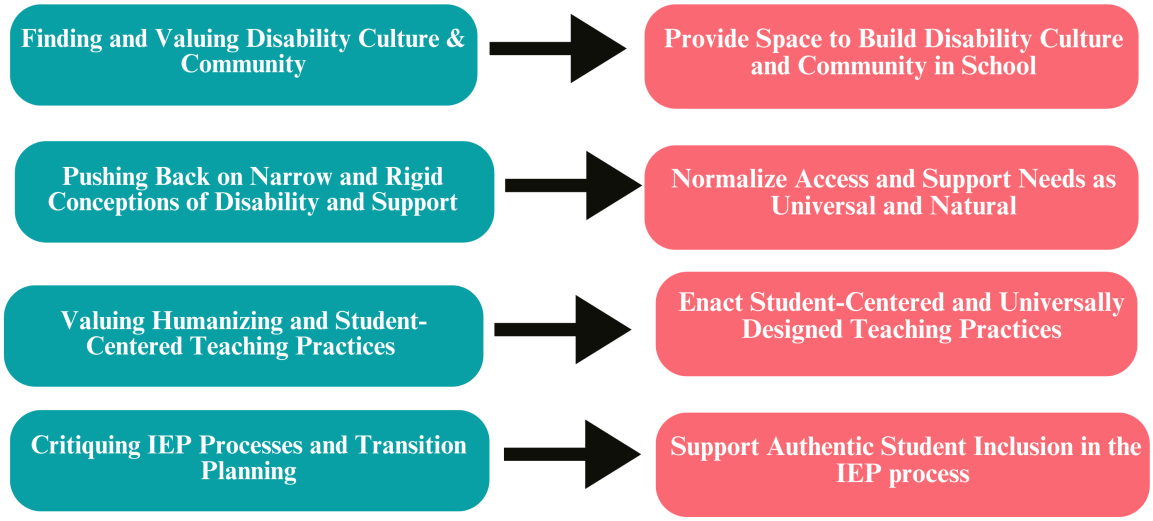
Member checking. After receiving feedback from community advisory board members, Author 1 shared an outline of our findings with each participant for feedback and review. This outline included a summary of each theme and recommendation and a sample of deidentified quotes from participants. Participants were invited, but not required, to share feedback via email or Zoom. Five participants responded with feedback that affirmed findings and small changes were made to align and clarify with participants' insights and perspectives.

Findings

We found that participants often held more complex understandings of disability and accessibility in K–12 schooling than the school-based personnel who worked with them. As such, this disconnect revealed an urgent need for K–12 school and teacher

preparation systems to reflect and enact practices and approaches that meaningfully respond to disabled people's strengths, needs, and lived experiences. Importantly, participants spoke about times when they felt affirmed and supported in their school contexts, which was often by people who shared their own lived experiences with disability. At the same time, they also expressed times when their needs and strengths were unrealized by many educators. In our analysis we uncovered four themes that illustrated how participants experienced schooling, which also shed light on how schools can improve to be more responsive to disabled students' strengths, lived experiences, and support needs.[6] To center action and change in our study, we linked each theme to a concrete recommendation for both K–12 schools and teacher preparation (see Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1. Participants' Experiences and Recommendations.



Note. The figure depicts four recommendations: finding and valuing disability culture and community, pushing back on narrow and rigid conceptions of disability and support, valuing humanizing and student-centered teaching practices, and critiquing IEP processes

[6] Content warning: participants discuss feelings and experiences that include suicidality, ableist treatment from peers, and other harmful experiences related to schooling.

and transition planning. The figure also depicts four recommendations: provide space to build disability culture and community in school, normalize access and support needs as universal and natural, enact student-centered and universally designed teaching practices, and support authentic inclusion in the IEP process.

Theme 1: Finding and Valuing Disability Culture and Community

Sharing Community with Disabled Peers

Participants often discussed the importance of building and sustaining community with other people with disabilities, including disabled peers, disabled family members, disabled educators, and disabled school leaders. Building relationships with other people with disabilities facilitated meaningful interpersonal connection. These relationships also allowed participants to practice disability culture and push back on ways of being, moving, and learning that often upheld nondisabled norms and expectations.

Participants often discussed valuable school experiences when they had opportunities to meet and form friendships with other students with disabilities. In some cases, disabled students were placed together in a resource room or self-contained setting. Participants also discussed times in which students with disabilities found each other in more organic ways. Leanne, for example, shared:

> But in high school, I was around a bunch of people that were also interested in the arts. And as an adult, what we now know is that most of us are some flavor of neurodivergent, as we've come into those identities, even if we never actually had formal accommodations, but we did find each other. And we have these spaces to be ourselves, and to exercise interest in our special interests.

Saying “we did find each other,” Leanne highlighted how shared identities and shared lived experiences brought people together even when it was not necessarily expected. Notably, for Leanne, this community was built through shared interests, a deep love for the arts, and the time and space for them to explore their “special interests” with others. Here, Leanne illustrated the power of ensuring students with disability and disability labels had meaningful opportunities to be in “the driver’s seat of their own learning” (Fritzgerald, 2020) and opportunities to engage beyond traditional academic subject areas.

Participants also discussed the impact of building and sustaining meaningful relationships with other disabled people *after* K–12. Catrina, for example, talked about meeting someone with a disability as a young adult and the strong bond they quickly developed:

> She told me she had... a disability. And she was working as a teacher, which is interesting. Because then I told her, “Hey, can I tell you a secret? I also have a disability too.” And we started to get into a talk about... how people tend to treat disabled students. And she also said that she used to be...insecure about her disability... not only because of bullying, but the lack of understanding from teachers or lack of support. So that was very interesting to hear. Because, you know, it's a unfortunate common experience, but it's also like something that we bond over.... We talked for hours about that...Even someone else commented that “you guys are solving the universe’s problems.” And I'm like, “Yeah, we are.”

In this excerpt, Catrina revealed how much she appreciated and valued the opportunity to meet someone else with a disability and share common experiences that were all too familiar for many disabled learners in school. Through meeting another person with a disability, Catrina was able to safely express the complexities of what it meant to claim and disclose a disabled identity, especially in a social context that might not adequately support or accept people with disabilities (Forber-Pratt et al., 2017; Mueller, 2019). Catrina's social connection with this person allowed them both to speak openly and honestly about the ableism, stigma, and othering that continues to happen in school without fear of being questioned or disbelieved.

Similarly, Sky also shared how they found community with other disabled people after high school. They explained how this community helped them develop their identity as a strong self-advocate *and* their understanding of disability history and rights. They specifically spoke about a service-learning program that tied disability rights and political education with volunteer work:

> …I went to this program called EMPOWER....I joined their service learning program... it's a volunteer program for people with disabilities. And we kind of just go in and we do days where we go and clean up a park, but there will be days where it will be very informative. And that's where I learned about the ADA, what the 504 meant, and all of the other things that, you know, I didn't know about until recently....When I learned that the ADA is not that old, it's around the time...where I am, like..."how old I am?" I was like, "wow, okay, this makes so much sense why they didn't want to tell me all of this." I didn't get any, like

> referrals or anything after high school. So I kind of just did everything on my own. And a lot of people were very surprised that I'm the advocate that I am, to just do it on my own. Because I wanted to know, and there were services out there that I could've partake in if my transition plan was the way that it was supposed to be. And the fact that it wasn't, I kind of just had to push myself and my mom did help with some of the work with trying to figure out what's out there.
>
> Because...[she] didn't want me to just be a lone wolf figuring out my adult life.

Not wanting "to just be a lone wolf" as they navigated adulthood, Sky was very clear that their participation in these programs was due to their own research, initiative, and desire to be in control of their life. While they received help from their mom, there was little to no support or referrals from their school. Moreover, the connections and knowledge built throughout the EMPOWER program, connected Sky to disability histories (i.e., Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504) and crystallized their right to services and supports that were lacking during their schooling.

Sharing Community with Disabled Teachers and School Leaders

Participants also talked about formative and supportive K–12 school experiences where they felt protected, affirmed, and supported by teachers and school administrators with disabilities. Maria, for example, talked about the power of having an educator with a visible disability. She cited the relationships he built with students and his willingness to be open with students as particularly memorable:

> I can share with you that Mr. Roberts sharing that moment or time with us...of ...losing his vision, you know, progressively. That was incredible. And I don't

> think that there was one student that was ever disrespectful to Mr. Roberts, you know, raising their voice or being rude or slamming something on the…desk. I think that we all bonded with him. There was great respect, you know, for Mr. Roberts in the classroom. And... I think that a lot came out of that experience of him sharing about himself. He didn't have to...

While importantly clarifying that Mr. Roberts did not have to share or disclose his disability with students, Maria expressed how his openness was appreciated and cherished. This willingness to share parts of himself with his students was due in large part to the trust and bonds built in their classroom. Earlier in the interview, Maria also explained that Mr. Roberts shared more than just one single marker of his identity (i.e., disability), he shared other things as well, like being a vegetarian. She said "He was the first person that I ever...knew that...[was] a vegetarian. And I saw him eating foods that were different, you know...and he would always offer me to give it a try." Maria and her peers saw Mr. Roberts as more than just a teacher who delivered instruction; he was a full person with unique strengths, lived experiences, support needs, and interests. For Maria, this was a formative and memorable experience that expanded her understanding of human diversity.

Annie also talked about the importance of having a meaningful relationship with a disabled adult in her school. For her, it was a school principal who shared the same disability. Annie explained that he would often check in on her and make sure that she was safe, meaningfully included, and getting the supports needed to thrive:

> I remember very vividly that he would check in with me whenever he… saw me in the hallways...He would make it a point to like come down the line to me and… he'd asked me "How are the other kids treating you? How are things going? How ya feeling? You feeling good?"...It was [my] kindergarten teacher Miss Smith... 'Do you trust Miss Smith?... you can tell her...you know, if anybody's been mean to..[you], right?' And that continued. And when I had my first surgery, he was actually the person pushing back on the teachers… because ...some of the teachers wanted to have me pulled into the sped [classroom] at that point... So then I guess they were trying to separate me out into sped because the teachers didn't know what to do with my wheelchair….And so my parents pushed back and he pushed back. And I remember him showing up in the classroom a couple times and just kind of like, standing against the doors, you know, and I didn't think anything of it as a kid other than like, "Oh, he's checking on me" [Now], as an adult with education training. I'm like, he was making sure those teachers didn't do...[bad] stuff. Cool, you know?

This quote revealed a deep form of solidarity that developed between Annie and her principal, which illustrated how important it is for disabled people to not only be represented in the K–12 workforce, but also hold meaningful positions in leadership. For Annie, her principal was able to prevent and push back on educators who wanted to exclude her for using a wheelchair. In addition, he was often modeling a critically important message: disabled students deserve to be treated with dignity. When he was checking-in with her and making sure that her peers *and* teachers were treating her well,

he was explicitly asserting that being treated poorly was not acceptable. To Annie, he was saying: I see you for all of who you are, and you deserve to feel safe in this community. Moreover, Annie's principals served as a powerful example of how disabled teachers can provide critical support and respite from spaces that have not always protected people with disabilities.

Sharing Community with Disabled Family Members

Participants also talked about building shared understanding and lived experiences with family members with disabilities. Leanne grew up with a disabled parent who was also a special educator, which gave them meaningful access to disability communities and spaces. Leanne described why they found comfort in a special education classroom that had a supportive teacher who built a safe space for students, including Leanne:

> ....So I'd always grown up actually around special education classrooms, because my mom, [a wheelchair user herself,] was subbing in what could be termed as "mod [moderate to] severe" special education classrooms. So this was already a space of comfort for me, in a lot of ways..... So like, I had a lot of connections to this community, but it was also about that space, it's that I felt comfortable going to...[these] classrooms, I felt like I belonged there in certain ways, which is very interesting, because…that [classroom] was a space that I saw was for me. But...it's not like I had a diagnosis.... I had to leave at a certain time to go to my mainstream classroom. So yes, it was about the space. But it was also like, I felt comfortable there already, even if I didn't, or couldn't name why.

In this quote, Leanne spoke about feeling a strong affinity to spaces that supported and affirmed students with disabilities at a time before they knew they had disabilities themselves. Here, Leanne's use of words like "space of comfort," suggests they did not feel a sense of community simply because of a setting label (i.e., "self-contained"). Instead, they spoke to how their response to this classroom was shaped by their own family's lived experiences with disability. Leanne's experiences highlighted how their family's identities and connection to disability can empower and support students to seek out such community in their schools.

Recommendation 1: Provide Space to Build Disability Culture and Community in School

Just as Sky and Catrina named the powerful impact that being in community with other disabled people had on their sense of self, they also recommended that schools actively foster opportunities for students to connect with other people with disabilities. Catrina suggested that high schools start clubs that support neurodivergent students:

> But I think it'll be nice...[to] have some clubs around campus, especially when it comes to like, neurodiversity....I hear from other high school kids...that...they tend to be more open about their disorders these days.... I feel like that's good, because that makes it easier to instead of hiding ...who you are, or what you're born with, you can get some more support, especially social support...

Catrina highlighted how being in community with others who share similar lived experiences with disability and neurodivergence can be an important support, and schools should intentionally provide this space for students. "Instead of hiding," Catrina's words

suggested that these spaces can provide affirmation, encourage self-acceptance, and give students what they need to navigate social situations and contexts without erasing who they are.

Like Catrina, Sky also discussed the importance of connecting with other people with disabilities. Sky, however, recommended that schools provide opportunities for disabled graduates to visit schools and mentor students with disabilities:

> Because I feel like we, as people with disabilities, already have a hard time making friends and making community. The fact that they [students] were able to at least see one person that's doing the work, and that we see them, and we can sort of connect with them with...whatever type of disability they have. And if we're able to...at least try to keep in touch with that one person...that makes...all [the] difference, because we already have a hard time making friends, or just...connecting with our community because of our disabilities or because... society wants to keep us...away from each other. So...it's so important to see us in that light, where they're [students] like, "oh, yeah, you know, maybe... I want to go in into a school and talk about...what happened to me so that it doesn't happen to you." Or... just to have a conversation, even just that...helps the students so much, because even if I don't see the student ever again, I know that I made an impact that they would remember.

Aligned with existing research that has found that disabled students often do not see disabled adults reflected in their K–12 school experiences (Mueller, 2021), Sky spoke to the promise of disabled mentorship. Importantly, Sky asserted that this mentorship is

needed because of the structural and systemic barriers maintained by dominant society. Recognizing that people with disabilities experience challenges maintaining and building friendships, Sky cited society as the problem—not the disabled person. As such, when Sky said, "I want to go in into a school and talk about...what happened to me so that it doesn't happen to you," they are focused on interrupting a pattern that leaves disabled students under-supported in schools. Building and sustaining community with other people with disabilities is a way to unmake and disrupt systems that leave disabled people disconnected, alienated, and othered from the communities in which they are a part. Overall, participants advocated for schools that centered a culture and climate that affirmed and supported students with disabilities and provided space for them to be their whole self[7] and connect with others who shared their lived experiences.

Theme 2: Pushing Back on Narrow and Rigid Conceptions of Disability and Support

Many participants also discussed experiences that were the result of views from school-based personnel that positioned disability and access through a binary that was rooted in deficit conceptions of who and who did not need support. Veronica shared that she believed that her mental and physical health needs may have been missed because she was "a gifted overachiever." As a result, both Veronica and her teachers were not aware of the very real needs and barriers she experienced during her schooling:

[7] We used this term to fully encompass all of students' sociocultural identities (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, disability) without having to mask or conform to dominant norms (e.g., white, nondisabled, male cisgender, straight norms)

> ...It wasn't obvious at that time that I had access needs that weren't being addressed, because I was achieving so well on paper. But it doesn't mean that the struggles were [not] very, very there beneath the surface, and not in a way that I was...really able to communicate or was even necessarily fully aware of myself. It wasn't until, like both my mental and physical health kind of started to fall apart in my junior and senior years of college that I started to recognize that I had more needs...that weren't being addressed or that weren't being accommodated, which was, [at] which time I sought disability accommodations.

Like many schools in the US, Veronica shared how she was part of a school culture that reproduced narrow assumptions of what someone needed based on their grades and achievement "on paper" (e.g., Leonardo & Broderick, 2011). Throughout the interview, Veronica emphasized that accessibility was complex and "there's way more to it" than just looking at someone's grades to determine what a student might need. Moreover, Veronica's experience suggested that students who are considered high-achieving are often excluded from receiving accommodations, a form of gatekeeping with potentially serious implications and consequences. For Veronica, being part of a school culture that associated support and access needs with one's so-called "intelligence," meant that she struggled to communicate and develop the self-awareness required to identify her strengths *and* needs. As such, Veronica's words brought to light the harmful consequences of what can happen when accommodations and supports are conflated with deficit perceptions of ability/intelligence. More specifically, in our analysis, we found that disabled students who were considered so-called low achieving *and* high achieving

were negatively impacted. Students were reduced to either needs, or their strengths, but seldom both.

Other participants discussed similar binaries where students were viewed and labeled in narrow ways. Matthew explained how his school was divided into an "upstairs" and "downstairs." "Downstairs kids" were students who might have had "anxiety or stuff like that" or "got in trouble or something." "Upstairs kids" were associated with gangs, youth detention centers, and breaking the law. By his last year of high school, however, they merged both programs and Matthew shared that this gave him an opportunity to get to know the kids who had been placed upstairs:

> They just kind of merged [upstairs and downstairs]...And I was like, "Oh, that's cool"... I just kind of I liked it...because then then there were like all these other kids. ...And they weren't all... like kids that got in trouble and stuff.... It just seemed like they just split them and put them up there anyway... it was kind of strange... And there's... one kid, for example, that I that I was friends with on Facebook...but because he was upstairs, I didn't really get to hang out with them or anything like that...during school. And then... when they merged it, then suddenly I was I was able to hang out with them....So that's... an example of...before it was..."Oh, they split everything." And then it was like, "Oh, now we can kind of all be in the same classes."

Matthew shed light on how schools can create siloes that reproduce the notion that there are "good kids" and "bad kids." In his case, students who were placed upstairs were criminalized, whereas the students who were placed downstairs were viewed as needing

mental health supports. There was a clear dichotomy between students who found themselves "in trouble" and students who found themselves navigating the criminal legal system. Importantly, Matthew problematized the labeling and separation of students in his school, as he pointed out how these labels did not accurately reflect his peers and classmates. In addition, he shared how much he appreciated it when students were finally not separated, which gave him an opportunity to build relationships and connections with classmates across both floors.

Finally, Sky also shared how narrow assumptions and labels around their academic needs and "functioning" levels shaped where they received instruction, and the quality of that instruction. In their freshmen year, Sky was moved into smaller classes and these classes felt very repetitive and too easy. Though Sky explained that the one-on-one support and smaller class sizes were helpful for minimizing distractions, they felt like they were receiving instruction that did not match their level. This meant that they often finished assignments very quickly without a clear plan of what they should do next. Sky said that the placement decision was based off testing that was challenging and felt very different than what was happening in classrooms:

> I think they kept going off [testing]...They would test me... at least every three years[8] or so. So I felt like they were going off whatever that they tested by. And so, of course the testing was more was...harder because the questions...they were asking. I don't remember, but they were hard for me to answer. And then for me

[8] Under IDEA (2004), students who qualify for special education must undergo a reevaluation (i.e., testing) every three years.

> to understand certain things that they were asking, so of course it was a little different from the testing aspect to like the classroom... And they were going by whatever number or whatever...Testing for me has always been hard. So I've always had a struggle, going into whatever test, whether it was the [high stakes test], or figuring out where...[my] level [is]..in... my classroom...And I think they knew that. But I don't know...[and] testing is what they do, or at least what they've been doing for the longest time. And that's how they figure out things. So I don't know, what could change with that to make it better.

Sky shared how testing constrains both students and teachers. For Sky, their testing did not align with what they were learning and doing in their classroom, nor did it feel accessible enough to fully capture what they already knew and could do as a learner. While testing was "always...a struggle," Sky was also aware of how such testing is "what they've [school] been doing for [the] longest time." Through sharing their experiences, Sky troubled a status quo that did not leave students or educators with much agency or autonomy. Sky illustrated how when school systems were required to uphold norms that privileged standardized testing, school-based personnel often had little choice but to reproduce services and supports that reflected the test and not the strengths, lived experiences, and needs of the actual student.

Recommendation 2: Normalize Access Needs as Universal and Natural

Embrace and Talk About Access Needs

As participants shared experiences where access needs and support were conditionally provided based on one's perceived level of intelligence and "goodness,"

they also made it clear that school systems were well positioned to unmake these binaries by taking a much more expansive and inclusive approach to accessibility. Participants shared the power of understanding access beyond labels that positioned disabled people as so-called needy or low functioning. For Maria, Mr. Roberts embodied the both/and of being an excellent educator without having to erase his experiences or identity as a disabled person. Similarly, John, who became an educator, discussed the importance of talking to students about disability and accessibility. He reflected on his own practices with students:

> Now that..[I am an] adult and I have experienced a physical disability, I wish I could have...known about disabilities in general...[In] my teaching... I talk to my students about a disability, because...they can see that it's there,...And when I can't go up the stairs, they understand why... I take the elevator....I always take time...to talk about my disability and...that accommodation and what that means for them....
>
> ...Most students are actually very curious about it, they want to know more, they want to know..."What is your disability? Why do you have this disability? How did it happen?"...And I take the time to...[answer] them...Of course, we have...some gloves on, but...I definitely take the time to answer them...I want to make sure that we're all comfortable and understand what's going on in my class.
>
> ...And... they react very positively to it. There's no one who's... laughing at me, or..making fun of me, which is fantastic....They are totally respectful and willing to help in every single way that they can. They want to pass out papers, they pass

> up papers, if they want to...If they want to make sure that I have a stool at circle time...take things to the front desk for me...

For John, his conversations with students were driven by the visibility of being a person with a physical disability and having support needs that his students "can see." By being forthcoming and responsive to their curiosity, he built and sustained a classroom climate where access needs were normalized for *everyone*, including educators. Centering and privileging students' comfort and understanding, he modeled how everyone can contribute to and ensure that their community meets everyone's needs. For John and his students, there was no shame in having a disability, needing accommodations, or sharing those needs.

Annie also talked about how her own experiences as an adult shaped how she thinks about honoring access and human diversity. Annie discussed her experiences as a disabled parent:

> [Did we talk about disability in school?] Absolutely not. That's not a question...I actually cried when I bought my daughter, the *Mama Zooms* book, because it was published in the timeframe that I was in elementary school.... And I never even knew that book existed until 2021, when my daughter was born. And the heartbreak, and I I'm speaking to this from very personal experience, again, that like the heartbreak I had, right? ...[My] daughter's, almost two and a half....She now brings me the *Mama Zooms* book every night and says "Mama, your wheels book."

> If my two-and-a-half year old can understand, right? That mama has wheels and that mama is different and it's okay. There's a level of grief over: why weren't the kids around me taught? Why wasn't I taught that it was okay to be different? You know because I got pulled out a lot for like PT/OT [physical therapy/occupational therapy] in elementary school. So you think about all that removal from instruction time. But... there could have been efforts and I think there's a lot of we just didn't know what we didn't know. And things are better now. And we also still have a lot to implement.

Here, Annie named missed opportunities in school to talk about disability and how it impacted her and her peers. Further, her daughter's engagement with a book that normalized and celebrated disability, wheelchair users, and disabled parenthood was instructive to Annie, and now to teacher preparation. Annie highlighted how when we give students windows into experiences, identities, and cultures that are not their own, and when we give students mirrors that reflect who they fully are (Bishop, 1990), there is an opportunity to build and sustain school communities that are truly supportive of disabled students. Unfortunately, for Annie this opportunity was not fully realized or recognized when she was a student. However, as Maria and John, and now Annie as a parent, have illustrated: there are educators and community members who have been doing the work to make sure that we build better communities and better schools that fully support and affirm people with disabilities.

Theme 3: Valuing Humanizing and Student-Centered Teaching Practices

Participants valued teaching approaches and practices that centered their strengths, interests, and support needs. John talked specifically about valuing teachers who centered students, instead of worksheets and textbooks:

> There weren't a lot of worksheets given out... it wasn't a lot of homework, which is probably a good thing for me….So there's a lot of... "Think about this…" "How does this make you feel?" kind of thing. As opposed to, "Here are the rules," "Here is what's happening here" …. It definitely felt different. In a way, it felt very personal. And I felt like I learned more because of that because it wasn't so rigid with the rules and with worksheets and workbooks and textbooks... I had one class where I didn't have a textbook at all. It was history class. And she just taught...just by talking to us. It was kind of like a college class, I guess you could say… We took notes. And, you know, we kind of went with those notes. And... we had tests or quizzes every other week, just to make sure that we were on top of the subject matter. But there was….no kind of like rigid structure where...everyone had to learn in the same way…. I think, for the most part...she made sure that we all heard her, and we all had to discuss these things as a class and became more of a community… We got to know each other through that class and then became friends because of that...

John shared important components of teaching that allowed him and his peers to think critically, and learn in a way that felt supportive to them and their needs. He highlighted that his teacher's approaches "felt very personal," which enhanced his learning.

Additionally, quizzes and tests were given with intentionality; they served as meaningful opportunities to ensure that students were making progress. These practices allowed for the class to become "more of a community." Importantly, John also identified instructional practices that encouraged and supported critical reflection and thinking instead of static and "rigid" conveying of information to students. For John, he valued personalized teaching that included opportunities for students to think, self-monitor their own feelings and reactions, *and* engage in intentional assessment. This was important because, for John, his learning felt most impactful and supportive when it meaningfully included students' perspectives and focused on academic growth.

Maria also discussed positive experiences with educators and classmates when instruction was tailored to their strengths, interests, and needs. Maria shared that her teachers responded to students' enthusiasm for learning with an opportunity to create and publish a student-run newspaper:

> I think somebody must have planted the seed somewhere….Because… they saw how much involvement there was. In the end, they probably figure "Hey, we ought to challenge them, set up some priorities, some goals, some ways of needing to manage things, you know, these kids have a lot of...of energy unused, why not utilize it?" And so someone planted that seed, "How about you know, a little, quote unquote, newspaper?" And… we agreed to it. We… did not feel that "Oh, my Goodness You know, that is too much!" Suddenly... here we are, you know beyond the classwork. Now we're getting more work to do... in the school. And of course, it happened during the school hours. And then after school, there

> were times that we would meet... at a library...and do a little bit of... coordinating of the work that we were going to take on the following day. And the teachers were into that. And I think...that it's a great accountability of the engagement of the teachers, that they planted that little seed in there.

In this quote, Maria shared how teachers fostered learning opportunities that put students in control of their learning ("they planted that little seed"). Responding to students' engagement and interests, they empowered and encouraged students to take on academic tasks that were meaningful and applicable to their lives inside and outside of schools. By highlighting that she and her peers also "agreed to it," Maria made it clear that her classmates were treated as partners in the learning process. Her teachers engaged them in the content being taught, as well as decisions related to their education.

Participants also discussed approaches and practices that supported their academic learning when they were struggling. While many participants were skeptical and at times critical of self-contained settings for students with disabilities and disability labels, some participants found value in receiving support in a resource room to meet academic goals. Though Sky was critical of the education they received in self-contained classes, they found value in the additional support provided in a resource room:

> I'd say I like to do pull out of…the classroom. One, because I, at that time, I feel kind of special being pulled out of a classroom, just because it was me. And going into a different setting was really nice, because I like the change of scenery. So... it was nice to be pulled out of a classroom that I was in all day and then going into a smaller classroom... down the hall. ...The teacher that I had... she would be very

> helpful...talking to me, figuring out what would be... the best thing that I can...write about...If I was [in] an English class, and...we're writing about a book that we're reading, she would be very in depth, and she would read the book with me....And it was nice that I was able to have that... one-on-one with a teacher. Because I didn't have that once going back into the classroom. So I think my teacher in the classroom tried to do it as best as she could, but because she had like 20 kids in her classroom, I wasn't expecting too much. So it was nice to have that...one-on-one...having the teacher... read to me, whatever…I didn't understand. The questions that were given to me when I was writing about the book was helpful. And then it was also nice...for her to look through what I wrote so that if there's any...mistakes like spelling or grammar that... I would make some sense in my own paragraph. Because I don't want to go back to the classroom, and it's just a jumble of words that doesn't make sense. So it was nice that she looked at that and was able to help me with that.

While Sky named the one-on-one support as "nice" and a welcome "change of scenery," they also identified the setting itself as a positive support, identifying specific practices that were responsive to their strengths and needs as a learner. By choosing to read the classroom text with Sky, the teacher partnered *with* them to ensure that they comprehended the texts they were reading and that their writing made sense. In other words, Sky's teacher was not an all-knowing expert positioned to give Sky all the information they need; there was a reciprocal relationship to their learning. In addition to supportive instructional approaches, Sky's experiences being "pulled-out" (i.e., receiving

academic support in a resource room), were in response to the realities and challenges of teaching and learning in a classroom of 20 students. For Sky, because the classroom teacher was constrained by the size of the class, the resource room was a space that allowed them to engage "in depth" with the academic content.

Participants also talked about feeling disconnected to instruction that was not aligned with their own strengths, lived experiences, and needs. Matthew, for example, discussed his participation in an additional year of high school where he was supposed to learn skills needed after K–12:

> I just kind of wished...when we were in school.. they kind of taught us... how to...do taxes ...Stuff that people will do when they actually, you know, grow up and stuff.... because then...when you leave high school, it's almost like..."what the heck's going on?".... And that's partly why I had I had this...extra year... it was kind of for that reason ...I guess give you an idea of how to do certain things. But again, it was a similar situation to you know, it was like "Hey, we're gonna go to the store or we're going to go to like the mall or we're going to go on a bus and this is how you use the bus or whatever...." I already...[took] the bus and stuff all of the time... For me, it was like stuff I already knew or stuff that... wasn't aimed at me...or aimed at...people that might have been in a similar position. To me it was more kind of...beginner stuff. ...After the basic stuff, it doesn't... seem like there's anything...after that... That's kind of... what I wish...schools...would...do more of...explain certain things.

Matthew spoke about the consequences of designing educational experiences and

instruction that did not meaningfully consider students' past and present experiences or post K–12 goals. For Matthew, he was in an extended K–12 program that was in theory supposed to help him gain skills for navigating life after high school. Unfortunately, however, this program made assumptions about what he needed without opportunities for him to have a meaningful say in what he was learning and participating in. Unlike Sky and Maria where they discussed the power of teacher-learner partnership, Matthew was at the whim of others' decision making, which often seemed to be misaligned with his own hopes, desires, and needs.

Finally, participants also valued teachers and approaches that responded to their needs with empathy, understanding, and a strengths-based lens. Veronica, for example, discussed experiencing challenges in high school when her "mental health started to fall apart" and how she wished her teachers responded:

> And like I said, in high school, when I started getting Ds, some of my...[teachers] were like, "Hey, this isn't your best work. Would you like to retake this test?" And I'm like, "Sure, let me try again." And I did better versus some of the...[teachers] were like, "No, you got an A plus first semester, you got a B second semester, you got a C third semester, you got a D fourth semester, you just don't understand it." Like, that's really not what it is. I just don't care anymore because I'm too depressed. And some of them just, they put those grades in my report card.

Veronica appreciated and valued teachers who viewed her performance on exams with a more holistic lens, instead of adhering to rigid grading norms and protocols that reduced

her down to a single score on an exam. She struggled to feel fully seen and supported by teachers whose grading approaches missed opportunities to address and support the root causes of her performance, which were related to her mental health needs and not her academic ability or skills. Not only did this mean that Veronica's needs were unrealized, but so were her strengths. By viewing each exam grade as an absolute marker of her comprehension, and ignoring her unmet needs, her teachers were not able to consider or appreciate the knowledge, insights, and skills that the test was unable to capture.

Recommendation 3: Enact Student-Centered and Universally Designed Teaching Practices

Build Relationships Built Around Affirmation, Reciprocity, and Partnership

In our analysis, we found that participants valued and responded to teaching that was responsive to their strengths, lived experiences, support needs, and goals. To meet this aim, teachers needed to be willing to build and sustain strong and trusting relationships with students. Like Annie's principal and Maria's teacher (Mr. Roberts) this relationship should be built on reciprocity where the teacher shares aspects of themselves with students. Aligned with Annie and Maria, Leanne drew on their experiences when they shared what teachers can do to foster a strong and trusting teacher-learner partnership:

> She's [Ms. Quinn] really engaging in the arts. So she like really brought that into the classroom. She also talked to me like I was a person... When I say "like a person," I mean some teachers and some adults just in general talk down to kids, and they don't approach them from an adult level. And…that's not saying... [talk

> about] inappropriate topics, but it's acknowledging... the humanity...of somebody. So that was really important. And thinking back now, as an adult, it's probably...because she saw that I didn't have many friends in the classroom, or saw that...people didn't necessarily treat me very well. So I was also isolated, quite often, because that was a heavy period of bullying in my life. And then in high school, it was really focused on my teachers that were surrounding... musical theater. So I had already found...my special interest...if I hadn't had that, I probably wouldn't have had a such a great time in high school. But I had an English teacher that was also one of my theater teachers later in the day. And he was really understanding and really...welcoming for students to come sit in his classroom at lunch. And he was really... willing to engage on a lot of different subjects and tolerate all the, you know, weird highschoolers stuff that we would pull up on YouTube and share his own interests and allow us to share our[s]…so that was a really welcoming space.

Leanne's teachers were receptive and responsive to their experiences navigating school as a disabled learner. Ms. Quinn spoke to Leanne in a way that made them feel fully seen and affirmed during a time when they were deeply impacted by a school culture that did not make them feel included or welcome. At a time when they felt deep isolation, they valued educators who recognized and centered their humanity. In the case of their English teacher, he provided spaces and opportunities for students to bring their whole selves into the classroom.

Participants also discussed the importance of proactive supports and tools that

were aligned with students' strengths and needs. Annie, when talking about her principal who advocated and looked out for her, identified how he ensured that she had access *and* instruction around how to use assistive technology:

> He advocated for me to start learning typing earlier than any of the other kids did....They got special software brought for me to learn typing skills. And I was the only kid working on typing skills, because he said it would be important. And he was right. Because then…I moved on to using... keyboard input. So he, he advocated for that.

Likely shaped by his lived experience as a disabled person, his advocacy did not end at simply purchasing the appropriate software; he also made sure that Annie learned how to use it.

While Annie and Leanne built meaningful relationships with educators, Catrina discussed supportive special educators and therapists who helped her navigate attending school while also experiencing serious social anxiety. Catrina explained a relationship that was once again built on trust, reciprocity, and making sure the practice fully met its purpose and her needs. Catrina described the process of re-entering classes after having to take an extended break due to social anxiety:

> I remember one day I asked...one of the teachers from the IEP...if I could go back to the classrooms because...I was ready to...start my normal routine schedule. And we made up a plan... only go to three classes a day, because there was six classes I had to go to, but I only went to three on the first few weeks. I remember...the first class I went to, I didn't make it, I ended up leaving the classroom again because I

> was nervous. So I went to talk to my therapist. And...she gave me... some strategies to work with…if...I felt anxious in the classroom. And miraculously, the second class I went to the next day, I was able to stay in the classroom the whole time for the very first time since I developed my anxiety disorder. And I thought that was amazing, because I'm like, if I could do this,...I can stay in through the rest of the classrooms. And that's what happened.... So since then... I will be able to go to all my... six classes. Sometimes I did feel anxious.... And my senior year, I did my whole I did everything normal, I didn't have to, like, you know, stay in one class all day, I would just be in multiple classes.

In this quote, Catrina was positioned as an active and agentic learner whose goals were meaningfully considered and supported by her teacher and therapist. More specifically, they both positively responded to her desire to re-enter the classroom, as well as her need for more support when she experienced barriers with the initial plan. Instead of questioning Catrina's goals or demanding perfection, they problem solved together so that Catrina could meet her goal and feel safe and comfortable in class.

Enact Universally Designed & Access-Centered Pedagogy

During interviews some participants shared dreams of classrooms that were designed with disabled learners and learner variability in mind. Annie and Leanne drew on Universal Design for Learning (Rose & Meyer, 2002) and access-centered approaches that reject narrow ways of moving, learning, and sensing. Leanne said:

> I wish that teachers could create a more playful space overall, because when I think about my education, the education that I most value, and was the most

> generative for me, was Ms. Quinn's poetry series of lessons that helped me develop a love of language. And I could invest more in my reading, or this art specific program that occurred from sixth period and after school that I really got to invest my time in, in high school. And in elementary school, it was at recess that I got to play and imagine on the field, I wish more of those spaces, were not spaces that are...outside of the classroom. Right? I wish more of those spaces were embedded in our K through 12 classrooms. Because I mean...what if we did get to play and it was more flexible? Then you wouldn't feel the need to correct students every time they fidget in their chairs, or they have to get up and be disruptive. I've also seen classrooms embed more of these things like having fidgets on walls more. A student had a specific accommodation, where...he'd go get their chewy, which was a fidget that we could actually chew on. Instead of chewing on pencils. I always got corrected for chewing on my pencils. And I was like, I don't know what to do. Like, I would break them nearly. So...I'm thinking... do we need the classroom with tons of seats and chairs and worksheets? Some of that we need, some of that we don't, but our classrooms are just saying that we do.

Building bridges between aspects of learning that were traditionally seen as enrichment or "add-ons" (i.e., play and the arts), Leanne connected them to approaches that can be embedded into K–12 curricula. Not only did they view this as an opportunity for students to develop a love of learning, but they connected it to students' access needs. In other words, when we build a classroom environment that is flexible *and* rooted in joy, students get what they need to thrive as learners without having to suppress or mask who they are.

By troubling worksheets and rigid rules, Leanne reimagined a schooling environment that was truly student-centered *and* learning-centered.

Annie also talked about the promise of approaches that centered access without stigmatizing and othering students with disability labels. Specifically talking about Universal Design for Learning (Rose & Meyer, 2002), she said:

> I've seen educators just completely miss ...[that a] student had an IEP or 504. I mean, just completely miss it. So then you start talking about UDL...How do you implement it? How do you structure that? Because that's actually less overwhelming for the teachers overall, and engages in giving a better learning process for all learners. Rather than othering....the student who is either visibly or invisibly disabled....We know a lot more now than we did then. And it's amazing. As, as I'm kind of talking to you, and walking back through this. I'm like, "man, we know so much more now." Yeah. And if there's, I guess one thing I can say to, you know, your students or other people who will read this, you know, when we know better, we do better.

In this quote, Annie troubled disabled/nondisabled binaries and positioned UDL as a framework that can safeguard and protect students with disabilities from the stigma that comes with needing accommodations in a school context that privileges a one-size-fits all model. Importantly, Annie did not suggest that schools abolish IEPs, instead she foregrounded the power of a framework that can push back on cookie cutter conceptions of students and their needs. Annie asserted that when educators implement UDL, all learners benefit. Further, teachers can proactively address barriers that disabled students

might encounter instead of relying on plans and documents that might be missing, incomplete, or hard to find.

Theme 4: Critiquing IEP Processes and Transition Planning

Participants shared critiques of IEP meetings and transition planning, which highlighted how their participation was often superficial. In some cases, this led to accommodations, supports, and services that were inadequate or misaligned to their strengths, needs, and experiences in school. Matthew talked about being present for IEP meetings after the age of 14, but having little idea about what was going on:

> I did have IEP meetings...every year, but yeah, kind of around 14 or so...It's...when I was...in high school. Maybe 9th grade, 10th grade was the first time that I was actually in one. Before that, …they would just meet with my mom or something at some point. But then when I was in high school, …then... I was part of it. And...whenever I had those...I didn't really know...what it was about...until maybe the final year where they were ...were talking about transitions and stuff…When I went to the transition program… kind of after high school type stuff, then then it kind of made sense for the first time. Before that it was more just kind of...all the adults talking. I'm just kind of there. And I'm like, oh, "what's going on?"
>
> …It was like...they were just talking about... whatever...they were...writing notes... I didn't really know…I guess…I kind of knew…what people were talking about but…I just kind of felt out of the loop. But I was just there at the same time.

> And the meeting was about me, but…I was just like, "I don't know what's going on."…Then the final year, then it...felt a little more like I was in it. ...That's kind of when they're like, "Alright… what do you think you're going to do after school?" ...That type of stuff.…That's kind of... when… it felt like I was actually part of it or something. I felt like it actually kind of made sense....All the other times it was pretty much just like some boring meeting.

Matthew shared experiences where for many years he was physically present at his IEP meetings but was not provided with meaningful opportunities to participate or be included until his final year in high school. While he "felt out of the loop" for most of these meetings, his experiences in his final year represented a promising example of what was possible when students' perspectives, hopes, and desires were centered. Before he was asked questions about how he wanted to live his life, he found those meetings "boring," and he also expressed that he did not always know what was going on. For Matthew, school-based personnel appeared to have valued his input in matters related to life *after* K–12, but not necessarily about matters related to his life and learning *during* K–12. This suggested that the IEP team might not have seen the ways in which K–12 and post K–12 experiences interrelate, especially for disabled learners who often have to advocate for themselves before, during, and after they graduate high school. Thus, Matthew's quote provided key insights related to *when* schools should include students in their own IEP, as well as *what* the school should be asking students about during the IEP process

Sky shared the ways in which their own experiences after high school were shaped by their experiences in the special education system:

> …this was a long time ago, in like, kindergarten, and that's when they were testing me for an IEP. Back then they weren't really sure what to call my disability. My mom was very confused, too, because she was trying to figure out what exactly it was… They were trying to do dyslexia, because at the time, I was having trouble reading and then writing. And then they're like, "No, it's similar to that. But it's not that, it's something else." And then, when they figured it out..it was just an intellectual disability. My mom was like, "Okay," … I'm not entirely sure. That right there has always been a question for me as to like, if that's the right one, or if it's with, it's this one combined with a whole bunch of other ones that are combined together, because I didn't notice all of my disabilities until after high school….I got diagnosed with ADHD at the age of two. And I never remember that testing at all. The fact that they had really old testing from the age of like two, and I don't remember, and they didn't put it in my IEP seemed kind of sketchy to me, because they knew all this time, it was in their paperwork. And it wasn't there. So the only thing that they were, I guess taking care of was intellectual disability, and everything else was just kind of like on the sideline. And also back then…my mom always had this suspicion that I was or is autistic...And as a person who was born female, it's kind of hard to test girls or people you know, who are born female as to figure out if they have that because the way that they perceive themselves who are autistic is a little different than it is

> with boys.... So, because I show the signs back then, and then I also show certain things that were a little different as what is typical for girls, I didn't get my diagnosis until I left high school. And I went into a neuropsych. And they kind of just went on based on what my mom was telling me and telling them, and they sort of saw something that could have been like, “yeah, this person is autistic.” And the fact that there was just something, there was something missing there, that I could’ve gotten and they never gave to me… A lot of the things were kind of missed. They also don't like listing a lot of disabilities on one IEP for some reason. Because they just want to just focus on one, and not all of them… and sometimes they will take one off and put something else. But that's like a whole different thing. For me, it was just kind of like, they didn't want to tell me, they didn't want to put it. And then after I figured out that I had so many other things that I was like, “Oh, this makes sense why my brain is this way.”

In this excerpt Sky described a narrow eligibility and identification process where the school-based personnel held an immense amount of power and discretion around which disability classifications they qualified under in their IEP. While the school appeared to work hard to determine the appropriate disability category when shifting from dyslexia (i.e., specific learning disability) to intellectual disability, this classification did not align with Sky’s own lived experiences, nor did it align with earlier medical testing that found they had ADHD. In fact, the school-based personnel appeared constrained by their lens of disability as a single marker of one’s identity. As such, they failed to consider the ways which diagnostic procedures can be shaped by other sociocultural identities, like gender.

For Sky, this meant more than just being misidentified in a document. They revealed that it wasn't until after high school, when they received an autism diagnosis, that they truly began to understand their neurodivergence.

Sky was not the only participant who discussed the ways in which gender intersected with the way their school viewed their strengths, needs, and disabilities. Leanne also discussed how gender stereotypes led to assumptions and misgivings about students' disabilities, strengths and support needs. Leanne spoke about how their brother was expected to fail because of tropes related to boys commonly struggling in school: "They would just say, 'oh…of course, young boys fail in high school…' That was a gendered thing, too. They're just like, let them fail and they'll come back." Both Leanne and Sky brought to light the ways in which gender binaries were used to perpetuate narrow conceptions about disabilities and support needs. Together, their experiences illustrated how IEP teams must consider the limitations of narrow diagnostic criteria and think more expansively about how disability intersects with other identity markers.

Though participants often talked about being largely excluded from the IEP process and cautioned educators from assuming they are the expert, Leanne clarified that it's important to be mindful of the power dynamic that exists between children, youth, and adults. They said:

> Administrators, and teachers need to recognize that the student can advocate for themselves, but only if they know what the f*ck they're talking about. Like, they don't know what they don't know. And... that is so clear to teachers in a classroom...But this is also like a developmental piece, like the students don't

> necessarily know what they do need. But they definitely know what they don't [need] in a lot of ways, because they are having those experiences, and they're formulating those ideas....Educators are not the experts on those students or their families....But they were so sure that they were the experts on all of these things, that they did not effectively listen to my mother or me or provide any of the information to us. They just bowled over all of that, it was like a steamroller. And this was my mom. That's a super passionate advocate and disabled person and knew what was up. And me...just like, I don't know what I need, but I know that this is not it. And I've been struggling through just fine. So do I even need to go through this process, if it's gonna be like this?... it was a space of invalidation more than it's a space of support...

Leanne named the complexity of centering the voices, lived experiences, and support needs of students with disabilities during the IEP process. They clarified that developing an awareness of one's needs requires time, space, and support. Educators should support such development in partnership with the student and their family. If the student is feeling "bowled over," this might be a sign that meaningful involvement is not happening. During the IEP process, Leanne identified a need for deep listening, which they believed can facilitate the exchange of information and an opportunity for students to develop self-advocacy skills. In other words, Leanne pushed back on a unidirectional system that devalued both themselves and their mom, and instead advocated for an approach rooted in reciprocity whereby the student and their family were positioned as serious and valuable experts.

Like Leanne, Annie also found the IEP process to be an invalidating and negative experience. As a result, she opted out of attending in 10th grade:

> Well, is it hard to do UDL? Or is it harder to figure out accommodations? Because that's what I ran into as a student. My teachers would not come to my IEP meeting, I didn't even want to be at my IEP meetings, okay? I didn't even want to be there, I think I no noped out of them after 10th grade and was just like, "somebody review it with me individually later." I'm not sitting in a room of people talking about me and not to me. Like, I remember very vividly saying "I'm done with that."

In this quote, Annie revealed how she could not decontextualize her own experiences in the IEP process when responding to teachers who asserted that implementing UDL was "too much." As previously discussed, Annie shared a belief that UDL can be a powerful framework that can help disrupt the ableism and stigma that many students with disabilities experience in school. In the meetings where she was supposed to have received services, supports, and accommodations to ensure meaningful progress and inclusion in her school, there was often widespread disengagement. Her teachers did not attend, and she also resisted being part of a process that tokenized her.

Recommendation 4: Support Authentic Student Inclusion in the IEP Process

Explain the What and Why with Students during the IEP Process

Throughout our interviews, many participants often shared that school-based personnel did not explain what it meant to qualify for an IEP or 504 or why they were receiving services, supports, or accommodations. This resulted in confusion and

uncertainty related to their disability classification, their services, and placement (e.g., academic in a self-contained and/or resource room), and their role in the IEP process. Catrina talked about the consequences of not being told about her disability or what it meant to have an IEP, and how this perpetuated her own misconceptions about autism:

> I wish...I was told what the whole process was about....Maybe ...I was too young [to have an] understanding about autism, but it will be really helpful to know about what it was, at least at that age, and have a better understanding because all I heard was very negative stereotypes.... But no one took time for me. No one took time...to explain about those aspects. Like that you could still have autism, even if you don't, or rarely struggle, in those aspects [social situations, controlling emotions]. So would have been nice to know about...what it means to be autistic and... what it means to take services from... IEPS and 504s.

In this quote, Catrina discussed how withholding information about a student's disability and IEP is not neutral. In fact, she suggested that it can leave disabled students disconnected and alienated from their own disability and service plan. She also discussed how her embodied experience as an autistic person did not align with mainstream narratives of autism, which depicted autism through negative stereotypes. Aligned with extant literature that center autistic women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary people's experience (e.g., Garcia 2021), Catrina illustrated the complexities of navigating an Autism diagnosis as someone who did not meet the diagnostic archetype (e.g., white, cis boy). As such, Catrina troubled narrow conceptions of disability, and advocated for students to be a part of the conversation with school-based personnel. Catrina conveyed

an importance for educators to expand disability labels beyond stereotypes and single markers, and give disabled students an opportunity to explore their disability and how it relates to their full self.

Like Catrina, Sky also talked about not understanding the label given in their IEP and how it misaligned with their self-perceptions:

> After high school… I felt like I was being put into… the high functioning box, because…I know how to take care of myself…take a shower, do all the things that a typical person could be able to do, right. But in high school, I felt like I would always see my IEP and it'll always say just the …disability that they saw, and then it would be with mild. So I'd be in the middle in between low and high functioning, and it'd be very concerning, because I didn't know what that meant….And it was so weird to be like in the middle like, "Okay, do I know certain things?" but then I'm lacking in certain things like, they didn't really explain too much as to what that was.

Not only did the school impose a functioning label on Sky without their input, but the lack of an explanation also impacted how they perceived their strengths and support needs. Catrina and Sky shed light on the consequences of when educators evaded conversations about disability. For both Sky and Catrina, the way educators talked about them and their needs did not align with their own lived experiences. This left them confused and disconnected from their disability. We found that participants advocated for an educational system where educators partner with families and students and have meaningful conversations around disability, disability identity, and support needs.

Further, participants indicated that these conversations should include opportunities to ensure that the school-based team's insights, perspectives, and recommendations align with the lived experiences of the student.

Build Understanding of IDEA and Americans with Disabilities Act

Both Sky and Catrina also talked about challenges related to moving from IDEA protections to ADA protections. Sky explained that their school started including them in their IEP meetings at the end of high school, which felt late given how different special education rights are from disability rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act:

> I think they didn't start telling me about how college was way different than high school....until my senior year. So they said..."You have an IEP, that's going to end in high school." And I was like, "What?!.. It's gonna end in high school?! I didn't know that." So the fact that they waited so late, I would love for them to start earlier, so that the student can be prepared. Not just for...whether they go to school or work, just so that they can be prepared to be the advocate that I know that they are, and so that...they be able to do the certain programs that they're able to do, get the funding that they're able to get .....do the work that they want to do. And then yeah, just be able to do it the right way, instead of a messy way where you're graduating high school, and you're pretty much left with nothing. And you're kind of just figuring out what to do next....I just wish that they started earlier for me, and if they could start earlier now, that'd be better. Because then, you know, for people who are still in school, and the IEP session and whether they're in the meeting or not... just letting them know...after high school... that's

it...you have to do everything on your own.

In this excerpt, Sky highlighted the promise and opportunity of including and informing students about their legal rights under ADA. More specifically, they focused on how building and encouraging a strong understanding of the ADA would support disabled student's self-advocacy, self-determination, and agency. Sky moved beyond a practice rooted in compliance and asserted that when students' understanding of their legal right was taken seriously, they could pursue their goals.

As Catrina transitioned to college, she explained that she struggled to know how to advocate for the accommodations she needed:

> From K 12, if you need... support, they basically come to get you, to look for you. In college, you have to look for them, which I know can be difficult because you don't know how to ask for help. That's what happened to me... I didn't register with...[disability] service[s]... And it was hard, I guess, for me to ask for accommodations because I didn't know how to. So I remember actually, my first semester, I almost failed the class.

While she explained that she "started to develop courage to ask for... accommodations" during her second semester, Catrina's experience illustrated an urgent need for schools to consider how students with disabilities were prepared and supported as they transitioned from high school to college, the workforce, or community living. Together, Sky and Catrina made it clear that educators should not just know the rights and services that disabled people are entitled to, but that they should also be equipped to teach students about their rights and services.

Slow Down, Build Trust, and Check-In with Students during the IEP Process

Finally, participants also shared how needing services, supports, and accommodations in school was a deeply personal and, at times, emotionally fraught experience. To be clear, this was not because they believed their disability was something to pity or mourn over. Instead, their vulnerability came from unmet needs, deficit positioning, and feeling unheard. While Veronica did not have an IEP or 504 in high school, she explained feeling under supported and unheard by school-based personnel when she had serious mental health needs during high school:

> In high school...my mental health started to fall apart.... I had been sent to the guidance counselor because I was getting D's and I was an A plus student. I think at that time, the guidance counselor should have reached out to my parents and said, “Hey, what's going on with her?” Like, versus just sending in a school counselor who, yes, did also reach out to my parents to then... encourage them to get me help from an...an outpatient therapist and an outpatient psychiatrist. But what went poorly at that time was that I told the psychiatrist, you know, this is the outpatient psychiatrist. I told them, “I'm positive, I have bipolar disorder.” And I gave them all the exact like, reasons why. And she was like, “Well, I think you're depressed.” And so she gave me a medication that's contraindicated from bipolar disorder. And it made me suicidal. So like, that doesn't really have anything to do with the school. But that was who the school referred me to... had someone listen to me better, that might not have happened.

Veronica's feelings of being unheard and peddled from one counselor and therapist to another had serious ramifications. By taking measures that did not meaningfully include her or her family, Veronica's needs remained unmet and escalated to a situation that she believed could have been avoided. Importantly, Veronica pushed back on an assumption that people with serious mental health needs should not be included in their care plans. Conversely, she asserted: had she been meaningfully included, she might have gotten what she needed.

Building on Veronica's discussion about the importance of deeply listening to disabled people, Annie suggested that teachers should slow down and build relationships with students during the IEP process:

> There was the very clear issue that most of my teachers wouldn't show up, right? They didn't have the time to. So I would be lucky if I had one or two mainstream teachers who would show up...And then it would be the educational coordinator who I would never meet outside of these meetings. I did not know her personally, even though this was her job. And looking back, there should have been a point to...introduce me to the educational coordinator. And not just as she handles sped students, because there was such a stigma, right? I was so often made fun of for being st*pid, just because my legs didn't work...that was a constant bullying that happened. So I was terrified to talk to the educational coordinator. I finally worked with her a little my senior year because I had to do extended time on the ACT....She was lovely. Looking back. I'm like, "gosh, dang, why didn't we you know [get to know each other more]..."

> So first, I feel like there's…an option of offering students the individual chance to go over their IEP with someone they trust. Now, hopefully that would be the educational coordinator, somebody who's got... a good global view of this right?...Someone that they trust individually. “Let's set aside a couple of times to go over this. Take some time, do you understand what's being offered to you?...Okay, I can see you're getting really worked up [and] agitated that you're starting to tear up...” I'm thinking about one of my IEP goals....And...the shame I felt over that goal being read out right in front of these teams of people.... And not even being able to say that or necessarily understand, because the structure of an IEP meeting is cognitively overloading for everybody in the room...

Annie shared experiences with her own IEP demonstrated the complex social dynamics and consequences often at play for disabled students. For her, IEP meetings were often not responsive to the stigma, ableism, and abuse that many students with disabilities experienced while she was in school. This lack of acknowledgement and action to protect, affirm, and support students with disabilities was perpetuated by structures, systems, and policies within IEP meetings that increased the cognitive load, feelings of overwhelm, and in some cases, shame. To counter these practices, Annie suggested implementing approaches such as partnering the student with someone they trust who was also knowledgeable (“a good global view”) about special education. To Annie, this would give learners in special education an opportunity to deeply understand their IEP, while also ensuring that they feel safe, heard, and affirmed.

Together, participants revealed a pressing need for IEP meetings to become more

accessible to those most impacted by special education: the students. For participants, access was often defined by features and approaches that would allow them to understand what an IEP meant, why they were receiving one, and opportunities to explore their disabilities. In addition, when enacting practices focused on the "what" and the "why," school-based personnel should be cognizant of how special education might be aligned and misaligned with participants' post K–12 disability rights and policies (i.e., ADA). Finally, participants emphasized that IEP meetings should be rooted in trust and care.

Like a relay race, we used these findings and recommendations as a figurative baton being passed to K–12 and teacher preparation systems because, in the words of Annie, "when we know better, we do better." Our analysis revealed an urgent need for K–12 teacher preparation to dream of a future where the current and next generation of teachers are fully prepared to celebrate, honor, and support the students with whom they work.

Discussion

Our participants shared experiences, and recommendations, that illustrated both the promise and limitations of school systems' capacity to honor their strengths and lived experiences and meet their needs. Participants deeply valued communities that allowed them to be their full selves and connect with other people with disabilities. Aligned with these experiences, many advocated for educators and school leaders to intentionally build and sustain such communities and cultures in their schools. Participants also critiqued systems and practices that perpetuated narrow and rigid conceptions of disability and support, and pushed for more access-centered approaches that position support needs as

universal and natural. Many spoke highly of, and endorsed, supportive learning experiences where educators and administrators enacted humanizing pedagogy that privileged students over rigid curriculum. Finally, participants reported feeling excluded and undervalued in IEP processes and transition planning, and envisioned a future where students are authentically included throughout their schooling. Together, our findings revealed a need for schools to think more expansively and holistically about the disabled students they serve. We posit that educators should reflect on their conceptions of students, their identities, and the ways in which systems of power and privilege shape teaching and learning (Annamma et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1991).

Throughout our analysis we found that participants talked about experiences that were shaped by more than just their disabilities and disability labels. In fact, participants' social positioning based on race, class, and gender shaped how educators in their schools thought about and responded to their strengths and needs (Annamma et al., 2013; Annamma & Morrison, 2018; Crenshaw, 1991). For example, Sky talked about the ways in which gendered assumptions about disability led to disability labels that misaligned with their experiences. Sonny Jane Wise (2024) has discussed the importance for disabled and neurodivergent people to have "access to affirming information and support from a young age." For Sky, without having access to information related to a possible Autism diagnosis until adulthood, there was an unease and uncertainty about their intellectual disability label. Thus, we began to think about the ways in which disability cannot be seen through a single-lens and must consider students' whole self. Further, while diagnosis can be fraught with issues (i.e., pathologizing; Price, 2023), for many

disabled people it can be an empowering experience providing and confirming important insights about their bodies and brains (Garcia, 202). This is made especially clear when, speaking about how they responded to their Autism diagnosis, Sky said, “Oh, this makes sense why my brain is this way.”

Gender did not just shape participants’ experiences with disability identity and diagnosis, we also found that it may have played a role in IEP and 504 Plan meetings. There is a long history of women being undervalued and discredited in these meetings, and in broader educational systems (Harry, 2008; D’Amico, 2007). Critical special education scholars have also discussed the ways in which professional expertise can be used to undermine the wisdom, knowledge, and perspective of students and families (Brantlinger, 2004). We posit that the disempowerment Leanne and their mom experienced in their own 504 Plan meetings demonstrate how disabled women are often living at the nexus of ableism and sexism. Interestingly, Leanne’s mom was a special educator, but in a different school and system. In Leanne’s case, their mom’s professional status was not privileged or recognized, potentially due to her role in the meeting as a parent and her identity as a disabled woman.

Finally, our participants shared experiences—both positive and negative—that spoke to the importance of honoring access needs and disability as something that is normal and universal. Pushing back on the notion that disability is something that needs to be fixed or cured, participants felt most supported when they were seen as agentic learners who can engage in critical thinking and decision-making. Importantly, participants highlighted a compelling both/and: students with disabilities’ strengths

should be recognized by educators and so should their support needs. This duality reveals an urgent need for educators to reflect on their assumptions and biases about the students with whom they teach. As discussed above, this includes meaningfully considering students' intersectionality and the ways in which students' multiple identities are positioned in mainstream society. It also requires educators to think more broadly about their conceptions of education and its broader purpose, particularly for students with disabilities. As John shared, teaching and learning can be powerful when students are encouraged and supported to think critically and deeply about content. Our findings revealed that special education systems and K–12 systems must push back on rigid and narrow teaching and learning norms. In doing so, they can commit to ensuring that disabled students have access to supportive curriculum and pedagogy that facilitates academic growth and develops their critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Limitations & Future Directions for Research

Since our study used recruitment strategies where flyers were shared on social media and via email to our professional and personal networks and communities, it is very likely that our sample was limited to those who are already interested and engaged in disability-related advocacy and activism. Coupled with the fact that our sample was small (8 participants), our results are not meant to represent the beliefs, experiences, and recommendations of all disabled people. Future research is well positioned to continue work that asks similar research questions and recruit those with disabilities who might not be engaged in advocacy, activism, or disability communities. This is especially important given the ongoing legacy of institutionalization and exclusion in mainstream

society which continues to leave many people with disabilities isolated from their communities (Annamma, 2018; Erevelles & Minear, 2010; Thornton, 2012). This might include conducting research with students and adults in residential schools, prisons, and segregated settings.

We also acknowledge that our participants were all adults who have been out of K–12 schools for a number of years. Though we firmly believe that revisiting memories and past experiences can be a powerful way to share one's lived experience and connect it to issues of justice and equity (e.g., Education Journey Mapping, Annamma, 2017). We also believe that future research should capture and examine the experiences, hopes, and dreams of young people who are currently in K–12. Not only would this work provide a necessary window into the present landscape of schooling for disabled students, but it would also be a powerful means of subverting hierarchies that erase the knowledge and wisdom of youth.

Implications for K–12 Schools and Teacher Preparation

Importantly, this study's analysis and findings are rooted in participants' experiences and recommendations, which allowed us to integrate each theme with a concrete action for both K–12 and teacher preparation. As a research team, we also identified implications for future practice that emerged from our own analysis and discussions. Both educators in K–12 and teacher preparation should honor disability as an identity and take care in ensuring that they do not mandate disclosure or tokenize disabled students or people. We also urge all educators, in both K–12 and higher education, to teach about disability and how it intersects with ableism and other systems

of oppression.

Participants discussed the power and importance of finding and building spaces where they could connect with disabled students, educators, and school leaders. John and Maria also talked about disabled educators who shared their disabilities with their students. There is a complex duality that many disabled people experience: Finding power in disability pride and community (e.g., Wong, 2020), and experiencing potential stigma when disclosing their disabilities in an ableist world (Valle et al., 2003; Ware et al., 2020). With this in mind, we urge educators to take great care around identity and disclosure. Educators should never expect, pressure, or coerce students or colleagues to share their disabilities. Meetings and conferences where students are provided space to talk about their disabilities, support needs, and goals should always be done in spaces where students' privacy is privileged. Maintaining and respecting privacy, however, does not mean educators should avoid talking about disability. We encourage all educators to normalize disability as a natural part of human diversity, through read alouds (e.g., *We Move Together,* Fritsch et al., 2021), lessons about disability rights and justice, and guest speakers.

Our findings also revealed how disabled educators and school leaders can be a powerful mentor and support for students with disabilities. At the same time, schools should be mindful of the ways in which educators and administrators with disabilities can be tokenized and expected to take on invisible labor teaching nondisabled people about disability and ableism. Therefore, it is vital that schools think about how they are recruiting, sustaining, and supporting a workforce that is inclusive of disabled people,

while also ensuring that unmaking ableism in schools is taken up by *all* educators in the building.

Finally, our findings illustrated that disability cannot be taught in siloes. In other words, educators cannot just teach and acknowledge that disability exists; they must also engage all students in conversations that build their understanding of ableism. This understanding of ableism must be from a lens that is intersectional and acknowledges the ways in which ableism works in tandem with other systems of oppression (e.g., racism, cisheterosexism, classism; Annamma et al., 2013). Using frameworks like DisCrit Classroom Ecology (Annamma & Morrison, 2018), educators can enact curriculum and practices that support and affirm multiply marginalized and disabled students, while also building every student's understanding of access, anti-ableism, and justice.

Conclusion

Students with disabilities and disability labels exist in every school in this country whether we realize it or not (Mingus, 2017). As educators and school leaders strive to meet their needs, it is vitally important that they center the wisdom, lived experience, and insights of disabled people. After privileging and examining the schooling experiences and recommendations of 8 disabled people, we encourage K–12 and teacher preparation systems to (1) build and sustain disabled community and culture, (2) normalize access and supports as universal and natural, (3) implement student-centered and universally designed teaching practices, and (4) facilitate and support authentic student inclusion in the IEP process. We assert that when schools become more reflective of and responsive to the strengths and needs of students with disabilities, our classrooms can move towards justice and equity.

CHAPTER FOUR – Creating and Holding Space to Celebrate Disability Histories & Disabled Communities in Early Childhood Classrooms

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"I want to say unequivocally that disabled people are everywhere.... No matter what community you're working with, you are working with disabled people."

- Mia Mingus (2017)

Introduction

Disability is a natural form of human diversity, intersecting with every other identity marker, yet school-based curricula often fail to meaningfully center disability as an identity with a rich, ongoing history (Mueller, 2021; Mueller & Beneke, 2022; Thompson, 2020). Instead, schools implicitly reproduce a narrative that disability is something to be fixed, cured, or even ashamed of, which both others and harms disabled students, educators, and families (Annamma et al., 2013; Artiles, 2011; Baglieri et al., 2011; Hehir, 2002).

We are educators who believe transformation occurs when school-based workers resist the dominant urge to erase disability in K–12 classrooms. Author 1 is a white, disabled, doctoral student-researcher and educator, author 2 is a Ghanaian-American woman and educator, and authors 3 through 6 are all disabled educators. In this chapter, we explore how early elementary educators can cultivate and sustain pedagogies that affirm, celebrate, and honor disability histories and communities in their classrooms. First, we discuss disability and ableism in K–12 schooling and how it works in tandem with other systems of oppression, upholding narrow and harmful conceptions of normalcy (Annamma et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1991). Next, we review the work of disabled activists, scholars, and allies who have highlighted the importance of teaching about disability, disability histories, ableism, and accessibility in K–12 schools (e.g.,

Annamma & Morrison, 2018; Mueller, 2021; Thompson, 2020). We then share how we teach about disability identity, disability histories, and collective care in our practice, unpacking how our teaching animates our solidarity with disabled and multiply marginalized students (Annamma & Morrison, 2018), particularly those stigmatized for refusing to acquiesce to nondisabled and white Eurocentric norms. We close with ongoing wonderings and a call to collective action.

Ableism, Intersecting Systems of Oppression, and "Normalcy" in K–12 Schooling

Disability activists and critical scholars have long called for schools to reject positioning disability as something shameful, wrong, or in need of fixing. They assert that schools should (re)frame disability as an identity to be claimed, and its histories as an essential part of understanding past, present, and future justice movements (e.g., Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019; Mueller, 2021; Mueller & Beneke, 2022; Thompson, 2020). Moreover, these histories cannot be divorced from the students we teach and the families with whom we work. Educators, students, and families enter schools with assets and lived experiences, which are connected to their multiple communities and identities. How their assets, lived experiences, and needs are realized, affirmed, and met in school, however, is shaped by how their identities are positioned within existing systems of power, privilege, and oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). Disabled students—particularly those marginalized based on their race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and language—often navigate ableist school systems that were not designed or maintained with them in mind (Annamma et al., 2013).

We define ableism as a system of oppression that upholds narrow conceptions of

who is considered worthy and valuable, equating worth with being nondisabled, white, cisgender, straight, male, English-speaking, and more (Lewis, 2022). Baked into US schooling, ableism intersects with other oppressions, such as racism, cisheterosexism, and xenophobia (Annamma et al., 2013). While it is no longer legally permissible to exclude disabled students from public education (IDEA, 2004), many students still experience serious stigma, harm, and injustice (Annamma et al., 2013). For example, disabled students of color are suspended, expelled, and placed in segregated classrooms at significantly higher rates than their white disabled peers (Cruz et al., 2021; Hehir et al., 2014). Massachusetts–the birthplace of public *and* special education–continues to allow disabled children, teenagers, and adults to be violently tortured with aversive shock devices at the Judge Rotenberg Center (Neumeier & Brown, 2020). Even when students are included in their neighborhood schools and taught in classrooms with their nondisabled peers, they are often pressured to acquiesce to nondisabled white Eurocentric norms and expectations (Halsall et al., 2021).

When school systems view disability from a singular lens and position it as a problem to be fixed, they potentially hinder the development of positive disabled identity (Mueller, 2019), while also erasing the ways disability intersects with other identities (Sins Invalid, 2019). Identity is not static; it can be formed and claimed by an individual, as well as shaped by one's experiences in broader society (Forber-Pratt et al., 2017; Mueller, 2019). For example, many disabled people have spoken about developing an asset-based understanding of disability identity after rejecting mainstream, ableist messages about disability (Wong, 2020). To counter implicit messages that might

perpetuate deficit-driven, internalized messages about disability, and to honor the wisdom and value disabled people bring to our world, we now turn to pedagogies that center disability as a worthy part of someone's full identity.

Counter Pedagogies: Teaching About Disability from a Critical, Asset-Based Lens

Since disabled people have always existed, the history of people with disabilities can be found in every era and movement. Many disability activists, scholars, and educators have written about making this history more visible and accessible in mainstream society. Vilissa Thompson (2020) shared the importance of teaching Black history without erasing people's disabled identities – for example, teaching about Harriet Tubman's full identity as a Black disabled woman, and centering the contributions of multiply marginalized people in disability and civil rights movements (Thompson, 2020; Schalk, 2022). Additionally, educators are encouraged to connect the past and present to show how disability history is still unfolding (Mueller & Beneke, 2022). For example, disabled people are playing key roles in climate justice movements, practicing mutual aid during disabling environmental disasters (Nishida, 2024).

Scholars have also encouraged educators to center the meaningful past and present histories, contributions, and strengths of disabled and multiply marginalized people. DisCrit Classroom Ecology is a pedagogical framework rooted in critical, intersectional, and culturally relevant praxis that centers the strengths, gifts, and lived experiences of multiply marginalized learners (Annamma & Morrison, 2018). DisCrit Classroom Ecology is anchored in three constructs, which are dependent on resisting white supremacist norms and practices that harm and oppress disabled and multiply

marginalized students:

1. **DisCrit Curriculum** ensures instructional content and materials include meaningful discussion and examination of the histories of disabled people of color and their communities.
2. **DisCrit Pedagogy** empowers educators to enact methods and practices that celebrate the assets and lived experiences multiply marginalized students *already* bring to their classroom, while honoring the diverse ways learning can be engaged with, represented, and expressed.
3. **DisCrit Solidarity** centers teacher-learner relationships rooted in "care, respect, and love, rather than hyperfocusing on behavior and management" (Annamma et al., 2023), rejecting oppressive discipline systems that rely on compliance and punishment.

Together, the work of disabled activists, educators, and critical scholars serves as guideposts for teaching that strives to affirm, celebrate, and support disabled and multiply marginalized students. Next, we discuss how we aimed for our K–12 classrooms to become sites that disrupt ableism and reimagine norms that affirm all bodies and minds.

Animating Disability Identity, Disability Histories, and Collective Care in Our Practice

Authors 1 and 2 have spent the last three school years teaching students about disability history, positive conceptions of disability, and the importance of dismantling ableism and facilitating access for all bodies and minds. After our first year, Author 1 developed the Disabled Educators Curriculum Collective (DECC; Authors 3–6). DECC

was created to center the wisdom and lived experiences of disabled people when developing curricula about disability. Meeting monthly, we engaged in reflection about our curricula, methods, and materials, interrogating whether they are accessible, meaningful, and responsive to our students. First, we share how we developed a deep understanding of community, accessibility, and disability identity with students. Next, we discuss how we taught students about past and present disability histories.

DisCrit Solidarity

Building a Deep Understanding of Community

We began by expanding students' conceptions of community—encouraging them to see beyond geographic borders to think about shared parts of their identity (see Figure 3.1). We invited students to tell, show, draw, and/or write about their communities. As we listened and affirmed their responses, students were positioned as the experts of their own lives. Giving space for students to identify multiple ways of being in a community (e.g., race/ethnicity, nationality, disability, hobbies/interests), we did not impose identities or communities on students. We embraced whatever they were willing to share with us.

Figure 4.1. Expanding Conceptions of Community

Note. This figure depicts a slide that says "Let's explore other communities you might be a part of..." There is a Dominican Republic flag with text underneath that says "People who share parts of their identity make up communities. This might be your race, ethnicity, nationality." There is a photo of a Black man in a wheelchair and a white woman. They are sitting at a table, talking, and smiling. Underneath it says, "People with disabilities are all part of a community." There is a photo of multiracial teenagers playing video games. Underneath it says, "Video gamers are part of communities!" The bottom of the slide says "Think, Pair, and Share" with a box underneath that says, "What communities are you a part of?" There are three images: two people talking, a pencil drawing, and a pencil writing.

We center disabled and multiply marginalized learners when developing our instruction, believing that when provided the time to explore who they are—both as an individual and as a community member—they might see themselves reflected in the

histories we share in our practice. We also assert that students should be given time, space, and support to develop a robust understanding of their identities and communities (Locke et al., 2022). Both extant research and the lived experiences of many disabled and multiply marginalized people demonstrate how history is whitewashed and sanitized in K–12, such that students who do not hold dominant identity markers often do not see themselves reflected in curriculum (Muhammad, 2023). Defining communities to include diverse sociocultural identities allowed us to then contextualize honoring and meeting accessibility needs as both an individual and community endeavor. Making connections to the concepts of interdependency and community care (Sins Invalid, 2019), we reminded students that our classroom is a community of learners working together to learn more about ourselves and the world around us (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Further, we must honor and recognize access as a natural part of being in community.

Accessibility, Disability, and Ableism

We reject the notion that to be a "good" learner or community member, one must be fully independent and without any support and access needs. Therefore, we normalized checking in with ourselves and each other. Since this practice might not be privileged in prior learning spaces, we modeled by starting with our needs. Author 1 shared that she needs a comfortable chair to sit in because the carpet is not supportive for her body. Students were then invited to identify what they need to feel safe, cared for, and ready to learn. Using hand signals (i.e., thumbs up/down/ to the side), children showed if they had what they needed. Striving to be flexible and open to what students were expressing, we practiced transparency with students about our abilities to meet their

needs. We explained that some access needs can be easily met, such as providing water, breaks, and fidget tools. Other needs, like the opportunity to immediately access family or community members outside of our school context, might not be possible for us to meet. We validated and affirmed all needs while naming the complexities of being in a community where there might be barriers to access (e.g., "Let me see if I can meet the important need you are sharing with us"). We aimed to explicitly embrace body and mind variability, and reject a one-size-fits-all model that expects disabled and multiply marginalized students to suppress their needs or hide aspects of themselves to conform to nondisabled and dominant norms.

As students practiced checking in with their bodies and brains, we connected accessibility to disability and ableism using *We Move Together*, a picture book rooted in disability justice and positive conceptions of disability identity and culture (Fritsch et al., 2021b). While reading, we encouraged students to think about what it means to learn and live in an accessible community where disabled people are valued and supported. To meet this aim, we developed accessible definitions for *disability*, *ableism*, and *accessibility* (see Table 4.1; Beneke et al., 2022; Fritsch et al., 2021a; Laureano et al., n.d.).

Table 4.1. Accessible Definitions for Key Concepts

Concept	Accessible Definition	Connections to *We Move Together*	Prompts to support critical thinking (adapted from Fritsch et al., 2021a).
Disability	A word used to describe when a body or brain moves, senses, or exists in a way that is different from what powerful people in our world expect. Disabled people are often unfairly treated because their bodies and brains are wrongly seen as less valuable, normal, and worthy. This is called Ableism (Fritsch et al., 2021a). Disability is not a problem or a bad word. It's a natural and important part of human diversity. No one is the same, and difference makes our world a better place.	Read the opening page showing a group of multiracial, gender-diverse, disabled, and nondisabled children. The children are using a variety of modes and tools to move, including scooters, wheelchairs, crutches, bicycles, legs/feet.	How are kids moving? Are they moving in the same way? Do you see kids moving in ways that you like to move? Does anything surprise you from this picture?
Ableism	When "people think that some people are better or worse than others because of their bodies and brains." (Beneke et al., 2022, p. 1251) When people think it is better to walk than use a wheelchair. Ableism is when there is no ramp for wheelchair users (Beneke et al., 2022; Hehir, 2002).	Read the part when a character using a power wheelchair is not able to access an ice cream parlor.	What is going on in this scene? What is the problem? How do you think we can fix the problem?

	"Creates barriers or obstacles for disabled people, making it hard to meet friends, learn at school, find a place to live, get a job, participate in community events, or even go for ice cream!" (Fritsch et al., 2021a, p. 8).		
Accessibility	"Making changes to our rules, buildings… [communities, and]... behaviors to make sure everyone feels welcome and is included." (Fritsch et al., 2021a, p. 8).	Read the part where a diverse community of adults and children come together to build ramps.	What is happening here? What do you think they are making? What different jobs are people doing? Who do you think is in charge?

Our definition of disability is multifaceted, drawing on the multiple realities of many disabled and multiply marginalized people. First, it is grounded in the social model of disability, which positions body and mind variability as a natural part of the world, and our ableist society—not disabled people—as the problem. Using accessible language, we assert that disability is socially constructed and maintained by dominant society's narrow conceptions of how they believe bodies and brains should move, sense, or exist (Lewis, 2022). Not shying away from difficult conversations about oppression, harm, and stigma, we foreground how the social construction of disability is not neutral, and how it can often result in deep injustice. Drawing from a long lineage of critical pedagogy and our own lived experiences, we know that disabled and multiply marginalized people come to schools with rich strengths and home and community practices (Annamma & Morrison, 2018). Yet, these strengths are not always privileged in mainstream society, meaning that many students with disabilities already know what it feels like to be marginalized. We view our definition as a form of solidarity with our students who are already impacted by ableism. This solidarity extends to the final part of our definition: disability is not the problem, nor is it a bad word. In fact, it is a natural and important part of human diversity.

We recognize that our curriculum does not exist in a static vacuum, and is mediated by our own social positionings, sociopolitical contexts, and pedagogies (Wertsch, 1998). Therefore, we recognize the facilitators and benefits of having a disabled educator (Author 1) teach this content. Although no disabled educator will approach teaching in the same way, I (Author 1) ground my practice in honesty and

transparency about my own lived experiences as a disabled child, learner, and now adult. My experiences of ableism in education afford me a nuanced understanding of the dangers of positioning disability as a tragedy and something to pity. Therefore, we approach this work with both/and in mind: disabled people and communities can be celebrated *and* we can have authentic conversations with kids about ableism and injustice.

Teaching Past and Present Disability Histories

Next, we taught disability histories, particularly histories of multiply marginalized people, as ongoing and connected to disability rights, disability justice, and other movements (e.g., racial justice, civil rights). In the next sections, we use DisCrit Curriculum and Pedagogy as frameworks for our practice and as an organizational tool for how we have animated this work (Annamma & Morrison, 2018).

DisCrit Curriculum

We centered the contributions of multiply marginalized people with disabilities (Mueller & Beneke, 2022). Centering people of color with disabilities is essential for several reasons. Disabled people of color have made, and continue to make, significant contributions that make our world more just (e.g., Schalk, 2022; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2022). These contributions, however, are often overshadowed by mainstream narratives privileging whiteness. For example, the disability rights movement is often associated with the accomplishments of white disabled people (Sins Invalid, 2019). Not only does leaving out other narratives shortchange all students with an incomplete history of the movement, but we argue that this can also particularly impact students who are multiply

marginalized, alienating them from disability communities of which they might be a part. We therefore prioritized telling disability stories that amplified the lived experiences of people of color, women, and other marginalized identities.

Centering Black Disabled People and Communities in Disability History. We began our unit teaching about Johnnie Lacy, a leader of the independent living movement, Brad Lomax, a key figure during the 504 Sit-In, and the Black Panthers as a group committed to racial justice and disability rights (Thompson, 2017; Schalk, 2022).

We started with a discussion about how Lacy was positioned at the nexus of both racism and ableism:

> *Johnnie Lacy went to school in Louisiana in the 1930s and 1940s. The law required that Black and white people be separated. Johnnie went to school with other Black children and white children went to school with other white children. Black children went to schools that were older and they often got books and materials that were very old, ripped, or broken (Lacy, 1998). Does that feel fair to you? Let's show, tell, or draw what we think.*
>
> *Johnnie also experienced a lot of ableism. When she went to college, the people in charge would not provide ramps (Lacy, 1998; Thompson, 2017). Does that feel fair to you? What do you think the people in charge should have done? Let's show, tell, or draw what we think.*

Connecting Lacy's schooling experiences to broader resistance to ableism and racism, we invited students to explore how the school could be more accessible to

disabled people. We also shared how Lacy practiced resistance: leading an independent-living movement that provided disabled people with support and opportunities to be fully included in their community. Recognizing that mainstream society, including K12 schools, privilege completing tasks without help (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Sins Invalid, 2019), we defined independence as "people's right to choose for themselves how they live and how they receive support."

When teaching about the 504 Sit-In, we taught students about Brad Lomax's work within disability rights and racial justice movements, thereby centering the contributions of a disabled leader of color. More specifically, we spoke with students about how Lomax's coalition building between the 504 Sit-In activists and the Black Panthers was key to the success of the action:

> *There were over 100 people living in an office building during the sit-in. What do you think people might need to safely live in a building that is not their home?*
>
> *That's right! Food, water, and beds! Brad was also a member of the Black Panther Party. One of the many important things this group of Black activists did was provide free hot meals to Black communities. Do you know what else they did? They brought hot meals and other necessities to protestors during the sit-in. Many people say that without Brad Lomax, the sit-in couldn't have happened. The food they received was necessary to keep people fed, safe, and healthy (Schalk, 2022).*

Building Links to the Present & Taking Action.

Centering Disabled Teachers and Learners. Aiming to connect our instruction to students' lives in school, we focused on the experiences of people with disabilities as learners *and* as teachers. Again, to disrupt narrow conceptions of what is considered "normal," we troubled binaries that position disabled people as students and never as educators (Mueller, 2021). To animate this, we unpacked Judy Heumann's experiences as both a learner and an educator, giving students opportunities to explore how ableism shaped Heumann's schooling. Using videos and quotes from Heumann, we explained that she was excluded from her neighborhood school until she was in fourth grade because she used a wheelchair (Heumann, 2020). Then, after completing college and passing the exams to become a teacher, she was not allowed to become a teacher–again, because she used a wheelchair and was considered a fire hazard (Microsoft, 2020). Students discussed whether this was fair, and what schools could have done to make sure she could move around the building and stay safe during an emergency. We also created space for students to think about why it's important to have disabled teachers in school.

Positioning Disability History as Ongoing. We also shared work from disabled creators who educate outside of traditional K–12 spaces. For example, we used Plank's (2018) video essay with Emily Ladau to illustrate how the US remains inaccessible for many disabled people. Showing students the barriers Ladau encountered as she met Plank for coffee allowed us to meet two aims. First, we disrupted the notion that disability rights and justice had been fully realized with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Second, this allowed us to focus on taking action and demanding change

with students, illustrating how historical disability rights and justice movements are ongoing (Mueller & Beneke, 2022). Our class discussions about Ladau, and many other disabled people's experiences, led to schoolwide petitions to government leaders demanding improved access. Through shared writing, students co-constructed a letter that included asking for more ramps and sensory supports.

DisCrit Pedagogy

Our curriculum includes methods and approaches that strive to affirm the knowledge, lived experiences, and support needs of our students. Using Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and DisCrit Classroom Ecology as an anchor (Fritzgerald, 2020; Annamma & Morrison, 2018), we honored the multiple ways students can engage in instruction and express what they know and have learned. We also represented content in varied ways to privilege the lived experiences of disabled and multiply marginalized people.

Using Multimedia to Center Disabled Voices, Perspectives, and Lived Experiences. To privilege the voices and perspectives of those most impacted by the histories we taught, we relied on multimedia created by disabled people, giving students a first-hand account of how people with disabilities have always resisted ableism and worked towards building a more just world. For example, we showed students excerpts from an NBC News video (2016) of Alice Wong sharing her life story and experiences as a disabled person. First-hand narratives helped us position people with disabilities as agentic people who lead complex, full lives (Wong, 2020).

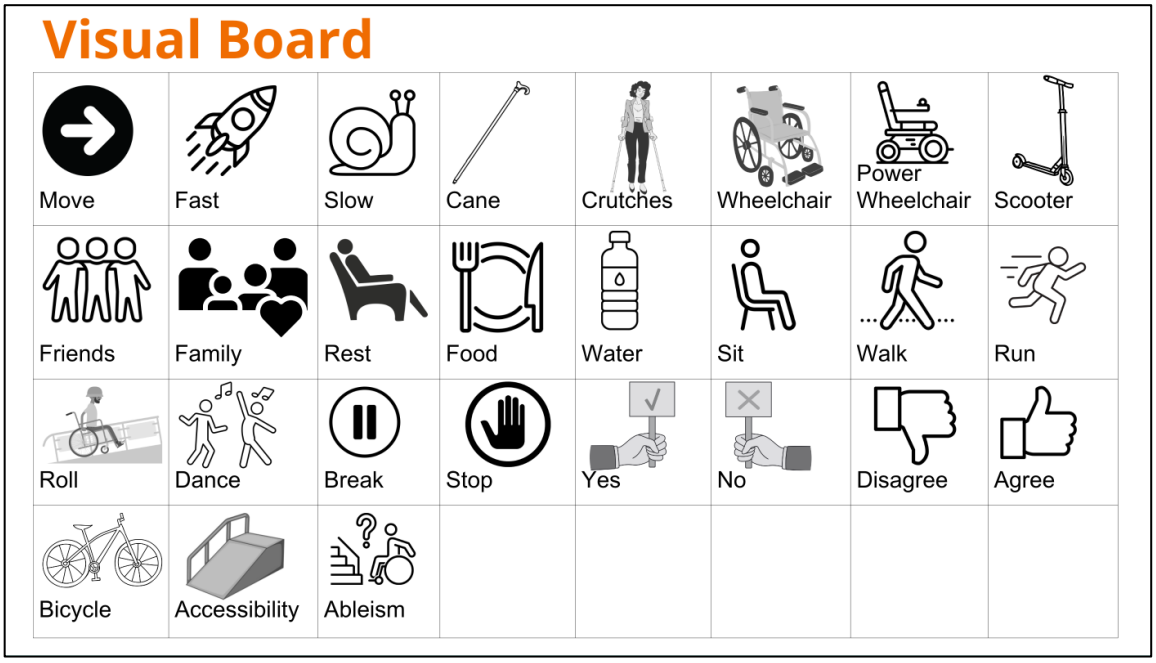
We also aimed to build connections to community and identity through

representations of children with disabilities. Privileging works written by disabled authors, we read a variety of books that meaningfully animate the joys, realities, and challenges of navigating our world as a young person with a disability. For example, we used both *Sam's Super Seats* and *A Day with No Words* to share stories that celebrate the multiple identities and lived experiences of children of color with disabilities, while disrupting notions that disabilities and access needs should be hidden (Brown, 2023; Hammond, 2023). *Sam's Super Seats* allowed us to explore Black disabled joy and everyone's right to rest, while countering dominant notions of disability as a single marker of identity. Students read about Sam, a young Black girl with cerebral palsy who loves every part of who she is and takes pride and joy in honoring her needs. *A Day with No Words* shares the story of Aiden, a Black Autistic boy who uses Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC) to communicate with his family and community. *A Day with No Words* rejects narrow conceptions of language and communication and positions Autistic identity as a natural part of human diversity. Together, these stories dispel harmful falsehoods that disability is tragic and something to fix or cure. Sam is loved for all of who she is by her family and friends and Aidan's use of AAC suggests to readers that AAC is just as valid as speaking. Both texts push the bounds of how disability is represented in children's literature, providing stories that can be shared with disabled and multiply marginalized students as a practice of solidarity: we see you and we value all of you.

Honoring Multiple Ways of Being, Knowing, and Expressing. We provided varied ways for students to demonstrate their knowledge, using anti-oppressive UDL as a

framework (Annamma & Morrison, 2018; Fritzgerald, 2020; Waitoller & King Thorius, 2017). Because speaking is only one of many ways to communicate, we incorporated "turn and share" opportunities into our teaching. With universal access to dry-erase boards, students were invited to respond by showing, telling, drawing, and/or writing. With support from a visual board (see Figure 4.2), students can use the board as a writing support or as a means of communicating (e.g., pointing). We have found that this practice empowers all students to contribute and share what they know, think, or wonder. As educators, we also found that it allows us to slow down instruction in meaningful and supportive ways, helping us to engage deeply with students and build connections across responses.

Figure 4.2. Visual Board Example



Note. This figure depicts a visual board with images for the words: move, fast, slow, cane, crutches, wheelchair, power wheelchair, scooter, friends, family, rest, food, water,

sit, walk, run, roll, dance, break, stop, yes, no, disagree, agree, bicycle, accessibility, and ableism.

Enacting anti-oppressive UDL also requires educators to reflect on what knowledge and expertise are affirmed and valued (Fritzgerald, 2020). Colleagues have asked us important questions about how we respond to students' wonderings and balance competing perspectives and needs. We lean on the belief that every child is the expert of themselves (Fritzgerald, 2020). If we believe there are multiple ways of knowing, we must also be prepared for responses and perspectives that widely vary. Therefore, we strive to honor those responses and perspectives while also facilitating learning and growth (Ladson-Billings, 1995). We do not "correct" students when they talk about themselves; if students are exploring disability and wondering if they have a disability, we do not impose or gatekeep identities. We affirm the connections students are making between the learning and their own experiences and explain that they get to decide who they are. They are in charge of their body and mind and it's OK to wonder and explore. At the same time, we also encourage students to explore and disrupt beliefs that position disability as a deficit. For example, while reading a book where a character uses a mobility device (e.g., wheelchair, crutches), we responded to conceptions that perpetuated ableist tropes, such as assuming you use a wheelchair because your legs are broken or needing a cane because you are old. Instead, we drew on examples from our teaching that resist these stereotypes and prompted students to return to the text:

> *I am wondering about all of the people we have learned about who use wheelchairs and canes for many different reasons. It's important that we don't*

make guesses about someone else's body and brain. Let's go back to our text and see if the author shared this with us.

By balancing their curiosity with gentle pushes to resist making assumptions about disabled people, we aimed to support their cultural consciousness.

Ongoing Wonderings and Our Call for Collective Action

We view our teaching about disability and disability histories as a form of deep solidarity with multiply marginalized students with disabilities who have often not seen their lived experiences and full identities represented in school (Mueller, 2021). We have also grappled with ongoing wonderings and institutional barriers that we believe must be attended to in order to build a more just and equitable educational system.

One limitation of our teaching is that it has been limited to one day per week as an "add-on" to other core instruction (e.g., ELA). Schools, particularly ones serving a high proportion of multiply marginalized students, are more likely to be under the state microscope and feel pressure to acquiesce to the very norms that we are trying to trouble (e.g., high-stakes testing, standardized Eurocentric curricula; Au, 2007). We wonder: How do we empower educators to take on more expansive approaches to curriculum and pedagogy when high-stakes tests privilege a "one size fits all" approach to learning and assessment? Similarly, we recognize how our methods trouble behavior management systems that focus on compliance (e.g., silent, still body; Beneke et al., 2022). As such, how do we empower teachers to reimagine what a classroom can look like, sound like, and feel like so that it does not reify punitive practices that reproduce oppressive norms?

While we do not have an easy answer, we believe the work starts with building a

collective of educators and educational leaders who will commit to this work. We urge leaders to invest in systems to support pedagogy and curriculum that centers and celebrates multiply marginalized students' whole selves. We believe this work must be funded, and also studied, at the classroom level with ample, protected time for planning and collaboration. For example, school districts can implement co-teaching models where educators use teacher inquiry cycles to examine how this work can be integrated and embedded into curriculum (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2015). We also urge districts to meaningfully reflect on their commitment to recruiting, hiring, retaining, and supporting disabled teachers, especially those with multiply marginalized identities (Loeppky, 2021). To be clear, we do not believe that disabled educators should be hired to teach about disability; rather, the labor of teaching about disability must be on all educators. We do believe, however, that disabled teachers bring valuable lived experiences and assets to school communities (Anderson, 2006; Pritchard, 2010), and they can serve as a powerful mirror and window to the future for disabled students.

CHAPTER FIVE – Future Research and Practice Directions

K–12 and teacher preparation systems are shaped by dominant ideologies and practices that uphold nondisabled and white-centered ways of being, knowing, learning, moving, and doing (Annamma et al., 2013; Kulkarni et al., 2021; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011; Lewis, 2022; Siuty, 2019). To become sites that disrupt such oppressions, they must strive to enact practices and approaches that (re)build communities that are reflective of and responsive to bodies and minds that are historically and presently marginalized (e.g., disabled people of color, LGBTQ people of color with disabilities). In this next section, I will use findings and insights from this dissertation to outline future research and practice agendas for teacher preparation programs and K–12 schools. As an emerging teacher educator, I ground this agenda in my identity as a practitioner and activist. Though ambitious and aspirational, this chapter strives to be feasible, sustainable, and grounded in the joys, realities, and challenges of what it means to be a teacher and learner striving for justice in our current educational systems.

Future Directions for Research

Our findings revealed an urgent need to disrupt a status quo that continues to uphold practices and norms that position disabled and multiply marginalized people in need of remediation, fixing, and curing. Unfortunately, these findings are not particularly revelatory, as disabled people and allies both inside and outside of academia have long reported the ongoing structural harm, exclusion, and stigma that people with disabilities experience in schools and communities (e.g, Annamma, 2013; Brantlinger, 2004; Erevelles & Minear, 2010). I am mindful of how calls for more research might feel

inadequate, especially if it is not directly connected to the people and communities most impacted by ableism, racism, and other interrelated oppressions (Fine & Torre, 2021; Sins Invalid, 2019). Therefore, I do not outline potential research questions, but instead propose to use critical research methods and teacher inquiry (e.g., DisCrit, Critical Participatory Action Research; Annamma et al., 2013; Fine & Torre, 2021) as frameworks for more expansive scholarship that has fluid boundaries between practice, communities, and activism.

Critical Participatory Action: Working with Communities Already Engaged in Anti-Ableist Work in Schools

Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR; Fine & Torre, 2021) is theory, method, and practice; all of which come together in pursuit of a future rooted in justice for those living at the nexus of multiple oppressions (Fine & Torre, 2021). With the disruption of a hegemonic status quo at its core, CPAR aims to center marginalized and multiply marginalized communities through democratic and decolonial practices. Thus, CPAR requires academics—especially those with sociocultural privileges and power—to decenter themselves, reject rigid binaries between the perceived researcher and subject, and to live out practices that truly position community members as experts (Fine & Torre, 2021). With both CPAR practitioners and many disabled activists championing "nothing about us without us" (Charlton, 2000), I assert that findings from this dissertation provide a strong and clear pathway to this very type of praxis. To build more just schools for disabled and multiply marginalized people, future scholarship must be deeply collaborative, political, and driven by those most impacted by injustice and oppression

(Fine & Torre, 2021; Sins Invalid, 2019).

Though CPAR aligns well with all three chapters of this dissertation, I will unpack how it might be used for future research about disrupting white saviorism and ableism (see Chapter 2). In the first of my three papers, we found that white saviorism and ableism continues to show up in the ways special educators talk about their work and their students. Though participants expressed commitment to their jobs and students, they often spoke using oppressive frames that valorized overwork and positioned students in ways that falsely suggested they were less than human. Though disturbing to hear, read, and analyze, it would be reductive and inaccurate to paint these logics and norms as an individual problem. Instead, our findings reflect a larger cultural script that has long been embedded into the social fabric of schooling (e.g., Aronson, 2017; Bettini, Meyer, & Stark, 2024; Meiners, 2002; Siuty et al., 2024). As such, research is well-positioned to come from a place of action and disruption.

Paper 1 is also a compelling frame for the promise of CPAR because of the unidirectional approach of our original methods. After conducting focus groups, we did not engage participants in unlearning or resisting the oppressive frames they were using. Thus, there is a ripe opportunity for future research to use CPAR as a means of responding and acting towards justice (Fine & Torre, 2021). For example, researchers can partner with those *already* doing the work to unmake and interrupt these systems of oppression in our education systems. Alternatively, scholars can partner with educators who hold a *desire* to unlearn and unmake saviorism and ableism in their teaching. Through democratic principles and values, educational organizers, activist, and

movement builders can lead research that captures anti-oppressive practice as it is happening, as well as the ways in which it needs to continue.

Researchers should meaningfully engage with educators, youth, families, and community members who are already working to resist white saviorism and ableism in schools. Being mindful that the goal is to build interdependent and trusting communities of practice rather than published scholarship or grants, scholars can step back and let the community-partners take the lead. For example, future CPAR can build on the work of Locke et al. (2022) and Beneke et al. (2022), whereby academic scholars partnered with critical practitioners to explore and enact emancipatory practices in K–12 classrooms. Academic researchers can collaborate throughout the entire research process to build questions and methodologies with community members. A potential point of exploration might be: *How do antiracist and anti-ableist activists and educators conceptualize disrupting white saviorism and ableism in their schools and communities?* Then, together, academic and community researchers can develop finer research aims, questions, and methodologies that would build on our findings from Paper 1.

Teacher Inquiry: Empowering, Supporting, and Amplifying the Work of Anti-Ableist Educators

All three papers revealed compelling complexities for K–12 and teacher preparation systems. I argue, however, that Chapters 3 and 4 illustrated a need for broader change in our schools, while also revealing that committed educators who strive to enact teaching and learning that affirms and supports disabled and multiply marginalized students have long engaged in this change work. Drawing on these findings,

I assert that academic journals, handbooks, and other educational press outlets should make intentional space for anti-ableist praxis to be shared with other scholars and practitioners. To break down siloes between researchers and educators in both K–12 and teacher education (e.g., classroom teacher, university lecturer), increased value should be placed on publishing practitioner papers that use teacher inquiry to position and support educators as researchers of their own practices (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2015).

Teacher inquiry is a strong framework for capturing and supporting anti-ableist practice because of how it centers and empowers those engaged in the daily practice of teaching (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2015). More specifically, teacher inquiry supports teachers to become classroom practitioners who are constantly engaging in research-based processes to improve their craft so that their students continue to learn and grow. As an ongoing practice intertwined with educators' pedagogy, it is both systematic and nonlinear. With no start and end, practitioners are constantly engaging in a process whereby they identify a wondering that emerges from their own teaching, collect and analyze data from multiple sources, take action to refine and adjust, then share with others (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2015). I will now share two ways in which the findings and assertions of Paper 1 and 3 can be used for further study using teacher inquiry.

Teacher educators are well-positioned to engage in *and* support candidates' use of teacher inquiry. As practitioners themselves, teacher educators can engage in the process as a way to reflect on and ensure that their curricula, methods, and approaches are rooted in anti-ableist and anti-oppressive frameworks (e.g., DisCrit Classroom Ecology). In Paper 1, we recommend that teacher educators provide meaningful and consistent

opportunities for teacher candidates to reflect on the ways in white saviorism and ableism shows up in their practice. As teacher educators implement this, it will be important that they engage in teacher inquiry. Engaging in such inquiry will help ensure that their students are building a critical consciousness that is also being applied to their own teaching. This type of inquiry is essential. Though our study analyzed ableism and white saviorism in K–12 contexts, recent empirical scholarship has revealed that it pervades teacher preparation as well (Siuty et al., 2024).

Since teacher preparation is often the entry point for teacher candidates as they shift from student to classroom educator *and* because ableism is baked into dominant society (Annamma et al., 2013; Lewis, 2022), teacher educators should use teacher inquiry as a framework for teacher candidates to reflect and disrupt oppression in their own practice. Teacher candidates might learn and engage in teacher inquiry in an *Introduction to Classroom-Based Research* course before applying it in a fieldwork seminar when they are completing a full-time teaching placement/internship. As they engage in teacher inquiry, connections should be made to anti-ableist and critical frameworks (e.g., Annamma & Morrison, 2018; Waitoller & King Thorius, 2016) so that they are integrating anti-oppressive practices into their work. For example, the curricula and pedagogy foregrounded in Paper 3 could be enacted while also engaging in the teacher inquiry process. As K–12 students engage and respond to instruction, educators can identify wonderings, working to adjust and refine their practice to ensure that it is meaningful and relevant to students' learning. Importantly, these wonderings should be framed around changes to practice rather than to students themselves. Potential

wonderings might include: *How can I improve my English Language Arts instruction so that it's rooted in the strengths, interests, and community practices of my students? How can I build solidarity with disabled and multiply marginalized students so that they feel a strong sense of belonging and autonomy in our classroom?* Then using multiple sources of data—including critical scholarship and evidence from their own classroom practice—they can begin to implement shifts and revisions to their pedagogy.

Finally, though this work is deeply embedded with practice, it is vital that it be published and shared as a valuable and systematic form of research. Teacher educators should model, support, and empower teacher candidates to publish their work in journals and other press outlets, share at practice-oriented conferences (e.g., American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education; Teacher Education Division of CEC[9]) and host community symposiums where members of teacher preparation and K–12 communities can listen, learn, and share feedback with those who are reporting on their practitioner research. Through sharing this work with broader communities that includes both research and practitioner-focused scholars, teacher preparation programs and K–12 schools can be provided a necessary window into how ableism and other systems of oppression are already being unmade (e.g., Locke et al., 2022). Further, amplifying such work can also motivate and empower those within these systems to take on the work themselves.

[9] I have chosen to use the CEC acronym instead of the full name to resist reproducing euphemistic language about disability in this manuscript. Please see Cokley (2020) for a more robust discussion on the history of euphemisms and why many people in disability communities reject them.

Future Directions for Teacher Preparation Program Development & Practice

All three studies exemplified how dominant educational systems continue to be shaped by narrow conceptions of normalcy and disability (Lewis, 2022). Acknowledging how this dissertation found that these norms were upheld *and* disrupted, I use this next section to dig more deeply into how teacher preparation can strive to enact more asset-based and anti-ableist practices. Using DisCrit Classroom Ecology as a framework (Annamma & Morrison, 2018), the approaches to curriculum, pedagogy, and educator-student solidarity do not exist in siloes from the previous section. Instead, the practices discussed in this section can and should be a part of a sustained teacher inquiry process (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2015). I argue that when used in concert with teacher inquiry, teacher practitioners are committing to ensuring that their intent matches the impact they have on their students.

DisCrit Classroom Ecology as a Programmatic Guide Star for Reflection and Revision

The findings outlined in Chapter 2 and 3 revealed that educational practitioners would strongly benefit from reflecting on how they reproduce and maintain ableism. Again, since teacher preparation is often the starting point for many teacher candidates' journey into becoming classroom educators, I argue that this is where this reflection should begin. DisCrit Classroom Ecology is useful because it is both rich in theory and in utility. Serving as praxis, it provides educators with a framework for resisting racism and ableism in curricula, pedagogy, and practice (for a more robust description of DisCrit Classroom Ecology, please see Chapter 1). In the following sections, I will build on

existing scholarship that has explored how teacher educators can use DisCrit Classroom Ecology (e.g., Love & Hancock, 2022; Siuty & Meyer, in review) and discuss how it can be used to examine, reflect, and revise teacher preparation courses and programs.

DisCrit Curriculum: Privileging Disabled and Multiply Marginalized People and Communities

Disability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit) and Disability Studies in Education Scholars have pushed back on teacher preparation curricula that evades disability (Kulkarni et al., 2021), or positions it as something to fix or remediate (Ashby 2012; Brantlinger, 2004; Connor & Gabel, 2008). Resisting approaches in teacher education that evade and pathologize (e.g, Connor & Gabel, 2013), more programs are teaching courses from critical and asset-based lenses (e.g., Ashby, 2012; Lutkins et al., 2023). At the same time, however, some researchers have found that these lenses are not threaded throughout the program, instead existing in siloes in a small handful of courses (Siuty, 2019).

I put this literature in conversation with Chapter 3 where participants revealed serious barriers when educators upheld narrow understandings of disability, access, and support needs. Together, the extant scholarship and our findings suggest that teacher preparation must be examined at a macro level. By looking across their entire program, teacher educators and leaders can work to ensure there is continuity threaded across all aspects of coursework, fieldwork, mentorship, and supervision. Adapting Love and Hancock's (2021) call for curricula audits rooted in DisCrit and Siuty's (2019) call for critical self-reflection, I propose that teacher educators should look across the syllabi and

consider:

1. **Who:** Whose experiences, insights, wisdom, and perspectives are being centered and privileged in each course? How are the voices and contributions of disabled and multiply marginalized learners and educators amplified without placing undue labor on them? Whose expertise is being celebrated and honored (e.g., individuals, communities, groups, etc.)?
2. **What:** What does the content you are teaching say about disability, ableism, and other systems of oppression? What opportunities do students have to engage in disability as an organic and natural part of human diversity? What opportunities do they have to examine past and present histories of ableism, racism, and other systems of oppression while connecting them to their work in schools? How are methods for instructional and social support positioned in relation to students' strengths, lived experiences, and needs?
3. **Reflexive Practice:** How are teacher candidates empowered and supported to apply their learning in coursework to their experiences in the field? What opportunities do they have to consider how their coursework, fieldwork, and supervision aligns or misaligns with their own lived experiences and values? In what ways have they disrupted oppressive thinking, practices, and/or approaches?

DisCrit Pedagogy: Engaging in Reflection to Enact Access-Centered Practices

Teacher educators, even those with critical scholarship agendas, must constantly reflect on their own practice to ensure that it is rooted in anti-oppression. Just as DisCrit Pedagogy provides a promising framework for K–12 educators, it is just as useful for

those teaching in higher education (Siuty & Meyer, in review). Grounded in DisCrit's assertion that multiply marginalized learners have valuable strength, knowledge, and wisdom that they carry into classrooms, teacher educators should develop methods and approaches that honor these assets (Annamma & Morrison, 2018; Love & Hancock, 2022).

Enacting an asset-based approach includes acknowledging that disabled people exist in every community (Mingus, 2017). Thus, even if teacher candidates are new to classroom teaching, there are undoubtably people in each class who have lived experiences with ableism and special education. This was clearly exemplified in Paper 2 when participants shared the representation and power of intergenerational disabled people in their homes and schools (e.g., disabled parents, teachers, and school leaders). Teacher educators can affirm the experiences of disabled and multiply marginalized teacher candidates by providing space for everyone to share the knowledge they already hold about teaching and learning (Annamma & Morrison, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995). For example, before teaching a practice, concept, or framework, instructors can ask: *What experiences have you had with this practice either as a learner or as an educator? Were there benefits? Drawbacks? Barriers? Is there anything you think we should keep in mind before we dig in as a community?* Educators should also take great care in making sure that they do not reproduce conditions that place labor on disabled and multiply marginalized teacher candidates to teach nondisabled and white peers about oppression. There is a real danger in using students' experiences with ableism and racism as a teaching tool for those with more privileged and dominant identities (Annamma &

Morrison, 2018). Teacher educators can safeguard against this by developing fluid classroom norms and values that are consistently revisited and having frequent opportunities to check in with each teacher candidate.

DisCrit Pedagogy also rejects the narrow and rigid achievement norms that pervaded many participants' schooling experiences in Paper 2. Instead, DisCrit Pedagogy expands the possibilities for how educators and learners can engage in and express their learning (Annamma & Morrison, 2018). Within this construct, teacher educators are empowered to design with flexibility and attention to what is meaningful and accessible to teacher candidates. This includes considering their communication and access needs while also considering preferences and what brings them joy. For example, teacher preparation programs can design courses with firm learning goals and flexible means to achieving them with opportunities for teacher candidates to build slide decks, develop posters, and other audiovisual means (Fritzgerald, 2020).

Finally, though these practice-based recommendations are intended for teacher preparation, it will be critical that teacher educators break siloes and build bridges between their instructional decision-making and their practices in higher education and K–12 education. In other words, as teacher educators resist dominant and narrow practices and instead employ more access-centered approaches (e.g., multiple ways to complete a task), they must transparently share *what they are doing and why they are doing it* while inviting teacher candidates to explore *how their approach might apply to a K–12 context.* Then, together, instructors and candidates can unpack affordances, constraints, and ongoing wonderings through class discussion, reflections, and debriefs.

DisCrit Solidarity: Building a More Expansive Approach to Accessibility

The findings shared in Paper 2 also revealed how important it is for educators' pedagogy to include enacting student-centered instruction and building strong relationships. These findings highlighted how teaching and learning cannot be reduced to a series of technical moves that are decontextualized from the sociocultural identities, lives, and contexts of students or educators. I posit that teacher educators can build on these findings and enact DisCrit Solidarity, which is firmly rooted in building and sustaining relationships that are anti-ableist and antiracist. More specifically, DisCrit Solidarity gives teachers and students space, tools, and a lens to resist dominant norms that gatekeep who has a right to access and support within classrooms.

Participants in Paper 2 discussed experiences where support and access were gatekept by school professionals who asserted expertise and dominance over students and families. Further, this expertise and dominance was rooted in deficit-based assumptions that one's support needs were contingent on narrowed perceptions of ability and "smartness" (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011). Consequently, some participants discussed navigating school contexts with inadequate and/or misaligned supports and services. These findings, though instructive for K–12, should also be strongly considered in higher education. As such, teacher educators should employ a more liberatory and expansive conception of access and support that pushes back on narrow and rigid binaries (Sins Invalid, 2019). Instead, teacher educators can build reciprocal and fluid systems and structures where *everyone* is empowered to share their access needs.

To be clear, the access-centered system that I describe is not meant to be at odds

with the regulations under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Instead, a more expansive approach to access actively responds to the limitations of a law that fails to meaningfully address how disability intersects with other systems of power and oppression (Sins Invalid, 2019). Multiply marginalized people with disabilities have long critiqued systems that solely rely on the ADA as a means for reaching justice and equity. They have named how these frameworks often serve those with dominant identity markers (e.g., white, wealthy, cisgender, male), often excluding those who deviate from such markers (Sins Invalid, 2019). To resist privileged gatekeeping, teacher educators can normalize meeting various access needs by providing spaces where both instructors and teacher candidates share what they need in a culture and climate where facilitating access is a natural part of being in community. Again, this must be done with care. Teacher educators must attend to the ways in which disclosing remains risky and deeply consequential for many disabled and multiply marginalized people. Therefore, it will be important to consider disrupting burdensome requirements like medical documentation, lengthy rationales, and disclosure of a disability. Enacting DisCrit Solidarity means trusting disabled and multiply marginalized learners while acting out practices that truly position themselves as the experts of their lives.

Future Directions for K–12 Practice

Each study of this dissertation provided critical insights about K–12 practice and reflected complex tensions. Within each study, there were ways in which K–12 educators both reproduced—and to varying degrees—resisted ableism and other systems of oppression. Paper 1 shed light on how teachers and students deserve more humane

working and learning conditions, as well as how there remains an urgent need to empower special educators to interrogate ableism and white saviorism in their own practice. Paper 2, which centered the expertise and knowledge of disabled people, provided a deeply honest portrait of eight participants' schooling by using their lived experience and wisdom to drive recommendations for K–12 and teacher preparation systems. Finally, Chapter 3, a conceptual essay written in collaboration with educators – many of whom hold disabled identities—unpacked the possibilities of (re)imagining and enacting curriculum and pedagogy that celebrates disability as a meaningful part of history, one's identity, and the social fabric of our world.

In many ways, I think these chapters already clearly speak to future directions for K–12 practice. It's time for K–12 educators and leaders to listen, learn, and act *with* disabled and multiply marginalized people. Read their work, listen to the stories they *choose* to share, and look to past and present disability histories to inform a more just and free future. For example, disabled educators in both Chapter 3 (John) and Chapter 4 modeled the importance of transparently acknowledging and meeting teachers and students access needs. In fact, both chapters also spoke to promises of building communities that center and honor disability identities. Catrina and Sky advocated for schools to create more intentional spaces for disabled people to connect with one another and share their wisdom. Annie shared the power of being supported by a disabled school leader who ensured that she was safe and protected. Together, their stories, along with the practices and curricula shared in Chapter 4, can provide an anchor for how K–12 spaces might (re)imagine a future where disability is not viewed as something shameful or in

need of fixing. Instead, it is seen as a natural part of a school's social fabric that is worth discussing and learning about. To meet this aim, our findings illustrate a need for schools to build and sustain systems and practices that privilege disabled leadership, community, and knowledge. For example, schools might consider policies that focus on:

1. Hiring, retaining, and supporting disabled educators (Loeppky, 2021)
2. Creating community and affinity spaces for disabled and multiply marginalized learners (Siuty & Meyer, in review).
3. Meaningfully incorporating asset-based understandings of disability in curricula (Stolz, 2023; Waitoller & King Thorius, 2016).

Disabled people have always existed, will continue to exist, and it is through their leadership that our world has become more just and accessible (Mingus, 2017; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018, 2022; Wong, 2020). Thus, if our schools are going to strive for a more just world, they must meaningfully include disabled people and their contributions.

APPENDIX A. Paper 1 Focus Group Protocol

I. ***Individual contexts:***
   1. Let's go around the room and share with everyone your name, your grade level, and how long you've taught students with EBD.
   2. How would you describe the working conditions at your school to a new teacher who was thinking about working here?
      a. What do you like best about working in your school?
      b. What do you think are the most significant challenges to working at your school?

II. ***Warming up:***
   1. After seeing the presentation we just gave on working conditions, what is something that stands out to you?
      a. What is something that resonates with you?
      b. What is something that you find yourself questioning, disagree with, or feeling concerned about?

III. ***Transition questions:***
   1. What, if any, working condition interventions have been tried at your school?
      a. What did you like about these? What didn't you like about them?
      b. How successful do you think the intervention(s) was/were?
   2. How do you hear [teachers/administrators] talking about working conditions in your school?

IV. ***Facilitators and barriers to WC interventions:***
   1. How do you feel that [X intervention][10] would work in your school?
      a. What might work well?
      b. What might not work well?
      c. Does anyone see this differently? Are there other points of view?
   2. How would you know that an intervention in working conditions is working effectively?

[10] Interventions included: Investing in strong teaching partners who can co-lead your school's program; Commit to protecting teachers' daily planning and instruction time; Provide access to strong curricular resources; Create systems that allow for homogenous instructional grouping; Develop a collaborative partnership between administration, teachers, & paraprofessionals that ensures adequate training and support for paraprofessionals.

3. How could Boston University best partner with your school to support successful working condition improvements?

V. ***Takeaways about WC interventions:***

1. If you had the opportunity to give advice to your administration on improving working conditions at your school, what would you recommend?

APPENDIX B. Paper 2 Recruitment Questionnaire

First and last name:
Email:

Did you attend schools in the United States? (If you attended school on a US military base, you can select "yes".)
- o Yes
- o No

Do you identify as a person with a disability?
- o Yes
- o No

Did you ever receive special education services when you were in school?
- o Yes
- o No
- o I'm not sure

Did you ever receive accommodations on a 504 Plan?
- o Yes
- o No
- o I'm not sure

What disabilities do you identify with? For example, cerebral palsy, autism, ADHD, intellectual disability, learning disabilities, depression.

What is your racial and/or ethnic identity? For example, Black, Latina, white, Multiracial.

What is your gender identity? For example, transgender woman, nonbinary, cisgender man.

What is your sexual identity? For example, gay, pansexual, asexual, straight, queer.

Are ASL interpretation services needed?
- o Yes
- o No

APPENDIX C. Paper 2 Interview Protocol

Participant's Identities:

1. Can you share your name and how old you are.
2. What disabilities do you identify with?
3. What is your racial and/or ethnic identity?
4. What is your gender identity?
5. What is your sexual identity?

Identifying barriers & access

1. Tell me a little about what school was like for you.

Potential probes:

1. What kinds of classes were you in? For example, were they inclusive or self-contained?
2. What did you like about school?
3. What did you not like about school?

2. Now we're going to talk about barriers. Barriers are things that get in the way and make it hard for us to learn, grow, or access things. What were some barriers you experienced in school?

Potential probes:

a. What could have been done to remove these barriers?

3. What kinds of tools, technology, and supports were helpful for you in school?

Potential probes:

1. What helped you learn?
2. What do you wish you had in school (these can be things that did or did not exist yet)?

4. You shared earlier that you identify as [refer to answer about participants' identities].

Were those identities valued in school?

Potential probes:

1. how did you know they were/weren't valued?
2. How can schools better celebrate students' different backgrounds?

5. Were you ever taught about your disability in school?

Potential probes:

1. What were you taught?
2. Who taught you?
3. What do you wish you learned about your disability when you were growing up?

Experiences with Teachers & Administrators

1. What kinds of things did your teachers value?

Potential probes:

a. What kind of learning did they value? b. What kind of behavior did they value? c. What do you wish they valued?

2. What kinds of conversations do you wish your teachers had with you in school?
3. What did communication look like between your teachers and parents?

Potential probes:

    1. What happened when there was disagreement?
    2. What kind of communication would you like to see between family and teachers?

4. How did administration (principals and vice principals) help or interfere with the accommodation and/or IEP process?
5. Think about your teachers and how they helped you meet your personal care needs or activities of daily living. What was most helpful to you? What would you have liked to be different?

Support, Self-Determination, and Self-Advocacy

1. Did you ever go to an IEP meeting or do you ever remember being told or asked about IEP goals or accommodations?
2. Transition planning is when you, with your teachers and family, set goals and plans for what you want to do after you finish K–12 school. Transition planning is supposed to begin at age 14 until you complete high school or reach the age of 22. Can you tell us if you ever participated or if you ever recall being asked your opinion about your IEP? What was it like?
3. How could your own voice and perspective have been included more during your schooling?
4. How could your teachers have empowered you to share your own voice?

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