Embodying Justice: Supporting Teacher Candidates with Disabilities

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Abstract

Teacher Education Departments at most liberal arts colleges serve as professional certification programs as much as departments with academic majors. We train our students to work in P-12 education in an era of inclusion and require them to support their students with disabilities in preparation for college and career. The federal government protects individuals with disabilities while they are students in school and while they are employees in the workplace. Are we doing our part to support our teacher candidates while they are in our programs? As professional certification gatekeepers, do we unnecessarily block students with disabilities from completing their internship? In this article the author discusses these questions and invites readers to support teacher candidates with disabilities as a way to embody justice in education.

Keywords: **teacher preparation, disabilities, accommodations, ADA**

A glance at many liberal arts college websites reveals that departments and schools of education serve as professional certification programs for future P-12 teachers. With this unique responsibility of providing a symbol of eligibility for employment, in addition to "developing intellectual and moral virtues" (Lederhouse, 2014, p. 3) resulting from any major in a liberal arts institution, teacher preparation programs position themselves as gatekeepers for the P-12 educational field. A closer look into the required courses for teacher certification reveals that teacher candidates take one or more courses about working with students with diverse abilities, language proficiencies, cultures, and socioeconomic backgrounds. A common conceptual framework in these courses is that the labels used in school settings are socially constructed, and situational. Given that stance, with its intention of preparing teachers to maintain student-first language and perspectives, we in teacher education do our part to move away from the dominant social discourse of the medical model with disabilities being an individual deficit (Ferri, Connor, Solis, Valle, & Volpitta, 2005; Hahn, 1998; Keller, 1998; Valle, Solis, Volpitta, & Connor, 2010). While we teach our students the basics of various federally-funded title programs that shape the P-12 educational scene, we often do little to integrate these systems of support into our work with those who will be teaching in these settings. In this article, I will expand on this idea in three sections: first, by giving a brief explanation of support students are legally entitled to under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA); then, by describing the communal aspects promoted in contemporary teacher preparation programs; and finally, by issuing a vision of teacher education programs and the teaching field as settings for embodying justice through disability support and accommodations for teachers in learning communities. A list of suggested accommodations for educators with disabilities is included as an appendix.

Throughout the article, I use the word *disabilities* as that is the term most often used in legislation and in the resources I cite. I

always phrase the discourse using person-first language by identifying students as *individuals with disabilities*, as opposed to *disabled students*.

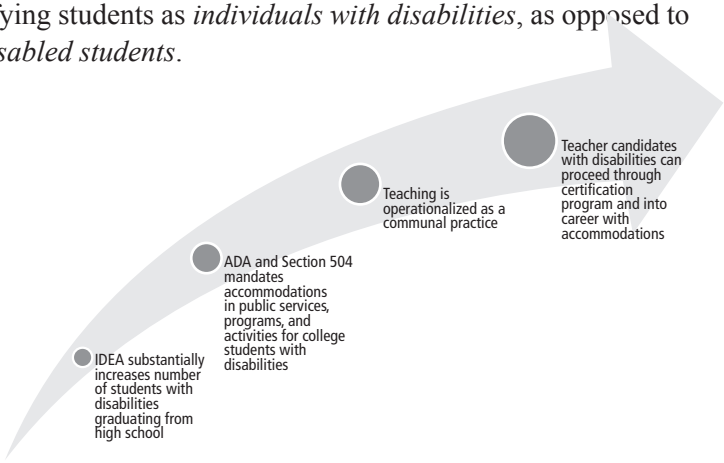

Figure 1. Progression toward Embodied Justice for Teachers with Disabilities

Federal Protections for Individuals with Disabilities

Federal government data of occupational employment and wages from May 2014 show that elementary and secondary schools employ over 5.5 million educators and that 249,250 people who have disclosed that they have a disability are employed as educators, trainers, or librarians. The occupation of education ranked as the 8th most popular for people with disabilities out of the 22 occupations listed by the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014). Other government reports use census data of individuals with disabilities to conclude that there may be over 1 million educators with disabilities working in U.S. schools (Whetzel & Goddard, 2010).

The National Center for Learning Disabilities reported on postsecondary education statistics in 2014. Students with learning disabilities currently enroll in postsecondary education at the same rate as the general population. However, only 17% of those with learning disabilities received disability support in institutions of higher education. The current college completion rate for students with learning disabilities is 41%, approaching the 52% rate for the

general population (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

Since the introduction of IDEA's predecessor, Public Law 94-142 in 1975 when only 20% of students with disabilities attended school (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2010), the percentage of students with disabilities graduating from high school has increased to 61% (Diament, 2014). Of these graduates, more than 60% enroll in institutions of higher education (Resmovits, 2014). IDEA mandates that all P-12 schools receiving federal funds provide a free and appropriate public education for students identified as having one of 14 federally recognized disabilities. In public elementary and secondary schools, students who qualify under IDEA receive an individualized education plan (IEP), and those who have a disability that substantially limits a major life activity are protected under Title II of the ADA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2010). These plans list accommodations, modifications, and, if needed, services that all who interact with the student must provide. The plans exist to provide equity in schools for the students between the ages of 3 and 22 who have them.

The educators and administrators who have worked with P-12 students in the era of IDEA have been encouraged to foster a sense of ability and hope in students with disabilities. Currently, many students with disabilities are told that they can achieve what their typically-developing peers hope to achieve academically and in careers. Schools are required to place students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment and with the general education population as much as possible. Students with IEPs have their goals based on grade level standards of their typically-developing peers, which are then unpacked to the individual student's level of performance. It is no surprise then that the percentage of students with disabilities graduating from high school has increased 16 percent between 1997 and 2008 (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2010).

Once the students reach college or university, they are no longer

provided with an IEP, but are federally protected by ADA, and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008 in particular (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2011). ADA prohibits discrimination against students with a disability that substantially limits a major life activity or bodily function such as, but not limited to: learning, reading, concentrating, communicating, interacting with others, functions of the immune system, neurological functions, and respiratory functions (for a longer, non-exhaustive list, see the Federal Register of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2011). Many institutions of higher education have a department or center dedicated to supporting students with disabilities, and the employees of the center often provide assistance to instructors who need to provide accommodations for students with disabilities. Classroom accommodations include, but are not limited to: accessible classrooms and housing, books and other printed materials in alternative formats, exam accommodations (such as extra time on exams or readers for exams), sign language interpreters or FM system, notetakers, and use of assistive technology (Seattle Pacific University Center for Learning, 2015).

Title I of the ADA protects employees from discrimination in the workplace including discrimination during hiring, work, and promotion processes. Once teacher education students are licensed and begin working, they are eligible to receive accommodations for mobility, sensory, allergies/chemical, mental health, and cognitive impairments. Examples of accommodations in their workplace include: ergonomic chairs, closed captioned videos, air purification devices, written as well as verbal instructions, organization tools and software, and mentors for guidance (Whetzel & Goddard, 2010).

The federal government protects individuals with disabilities while they are students in school and while they are employees in the workplace. Are we doing our part to support these individuals while they are in our teacher preparation programs? Multiple researchers found that teacher education programs provide the least support in the areas of field experience and course substitutions to students with learning disabilities (Baldwin, 2007; Bowman

& Barr, 2001; Csoli & Gallagher, 2012). As teacher educators, we have the opportunity and the obligation to provide equitable conditions for our students as they work through their licensure requirements.

Teaching as a Professional Community

Teacher candidates in most preparation programs are taught about professional learning communities. Starting with the writing and professional development workshops offered by Richard and Becky DuFours and Bob Eaker in the late 1990s, the P-12 teaching community made explicit efforts to transform the concept of teaching from being a solitary exercise to one requiring active membership in a group that focuses on student learning. With each successive cohort of novice teachers, the image of a teacher being someone who goes into a classroom, closes the door, and singularly rules the realm fades into history. This generation of teachers knows that one part of being a teacher is working with colleagues on planning, instruction, and assessment. Today's teacher may share students during leveled teaching or intervention activities, may share the classroom through co-teaching with special education or general education staff, and may share student data with a grade level team for reflection and further planning. In all of these circumstances, the teacher is engaged with other adults, and therefore has others who can provide feedback, assistance, and insight when needed. Today's teacher is not an island.

As teacher educators, we teach the communal nature of education to our students, and we expect that they will experience this during their internship. We build on Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of communities of practice and the notion of learning and teaching as a communal process (Matusov, Julien, Lacasa & Candela, 2007). If mutual support among teachers is an expectation and a practice we introduce to our students, do we unnecessarily act as gatekeepers keeping out students with disabilities who might be successful teachers if only they were able to rely on collegial support during the licensure process and in the P-12 school setting?

Some institutions have started formalizing such support, through

dyad and triad placements for internship or through comprehensive assistance in applying for accommodations on state licensure testing such as the edTPA. Often though, we counsel students with disabilities out of our programs. When we do, P-12 students lose the opportunity to feel accepted in their school when they see their teacher(s) with disabilities being accepted there (for example, see Wills, 2007). The P-12 students miss out on role models of people with disabilities being successful. We fail to provide the schools with teachers who can relate to the life circumstances of students with disabilities (Bowman & Barr, 2001; Ferri, Keefe, & Gregg, 2001; Valle, Solis, Volpitta, & Connor, 2010).

A Vision for Teacher Education Programs

Teacher education programs provide the least support in the areas of field experience and course substitutions to students with learning disabilities (Baldwin, 2007; Bowman & Barr, 2001; Csoli & Gallagher, 2012). Colleges and universities have significant autonomy in determining essential elements in their degree programs, and for that reason, many decisions affecting students' success in teacher education are impacted by faculty bias. Attitudes toward the ethics of accommodations and personal experience with individuals with disabilities influence instructors' classroom and program decisions (Leyser, Greenberger, Sharoni, & Vogel, 2011). Some faculty bias stems from ignorance, with faculty "doubting the existence of less visible conditions such as learning and psychiatric disabilities" (Papalia-Beerardi, Hughes, & Papalia, 2002, p.28). Some lack of student success in teacher education programs stems from faculty's low expectations of students identified as having disabilities (Ferri, Keefe, & Gregg, 2001). For these reasons, some students in institutions of higher education are tempted to "pass" as typically-developing students rather than risk disclosing their disabilities.

Teacher education programs can address these issues in all three of the "complex and dynamic communities" described in Lederhouse's (2014) article on teacher preparation in liberal arts colleges. Researchers call for training on disability awareness and

advocacy for all those working in Community #1, the traditional academy's teacher education programs—instructors, directors, field supervisors, and mentor teachers (Csoli & Gallagher, 2012; Leyser, Greenberge, Sharoni, & Vogel, 2011; Valle, Solis, Volpitta, & Connor, 2010). Training could be provided by educators with disabilities to promote relational understanding of individuals with disabilities. Employees in college and university Learning Centers/ Disability Support Services could teach those in the teacher education programs about federal legislation, legal accommodations, and the ethics of equity.

Members of Community #2—Institutions of higher education and P-12 organizations—could work together to facilitate collegial support for teacher candidates with disabilities at school sites. Professional Learning Communities could use some of their time together to support individual teachers' needs, such as double-checking numbers for those with dyscalculia, checking the pre-written phrases or sentences of those with learning disabilities, or setting up productivity software for those with expressive writing disorders or with organizational challenges (Searchable Online Accommodation Resources, 2015). Educators who are proficient in teaching as a communal practice could split their duties accordingly so that disabilities are rescripted, not as individual deficits, but as a normal part of the discourse of planning and teaching.

All of those working with teacher education students could be informed of current statistics on the less-visible disabilities, such as those with mental and cognitive components. Through interaction with Community #3—state and federal regulatory agencies—those working in teacher education programs should be held accountable for providing accommodations and they should hold accountable the licensure exam organizations to ensure equitable opportunities for students with disabilities. One member of Community #3, The U.S. Department of Education is in the process of funding an information center to help students with disabilities in institutions of higher education and to help colleges and universities improve their disability support services (McIntire, 2015).

Conclusion

The future teachers, students succeeding with disabilities, are out there, and they are entering our teacher education programs. The more we know, the more we can explicitly shape the dominant discourse on abilities of individuals with disabilities. We have been teaching our students to promote this among the P-12 population; now it is our turn to promote this for our teacher education participants. If liberal arts education "aspires to promote human flourishing, [and] explores what it means to be fully human in order to experience a more enriched life" (Lederhouse, 2014, p. 6), and if we believe in a sociopolitical construct that positions disability within the parameter of full humanity, then we must model for our teacher education students what it means to support those with disabilities in our educational communities. This is how we embody justice in our teacher education programs.

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Appendix A
Accommodations for Educators with Disabilities

Accommodation Ideas from Job Accommodation Network (Searchable Online Accommodation Resource, 2015; Whetzel & Goddard, 2010):

Motor/Mobility Impairments

Motor and mobility impairment refers to limitations in motor movements such as walking, lifting, sitting, standing, typing, writing, gripping, and maintaining stamina. Many conditions cause motor or mobility impairment, including but not limited to multiple sclerosis, cancer, stroke, spinal cord injury, cumulative trauma disorder, back condition, arthritis, cerebral palsy, Parkinson's disease, and heart condition.

Difficulty standing in front of class:

- Use sit/stand stool
- Use anti-fatigue mat/carpeting with extra padding
- Use counter height stool
- Alternate often between sitting and standing
- Rearrange student seating so the individual may sit, but still be viewed easily by all students, e.g., semi-circle
- Adjust height of chalk board, white board, or interactive white board
- Allow use of supportive foot wear
- Difficulty bending to assist students:
- Have student come to individual when needed or when directed to do so
- Use teacher's aide and student teachers
- Use student assistants to help others
- Allow use of portable desk height stool so that individual can sit next to a student's desk

Difficulty bending to obtain materials or access files:

- Use automatic shelves and file systems so that materials are brought to appropriate height with a push of a button

- Have most commonly used materials on easy to access shelves or drawers
- Have shelves lowered or raised
- Have student helpers to assist with tasks
- Sit on a low stool when accessing lower shelves, cabinets, and drawers
- Use a reacher to access out of reach shelves
- Consider allowing use of a service animal

Difficulty sitting for long periods of time at desk:

- Use ergonomic chair so that seat can be adjusted to fit the person using it
- Use adjustable height desk for the option to sit or stand while working
- Take frequent rest breaks and alternate between sitting and standing

Difficulty moving around room, building, or grounds:

- Make sure appropriate mobility aids are being used for the condition experienced by the person with a disability and for the environment
- Have accessible path of travel and make sure it is clear at all times
- Make sure floor surface is appropriate (even and slip resistant, and if carpeted, no more than 1/2 inch thick, securely attached, and firm padding underneath)
- Locate work station and planning area near restrooms, individual's work room, and emergency exit
- Develop a plan to signal for help in an emergency so that the individual does not have to physically go to office to get assistance
- Provide appropriate parking

Difficulty writing on whiteboard:

- Use writing aid to hold marker
- Use PC projector
- Use overhead projector
- Use flip chart
- Use pocket chart

Difficulty writing on papers:

- Provide writing aid to assist in holding writing device
- Allow frequent rest breaks and alternate between tasks
- Provide writing line guides, clip board/paper holders, tactile paper with raised lines
- Use typewriter
- Convert forms to digital format when possible and allow computer based data entry
- Use stamps for comments, dates, and signatures when practical
- Provide an ergonomic workstation

Difficulty keyboarding:

- Use key guards
- Provide voice recognition software
- Use ergonomic keyboard
- Provide other alternative input: head stick, scanning systems, etc.
- Use wrist rests
- Provide ergonomic chair with arm/elbow support
- Allow frequent rest breaks/alternate between tasks

Sensory Impairments

Sensory impairments are any conditions that affect hearing, speech, vision, or respiration.

Difficulty viewing computer screen due to low vision:

- Provide larger sized monitor
- Provide external magnification (fits over existing monitor)
- Use screen magnification software
- Reduce glare via glare guards, blinds on windows, or adjusting lighting in the work area
- Provide monitor with high resolution, high contrast, and flicker free features
- Allow frequent rest breaks for eyes
- Change font size
- Provide a keyboard with large print on keys

Difficulty viewing papers due to low vision:

- Provide hand/stand/optical magnifier

- Provide closed circuit television system
- Provide electronic magnifier
- Enlarge information on copier
- Provide task lighting
- Reduce glare in area, via overhead lights, windows, etc.
- Install adjustable light switch or other alternative lighting
- Change font size
- Allow frequent rest breaks for eyes
- Use a document camera and computer projector to project pages onto a wall screen

Difficulty obtaining information from computer screen due to no vision:

- Provide screen reading software
- Provide Braille display terminal
- Provide reader (clerical staff, etc.)

Difficulty viewing papers due to no vision:

- Provide optical character recognition system
- Use reader/assistant

Difficulty communicating with others due to hearing loss or no hearing:

- Provide assistive listening devices (FM, infrared, power loop)
- Provide real-time captioning via computer/PC projector
- Use hearing aids
- Implement appropriate positioning and lighting to assist with lip reading
- Reduce background noise and improve acoustics by shutting classroom doors and windows, adding carpet and acoustical wall/ceiling coverings, improving etiquette at meetings, and reducing air rush sound from air and heating ducts
- Allow written communication
- Consider use of a sign language interpreter
- Use electronic mail (via computer)

Difficulty accessing information from video tape/DVD:

- Have equipment capable of providing closed captioning when it is available (new television, decoder)

- Use assistive listening devices
- Provide closed captioned (either in house or by using a service)

Difficulty communicating over the telephone due to hearing impairment:

- Provide text telephone
- Provide telephone amplification via amplified phone (handset or via in-line or portable amplifiers)
- Use relay service
- Use captioned telephone and Cap-tel service
- Use voice carry over phone
- Use video phone

Difficulty responding to fire and emergency signals:

- Add visual signals to auditory alarms
- Use vibrating pager
- Consider allowing use of a service animal
- Have students or another employee alert person that alarm has sounded
- Use Signtel Intercom System

Difficulty speaking loudly enough for others to hear:

- Provide portable voice amplifier
- Provide stationary PA system or FM system when portable systems do not provide enough gain
- Provide communication board or other communication device with speech output
- Use signals with special meaning to reduce amount of speaking needed
- Prerecord frequently used instructions and store on computer (CD or interactive whiteboard) to reduce amount of speaking needed
- Use supplementary teaching materials such as videos DVDs and computer software
- Use the narration feature in PowerPoint or a similar program to add sound to presentations that will be used frequently
- Provide a computer with screen reading software so that the individual can type instructions rather than speaking

Allergies/Multiple Chemical Sensitivities

Sensitivities to cleaning agents, smoke, pesticides, perfumes, paint, carpet, and other building furnishings:

- Use air purification device
- Avoid the irritant to the extent possible
- Use non-toxic paint and other cleaning products that are less irritating alternatives
- Remove, replace, or detoxify existing carpet and select other less toxic building furnishings and supplies
- Improve ventilation within the worksite
- Notify in advance of painting or use of pesticides so that alternative work arrangements can be made
- Educate others concerning the nature of multiple chemical sensitivities and how fragrances can affect the condition
- Move work area away from such areas as the shop class, chemistry lab, cafeteria, or parking lot
- Have cleaning, maintenance, and remodeling jobs performed while the building is unoccupied
- Consider implementing a fragrance policy
- Provide a dehumidifier to prevent build-up of mold
- Provide access to a list of ingredients in cleaning products and other chemical agents used on school grounds

Mental Health Impairments

Mental health impairment refers collectively to all diagnosable mental disorders. Mental disorders are health conditions that are characterized by alterations in thinking, mood, or behavior (or some combination thereof) associated with distress and/or impaired functioning. Examples of mental health impairments include depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorder, schizophrenia, and addiction.

Difficulty handling stress, emotions, and change:

- Have mentor to assist when stress levels become high
- Provide administrative and coworker support with open communication

- Allow time off for counseling and stress management support groups
- Limit number of subjects to be taught (e.g., specialize in one or two subjects)
- Consider limiting number of students in class if feasible
- Have plan period at the same time everyday
- Have own classroom instead of having to change rooms
- Use stress management techniques effectively
- Use soothing music or environmental sound machine to block out background noise when doing paperwork
- Allow additional time and training to learn new responsibilities
- Allow telephone calls to emotional supports
- Schedule meetings with supervisor to discuss workplace issues, production levels, effectiveness of accommodations
- Develop strategies to deal with problems before they arise
- Obtain clear expectations of responsibilities and the consequences of not meeting them
- Provide sensitivity training to co-workers
- Provide to-do lists and written instructions
- Consider providing in-service training on stress management

Difficulty with organization, staying on task, finishing paperwork, managing time:

- Provide organization tools such as electronic schedulers, pace setters, memo recorders, software organizers, calendars, and grade books
- Assign permanent classroom instead of having to change rooms
- Schedule structured plan period at the same time everyday
- Use color code files, papers, books
- Create detailed lesson plans and outline
- Use specialized lesson plan books
- Limit number of subjects and classes to be taught
- Divide large assignments into smaller tasks and steps
- Assign a mentor to assist with determining goals, providing daily guidelines, reminding of important deadlines
- Consider providing in-service training on time management

Cognitive Impairments

Cognitive impairment refers to disturbances in brain functions, such as memory loss, problems with orientation, distractibility, perception problems, and difficulty thinking logically. Cognitive impairment is a syndrome, not a diagnosis. Many conditions can cause cognitive impairment, including multiple sclerosis, depression, alcoholism, Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, traumatic brain injury, chronic fatigue syndrome, and stroke.

Difficulty with concentration:

- Increase natural lighting or provide full spectrum lighting
- Reduce clutter in the classroom
- Plan for uninterrupted work time
- Divide large assignments into smaller tasks and steps
- Restructure job to include only essential functions

Memory deficits:

- Allow individual to tape record meetings
- Provide printed minutes of each meeting
- Provide written as well as verbal instructions
- Allow additional training time for new programs and initiatives
- Provide reminders of important deadlines via e-mails, memos, and weekly supervision
- Provide mentor for daily guidance
- Use notebooks, planners, or sticky notes to record information for easy retrieval
- Provide cues to assist in location of items by using labels, color coding, or bulletin boards

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