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Exploring Special Education Teacher Candidates' Perception and Motivation Towards Working with
Students with Developmental Disabilities

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Special Education

by

Maya Evashkovsky

2023

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Exploring Special Education Teacher Candidates' Perception and Motivation Towards Working with
Students with Developmental Disabilities

by

Maya Evashkovsky

Doctor of Philosophy in Special Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2023

Professor Connie L. Kasari, Co-Chair

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Teacher education programs strive to promote social justice and critical thinking among candidates. However, limited attention is given to ableism and disability rights. This study investigates how special education teacher candidates discuss disabilities and the future of students with developmental disabilities, as well as their motivation to work in the field. Ten candidates from an urban Hispanic-serving institution participated in semi-structured interviews. The findings highlight a lack of experiences beyond the classroom and emphasize the need for a critical framework and disability studies

perspective in teacher preparation programs. Addressing these gaps can enhance the understanding and support provided by future special education teachers to individuals with diverse needs.

The dissertation of Maya Evashkovsky is approved.

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Table of Contents

Introduction 1

 Research Questions 3

 Research Significance..... 4

Literature Review 5

 Special Education Teacher Preparation 5

 The Nature of Teachers’ Work..... 6

 Justice and Equity in TEPs 7

 Teacher Candidates’ Beliefs and Perceptions..... 8

 Disability Studies in Education 9

 Students With Developmental Disabilities 13

Methods..... 16

 Positionality Statement..... 16

 Recruitment 17

 Participants 17

 Ethical Considerations..... 18

 Developing the Research Protocol..... 18

 Data Collection and Procedures..... 19

 Data Analysis..... 20

 Coding Stages..... 20

 Validity and Credibility..... 23

Findings 25

 Part I: The Route to Teaching in Special Education 25

Part II: Conceptualizing Post-Graduation Experiences Students with DD as Perceived by Future Teachers.....	36
Discussion and Implications.....	45
Implications and limitations.....	50
Future Direction.....	51
References	53

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 <i>Overview of Participants</i>	18
Table 2 <i>Sample Interview Excerpts and Initial Codes</i>	21
Table 3 <i>Sample Code Thematic Transition</i>	22

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 <i>Thematic map describing findings for RQ1: The route to teaching in special education</i>	26
Figure 2 <i>Candidates' conceptualizing post-graduation experiences of students with DD</i>	37
Figure 3 <i>Current findings indicate perpetuating exclusionary practices with research recommendations suggesting future practices</i>	47

LIST OF ACRONYMS

CAT	Critical Ability Theory
CTC	Commission on Teacher Credentialing
DD	Developmental Disabilities
DS	Disability Studies
DSE	Disability Studies in Education
ESN	Extensive Support Needs
GT	Grounded Theory
ID	Intellectual Disabilities
IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
IEP	Individualized Educational program
MMSN	Mild Moderate Support Needs
PWD	People With Disabilities
SPED	Special Education
TEP	Teacher Education Program
UDL	Universal Design for Learning

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Introduction

I remember the first time I entered a special day classroom for students with autism and the following decision to seek a teaching credential. But it was only years later that I met and talked to an autistic adult. That meeting left a strong impression on me and sparked my interest in the experiences of my young elementary-age students outside of the classroom. In recent years as a graduate student, I got to develop my understanding of disability studies. Reading the work of disabled advocates and critical theories reminded me of that first encounter with an adult with autism and the overlooked gap between teachers who decide to serve students with disabilities and what they know about this community beyond the special education context.

In designing this research, I decided to address this knowledge gap and learn about the experiences of upcoming educators. I chose to focus on credential candidates since they are close to making the decision to seek a career in special education. Credential candidates are the next generation of teachers who come to the profession in an era when social justice and equity discussions are embedded in higher education and beyond. Learning about their experiences is what motivated me to design this research.

Special Education Teacher Education Programs

Teacher Education Programs (TEPs) play a significant role in preparing special education teachers to serve students with diverse needs. Special education teachers have power in deciding on services, placement, and curricula that students can access (Brownell et al., 2010). Yet the implications of these decisions extend beyond PreK-22 and affect one's adulthood and quality of life. This is especially true for students most of whose K-22 years are spent in special education settings: students with Developmental Disabilities. Research finds that teachers' decisions could be impacted by several factors, including teachers' perceptions of disability, knowledge, and training (Bell et al., 2021; Kwok et

al., 2021). Therefore, there is value in examining teachers' perceptions of students with Developmental Disabilities (DD) as factors that affect students' educational and life experiences. This group of students is growing rapidly but it is not yet effectively included in the general education classroom, or even community settings.

Although special education introduces various assessment tools to determine the impact of disabilities on students' learning and behavior, the social aspect of the disability is not well-developed in the discipline. Disability, as a social construct, is flexible, unstable, and highly influenced by society's perception and aligns with other identity-focused social constructs such as gender, race, and/or sexuality (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2017). Unfortunately, issues of disability rights are often excluded from the ongoing conversations about social justice; it seems that ableism, the common form of oppression that perceives able-bodies and minds as superior to the disabled (Peters et al. in Adams et al., 2013), is common yet almost excluded from discussions on diversity. However, with sixty-one million People with Disabilities (PWD) living in the United States (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018), and 14% of all K-12 students receiving special education services (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), the need to incorporate these conversations with preservice teachers is amplified.

One discipline that addresses this need is the Disability Studies in Education (DSE); an interdisciplinary academic perspective that offers frameworks to analyze educational institutions like TEPs using critical, intersectional lens (Baglieri et al., 2011). A closer look at the special education teacher preparation curriculum shows that, surprisingly, the conversation about ableism is not as prominent as one would expect (Cosier & Pearson, 2016). TEPs discuss the legal and social evolution that created the legal requirements to educate and include students with disabilities, but the perspective of PWD in these discussions is scarce. Yet, educators who work with the disability community must reflect on their experiences, beliefs, and biases toward the community they serve. The proposed grounded theory qualitative exploratory study is a first step towards understanding

perspectives on disabilities held by teacher candidates who seek a credential in special education, with a long-term goal to disrupt the themes of ableism and systemic oppression of the disability community presently embedded in TEPs.

Theoretical Approaches

Disability Critical Race Theory

This work is guided by the theoretical framework of Disability Critical Race Theory —DisCrit. Annamma and colleagues (2018) documented the intersection of Critical Race Theory and disabilities under the theoretical framework of DisCrit, emphasizing the strength of an informed framework that rejects a single-identity perspective. As we discuss disabilities in this research, I consider the intersecting identities of study participants and the students they work with. While the core of the present project is to identify beliefs towards the disability community, it is vital to acknowledge the diversity within this community and that we cannot narrow our students' identity to a single identity only. DisCrit has a role in identifying our participants as individuals from intersecting backgrounds, avoiding the use of single-identity methods, and acknowledging multi-layered identities. DisCrit's tenets (Annamma et al., 2018) guide the interview questions and analysis of data; in particular, tenet one, "DisCrit focuses on ways that the forces of racism and ableism circulate interdependently, often in neutralized and invisible ways, to uphold notions of normality" (Annamma et al., 2018, p.55) and tenet two "DisCrit values multidimensional identities and troubles singular notions of identity such as race or dis/ability or class or gender or sexuality, and so on" (p.56). I encouraged participants to discuss the intersectionality of identities along with their perceptions of disability as a single identity.

Research Questions

By further exploring the perceptions of disabilities with special education teacher candidates, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do education specialist credential candidates discuss disabilities?
 - a. What kind of previous experience with individuals with disabilities affects their perceptions? (e.g., interactions with family and community members; work-related experiences)
 - b. What motivates them to work with students with disabilities?
2. What are education specialist credential candidates' conceptions of the life experiences of students with developmental disabilities?
 - a. What do they expect students' future to look like?
 - b. To what do they attribute students' success or challenges?

Research Significance

TEPs have a prominent role in preparing future educators to work with students with diverse needs from various backgrounds. While there is growing interest in incorporating themes of social justice and equity (Cochran-Smith, 2020), disability-justice topics remain excluded from these conversations (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2017). This issue becomes even more prominent when preparing special educators to work with students with DD. This growing population of students is the most vulnerable during their school years due to their exclusion from general education settings and the otherness imposed on them by systemic biases. But this exclusion goes beyond the K-22 years, and marginalization practices continue into post-graduation for individuals with DD. In fact, by raising awareness and social responsibility with special educator teacher candidates, we can challenge this trajectory and change the oppressive cycle from its roots. This study brings a critical disability studies perspective to special education preparation programs, yielding a theory that is rooted in data and can guide future research and practice in the field.

Literature Review

Special Education Teacher Preparation

Special education teachers hold a complex role that requires a thorough and integrative preparation program. Teachers are expected to master an extensive knowledge base to be successful at their work; in addition to disability-related knowledge, assessment procedures, and effective special education practices, teachers need to be highly qualified in core content areas and the general education curriculum (Brownell et al., 2010). These requirements are reflected in TEPs as they address multiple content areas while preparing teacher candidates for their role as classroom managers.

The content of TEPs is guided by a set of clear standards, Teaching Performance Expectations (TPEs) that should be followed consistently in order to accredit the programs' participants. In California, the standards and curriculum of TEPs are overseen by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC, 2021). The credential program standards address the "aspects of program quality and effectiveness that apply to each type of educator preparation program" (CTC, 2021, p. 5). For special education (SPED) teachers, CTC standards describe specific pedagogical skills by grade level and academic domain and are structured around several types of credentials such as Early Childhood Special Education, Mild to Moderate Support Needs, Extensive Support Needs (formerly referred to as moderate to severe), Deaf and Hard of Hearing, and Visual Impairments and Blindness. The standards guide TEPs' learning outcomes, curriculum, and syllabi to achieve accreditation.

Yet, with the strict requirements grounded in standards, TEPs teach in various ways that often serve best the communities in which they are nested. For example, TEPs that predominantly serve urban school districts may spend additional time preparing their teachers to serve the unique needs of urban learners and families. One recent change in the curriculum (Carrillo & Flores, 2020) is the drastic shift that occurred due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which forced TEPs to provide candidates with resources for

teaching online. These are examples of the relative flexibility that TEPs hold in designing their curriculum to adapt to changes or needs in their communities, even if those are not explicitly stated in the standards. Therefore, introducing discussions on disabilities and offering different perspectives within the flexibility of the TEPs.

The Nature of Teachers' Work

Since SPED teacher candidates are at the heart of this research, I want to address a reoccurring question that deals with the nature of teachers as public servants; hence, an attempt to frame the objectives and obligations of the teacher profession (Osman, 2015; Taylor, 2007). This inquiry emphasizes the essence of teaching, as it reflects beyond standards and skill sets. One of the dominant approaches considers *educators as street-level bureaucrats* (Lipsky, 2010; Taylor, 2007). Lipsky (2010) expressed the notion that “those who work on the front line of public services make a difference to policies and to the way in which they are experienced” (Lipsky, 2010, as cited in Rowe, 2012, p.10). Teachers, as public service workers, follow the policies while interacting with the public daily. This bottom-up approach makes their interpretation of the policies and their personal values critical to the communities they serve (Wray & Houghton, 2019).

Another approach perceives *teachers as specialized technicians* (Evans, 2010). Teaching as a technical line of work is a standardized profession bound to a set of rules and regulations where success is measured with objective sets of tools (Evans, 2010). While this approach praises pragmatic and measurable achievements, it is criticized for its negligence to acknowledge the complexity of education beyond academic achievement, especially in urban diverse populations (Cochran-Smith, 2020). One of the outcomes of this approach is the heavy use of standardized testing as a measurement of teachers' productivity (Evans, 2010; Murnane & Papay, 2010). In recent decades, with the widespread use of standardized testing, the perspective of teachers as specialized technicians has become dominant, and outcomes of students' testing are considered a valid measure of teachers' success and professionalism.

This trend is highly criticized by those who serve minoritized communities, including students with disabilities, who may show lower-than-average scores, often referred to as the achievement gap (Perry & McConney, 2010).

Lastly, a more recent and radical approach offers a multidimensional view of *teachers as transformative intellectuals*. It suggests that teachers' culture, dispositions, and set of beliefs take an important role in their daily work (Giroux, 2011; Osman, 2015). This emphasizes schools as a place to develop democratic discourse and develop communities that foster intellectual freedom while encouraging dialogue. Osman (2015) elaborates on the role of teachers in discussing diversity and cultural variations and inspires students "to reach beyond themselves" (p.43). Thinking about teachers as transformative intellectuals goes beyond the role of the teacher; it emphasizes the classroom as a place of discourse and democracy, allowing students to explore their standpoints while examining their role in society and their communities. A growing body of research discusses the importance of teachers as agents of change (e.g., Liu & Ball, 2019; Souto-Manning & Martell, 2019) which puts a spotlight on teachers' preconceptions and values. Research indicates the importance of these features as early as in kindergarten and throughout the educational journey. In the context of this work, the present study views its participants as transformative intellectuals as it explores the role of teachers' beliefs and values toward individuals with disabilities.

Justice and Equity in TEPs

Aligned with the perception of teachers as transformative intellectuals, it is critical that teachers' education instills values of equity, diversity, inclusion, and anti-racism. The CTC's report on California Professional Standards for Education Leaders (2014) indicates that educators' decisions, models, and behavior should demonstrate "a personal code of ethics that requires continuous reflection and learning" (p.9). The state standards address anti-racism or ableism briefly, and refer to the general terms of equity, integrity, and justice. Kim (2011) reviewed research on the incorporation of the anti-

racist curriculum in TEPs. The study reports on an overall perspective that emphasizes multiculturalism-focused viewpoints. The author also indicated the need for teacher candidates to examine their identity and growth with critical thinking and towards race and whiteness. Cochran-Smith et al. (2016) list the tasks that can promote teachers' education on equity. They highlight (a) framing the issue within the local context, (b) defining the goal and practice around the learning of under-served populations, (c) creating a curriculum that fosters equity throughout disciplines, and (d) implementing research, learning, and teaching that supports teacher candidates' engagement in theories and practice for equity. The nature and intensity of discussing equity and justice in TEPs vary greatly based on the characteristics of the accreditation institute; hence it is possible that these values are still controversial and highly politicized, especially in an era of polarization in society (Cochran-Smith, 2020) and that we cannot assume that teacher candidates had the opportunity to have meaningful conversations on equity and justice during their preparation program. Bell et al. (2021) indicate that social-justice discourse in TEPs is trapped in a web of policies from federal-state- local- and institutional entities. Yet, the scholarly work discussing social justice in TEPs is gradually growing, holding the promise to include complex discourse in the training of future educators (Dyches & Boyd, 2017).

Teacher Candidates' Beliefs and Perceptions

Research shows that, ultimately, teacher candidates' set of beliefs can affect their practice and professional attitude (Bell et al., 2021; Kwok et al., 2021). It also emphasizes the importance of teacher candidates to articulate their knowledge and beliefs on issues of equity and justice (Bell et al., 2021). Kwok et al. (2021) surveyed beginning general and special education preservice teachers about their beliefs on variables that affect classroom management and found that 75% of respondents found that "culture, language, and worldview" have a crucial effect on students' behavior and understanding of the classroom expectations (p. 416). Participants in Kwok et al.'s study also mentioned that "all students have the same capability to learn..." (p. 419), indicating the perceived need to have equal expectations

from all. Yet, having equal expectations contradict the fundamentals of accessibility and common frameworks like the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) that suggests universal access to the curriculum without compromising individual needs (Levey, 2023). Having equal expectations denies the value of human diversity in our school system, and these findings reflect the complexity of teacher training programs that not only provide practical tools and strategies to teachers but also holds an important role in establishing a set of beliefs that align with educational equity.

The importance of knowing teachers' beliefs and biases has been long debated in research, and there is limited evidence on how effective TEPs are in reducing teachers' biases (Worrell, 2022). Yet, one cannot argue that teachers' explicit or implicit biases are more likely to affect attitudes toward students (Pit-ten Cate & Glock, 2019). In the context of this work, I focus on special education teachers—those who are trained to serve individuals with disabilities— and examine their beliefs and implicit bias towards PWD. While the literature on the topic is limited and faces methodological obstacles in addressing implicit bias, there is some advancement, and much of it is contributed by the fields of *disability studies in Education* as I discuss in the next section.

Disability Studies in Education

Disability studies in Education (DSE) is an interdisciplinary academic approach that aims to shape learning environments to accommodate all school members to have access to curriculum and learning (Baglieri et al., 2011). While there is, ultimately, an overlap between the discipline of special education and disability studies, the distinction between the two as academic disciplines is fundamental to the understanding of these domains. DSE seeks to dismantle the educational labeling of students who differ from what is considered “normal society.” DSE rejects the necessity, emphasized by SPED regulations, to address disability as an individual need and calls to design the learning environments in a way that enables diverse learners to access the curriculum. This core disagreement on the most fundamental

practices, like Individualized Educational Programs (IEP), placement, and assessment, brought many DSE experts to criticize the state of SPED services that perpetuate labeling and the segregation of students with disabilities, and in particular students from minoritized backgrounds (see Baglieri et al., 2011; Cosier & Pearson, 2016). DSE offers alternative perspectives to disability, ones that stray from the common medicalization of disabilities in society and the educational system. These are important for this study as they can help us understand or conceptualize candidates' perceptions. I discuss those in the following section.

The Models of Disability

Disability studies (DS) theories describe various models of disabilities that are dominant within our society; these aim to explain how societies perceive the essence of disabilities and disabled individuals (Peters et al., 2013). In this section I briefly introduce some of the models that are relevant to the work and perspectives of teachers. First, and probably most dominant perspective in the educational sphere, is the *Medical Model of Disabilities* that explains disability as an impairment or deviance that needs to be cured (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2017). It assumes disability is an unwanted condition and offers healing or treatment to dismantle it (Bricout et al., 2004). A critical evaluation of the medical model brought the development of *the Social Model*, recognizing that systems of oppression and exclusion are embedded in social structures where PWD are systemically deprived of their rights and needs. This model emphasizes that individuals are not disabled due to their condition, whereas the existing infrastructures disable them from being fully included in the community (Bricout et al., 2004). Proponents of the social model of disabilities suggest that disability is a social construct, and as such, it evolves and changes through time (Wendell in Adams et al, 2013).

An alternative, yet complementary perspective invites the perception of PWD as minorities in a society that celebrates normalcy. The *minority group model*, developed by American scholars (Hahn, 1996; McDermott & Varenne, 1995), claims that disability is a difference-maker in a person's life. In

similarity to other identity classifications such as nationality, race, gender, or sexual preferences, having a disability makes a difference, sometimes significant, in one's life. Barnes (2009, 2016) develops their perspectives and stresses that we should step away from the assumption that this difference is necessarily negative; hence, some PWD experience their difference in a neutral way while others may experience a 'negative impact on their quality of life' (Barnes, 2009; p. 339). A major critique of this model indicates the challenge of discussing a diverse group of people like PWD under a unified umbrella (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2012), emphasizing that a category that forces all disabilities into one group can never account for the diverse needs and abilities of its members. Understanding the different perspective and models of disability will serve as an analytical tool to understand the perceptions of teacher candidates.

Special Education Through the Lens of DSE Models

Using the DS lens to analyze SPED services, we find a consensus among researchers that special education practices are nestled within the medical model of disabilities (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2017). Baglieri and colleagues (2011) describe schools as institutions immersed in the medical model, relying on systems of assessments and classification of those with diverse needs. Evidently, the entry point to receive SPED services is tied to the acceptance of a label, one of the thirteen categories defined by the IDEA (2004). These are needed to allocate services and appropriate support and accommodations to allow appropriate inclusion in the least restrictive environment. In addition to the compulsory label, at the heart of the SPED services is the IEP that centers the remedial process within the individual and with isolation from the societal aspect of disabilities. Cosier and Pearson (2016) surveyed faculty in teacher education programs about their use of disability studies in their teaching. They found that only 10 percent of participants defined DS closely to its scholarly definition, while many faculty members discussed DS and SPED interchangeably. Their study emphasized the theoretical gap between these two

disciplines with a call to collaborate and exchange ideas to benefit the disability community by strengthening disabled voices in the training of their service providers (Cosier & Pearson, 2016).

Disability Studies in Teacher Preparation Programs

SPED TEPs, aligned with SPED services, are highly influenced by the medicalization of disabilities (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2017; Bialka, 2015). Some scholars report on successfully integrating DS concepts in their TEP, encouraging teacher candidates to critically examine the set of beliefs they and their schools hold. Bialka (2015) coined the term Critical Ability Theory (CAT) and suggested using it as a framework in teacher education programs. According to Bialka, CAT follows the tenets of Critical Race Theory when accepting Hahn's (1996) perspective of the minority group model of disability. They add that "just as educators must consider their own racial identity when working with students of color, it is also important that they attend to their physical and cognitive identities" (Bialka, 2015, p. 148). Adopting a critical lens toward disabilities in teacher education programs has the potential to avoid a deficit-oriented approach and to allow teachers to reflect on their "cognitive and physical privilege and its implication" (Bialka, 2015, p. 149).

One of the key questions is how to incorporate the theoretical aspect of disability studies within the practical preparation of candidates for their role as educators (Naraian, 2021). Several researchers attempted to address this question and present their suggested models. Baglieri et al. (2011) calls for an open conversation within our education system, which allows examination of beliefs and attitudes towards this community that so often experiences segregation or inferior quality of education due to ableist systems of power. Ashby (2012) emphasizes the importance of merged preparation programs, general education alongside special education. Ashby describes an inclusive teacher preparation program that is committed to social justice and inclusivity, avoiding the automatic adoption of the social construct of disability. Freedman et al. (2019) introduce additional strategies that support the integration of DS in teacher preparation programs. Among their suggestions, we find integrating

discussions of the history of disability and the eugenics movement, exposing students to the historical movements that influenced our current definitions of disability and the intersection with race, gender, and immigration status. Freedman et al. (2019) assert that the incorporation of these themes in TEPs can help candidates develop critical thinking on ability, disability, and representation in the educational system. Another recommendation is infusing first-person narratives in the teacher preparation curriculum, starting a shift in perspective from talking about persons with disabilities to talking with them. Baglieri (2011) states that these steps can help in removing stigma and bias towards the disability community.

Students With Developmental Disabilities

As mentioned in previous sections, the term *disability* cannot capture the varied needs and abilities of a diverse group of individuals. Therefore, this research focuses on teacher candidates' perceptions and understanding of students on the spectrum of developmental disabilities (DD). This group of students usually receive special education services under the designation of developmental delays, intellectual disabilities (ID), or autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Together these designations make up approximately 24% of students eligible for SPED services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2022). I chose to focus on students with DD since the exclusion and infringement on the social rights of these individuals goes beyond the educational arena. Research shows that our society chooses to neglect those who are cognitively different or minimally verbal (Scior, 2011). The disregard for their presence in society is evident through challenges in limited access to decent employment, independent living, or access to higher education; all are indicative of ongoing oppression. This erasure of the DD community from everyday lives emphasizes the importance yet challenges for teacher candidates to conceptualize their perspective and understanding of the community they are trained to serve.

Meaning and Definition

The educational definitions of disabilities are set by the IDEA (2004), and states can extend eligibility. Although the definitions are derived from clear criteria, contemporary perceptions indicate that “intellectual disability and developmental disabilities mean much more than meeting the criteria set out in a definition” (Wehmeyer et al., 2017, p.4). In other words, DD are considered to be socially constructed (Leiter, 2007) and perceived on a continuum that, according to Wehmeyer et al. (2017), is composed of four meanings: personal, public, critical, and definitional. The personal meaning is what disability means for the individual, considering their personal aspect and background. The public perspective is the meaning of the disability as depicted by the general public that is not in close contact with developmental disabilities; it is usually constructed by the sociocultural climate and broad perspective rather than a personal acquaintance and understanding of the disability. The third perspective is the literal meaning. It is represented throughout this paper as the disability studies lens that invites a critical examination of the social and medical construct of disabilities and the subjective, yet widely accepted, perceptions of normalcy. And lastly, the definitional meaning is the criteria set in policy to establish eligibility to receive educational services. These four meanings emphasize the complexity of defining DD and shed light on how educators may take different approaches to what seems to be a straightforward task of defining a disability.

IDEA’s definitions of DD, ID, and ASD are multi-dimensional and evolved over the years. For example, the definition of ID stepped away from relying heavily on IQ testing and is now structured around multiple domains such as adaptive behavior, language skills, interpersonal relationships, in addition to IQ. Chapman (2020) highlights that having an ID goes beyond the standard definition and is often associated with low levels of well-being and opportunities to flourish due to societal barriers and limited inclusion. Hence, in similarity to the claim by proponents of the social model of disabilities,

societal barriers, not the physical or mental application of the disability, serve as a significant part of the exclusion and disabling factor of people with DD.

To summarize, in 2019-2020, 24% of students who received SPED services were diagnosed with DD (NCES, 2022). This growing number of students with DD experience oppression on all four meanings: personal, public, critical, and definitional (Wehmeyer et al., 2017). Although most SPED teachers work with students with DD, and teachers' beliefs about them play a role in their work (Bialka, 2015), there is limited discussion on the meaning, value, and life trajectories of these students. Given the growing number of students with DD in schools, there is an ever-growing need to learn about teacher candidates' views of the population they are about to serve.

Methods

In order to best address the research questions, I chose a qualitative phenomenological methodology, specifically, a grounded theory analytical approach. The phenomenological approach allows the researcher to explore a relatively unknown research area in an exploratory way (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The Grounded Theory (GT) (Charmaz, 2014) analysis aligns with the exploratory nature of the research and the theoretical nature of the research questions. This research identifies patterns of behaviors and experiences of preservice teachers and is relevant for those involved in the field of teacher education programs (Chun Tie et al., 2019).

Positionality Statement

As with every research, the researcher's lens and positionality hold importance in understanding the ways one's identity contributes to the research process (Roberts et al., 2020). I am a white female, identified as able-bodied and minded. In the last 15 years, I have worked in different educational capacities including a self-contained classroom, a teacher in higher education settings, and a field supervisor of credential candidates. Throughout my professional career I have worked with students with DD, starting at the lower grades (K-2) and in higher education. As a non-disabled researcher in the areas of special education and disability studies, I acknowledge my limited understanding of the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities and my role as an ally to the disability community.

Recruitment

Participants in this study are a purposeful sample recruited during two separate rounds. The inclusion criteria for the participants are candidates between the ages of 25-35, working towards their teaching credential in the MMSN and ESN specialization, and have yet to start an internship or take over a lead teaching role. The first round of recruitment occurred in October 2022. The researcher visited courses in which potential participants were enrolled and introduced the goal of the research, requirements, inclusion criteria, and expected incentive. Credential candidates were asked to email the researcher if they were interested in participating. Out of eight interested candidates, five were selected to move on as the remaining three did not meet the inclusion criteria (international candidates, from Visual Impairment specialization). The second round of recruitment occurred in January 2023. Potential participants received an email from the researcher inviting them to participate in the research. The email included a brief description of the goal of the research, sample topics, and expected incentives. Out of seven emails that were sent, five participants replied, and the researcher scheduled the interview with them. All the participants received a \$100 gift card.

Participants

Participants in this study are undergraduate (n=3) and post-baccalaureate students (n=7) in a credential program who are working towards their education specialist instruction credential. Participants are in the process of acquiring credentials in the MMSN and ESN specializations/areas in SPED. Participants were all from an urban background and attended local public schools, apart from one who attended an urban private catholic school. The participants are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Creswell & Clark, 2017), with the majority of them identifying as Hispanic (n=8). Table 1 describes the participants.

Table 1
Overview of Study Participants

	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Specialization
Anabel	Hispanic	F	MMSN
Alejandra	Hispanic	F	ESN
Fionna	Hispanic	F	MMSN
Naomi	Hispanic	F	MMSN
Julie	Korean American	F	ESN
Yessenia	Hispanic	F	ESN and MMSN
Ramon	Hispanic	M	MMSN
Rayah	Hispanic	F	ESN
Stephanie	White	F	MMSN
Sandra	Hispanic	F	ESN

Note. The table presents pseudonyms of participants.

Ethical Considerations

Participants who showed interest in this study received a copy of the research invitation by email. Before starting the interview, I reviewed the rights of the participants, and they provided verbal consent. Information about participants was handled with care and confidentially, and study data was physically and electronically secured on a single computer protected by a password. No personal and identifiable information is provided in the final research report, and anonymity is kept to the maximum extent. The research was reviewed by The California State University, Los Angeles Institutional Review Board-Human Subjects (IRB) and was certified as exempt from IRB review.

Developing the Research Protocol

The interview instrument is a researcher-developed protocol that addresses the research questions and provides participants with multiple opportunities to engage with the topic (Appendix 2). The protocol is an adaptation of Seidman's (2019) guidelines for semi-structured interviews with the objective of conducting an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences. The protocol includes

questions about participants' backgrounds, their experience and knowledge about individuals with developmental disabilities, their motivation to join a special education program, and their thoughts on students' future trajectories.

To address the credibility of the instrument (Noble & Smith, 2015), I conducted two preliminary interviews with teacher candidates. Recruitment of participants for the preliminary stage was purposeful; I emailed two students I previously supervised in their early fieldwork assignment and invited them to interview and provide me with comments on the protocol and interview procedure. Prior to our meeting, I sent participants the interview protocol and invited them to provide me with suggestions. Following these preliminary interviews, I transcribed and reviewed the questions, order, and the responses. I have made several changes to the protocol. For example, I removed questions regarding candidates' experiences with families of students with DD, since candidates do not necessarily have relevant experience with families and replaced them with broader questions about perceived families' characteristics. The final draft of questions was then reviewed by current SPED teachers whose feedback served as an additional measure to ensure interview's relevance and alignment with the SPED teachers work.

Data Collection and Procedures

Data collection for this study occurred in two cycles, as recommended for grounded theory research (Charmaz, 2014). Semi-structured interviews were scheduled with each participant through text or email exchange and were conducted on Zoom. Nine interviews were conducted by me and another one by a colleague since the student was enrolled in one of my courses. Each interview started with a brief overview of the research topics and a reminder of participants' rights to skip questions or withdraw from the study altogether.

The interviews were recorded using the Zoom-secured platform. Audio transcriptions were generated by an AI platform and were revised thoroughly verbatim by the researcher. In two instances, I

emailed participants after reviewing the transcriptions in order to ask follow-up questions or clarification. After transcribing verbatim, the interviews were uploaded on Dedoose (2021), a collaborative coding software, where the bulk of the analysis took place.

Data Analysis

The analysis process of GT research is a multi-stage process that takes place throughout the research phases (Charmaz, 2014; Chun Tie et al., 2019). GT requires the researcher to engage in the coding process as early as in the initial data collection stages in order to modify the questionnaire or add purposeful questions to enhance and clarify certain codes.

Coding Stages

The first round of coding started immediately after the initial data collection was transcribed and uploaded on the Dedoose (2021) platform. I took a concept coding approach (Saldana, 2021) that is recommended for the first cycle of coding in GT research. In concept coding, codes are attributed to larger chunks of data, and the concepts that are assigned identify the bigger picture and suggest the idea behind the excerpts rather than an observable language choice or behavior (Saldana, 2021). This cycle of coding led to the intermediate coding and continued until saturation was reached and data collection was halted.

The concept coding used inductive-deductive codes where some a priori codes were derived from the theoretical framework, prior research, or research questions (Saldana, 2021). Examples of a priori codes include *early encounters*, *my family's perception*, and *myself as a student*. The inductive coding allowed for new codes and concepts to emerge from the data. These were concepts that were identified in the data and assigned a code that represents their essence. Examples of inductive codes are *a broken system*, *meaningful work*, and *care*. Table 2 provides sample interview excerpts and their assigned concept codes.

Table 2*Sample Interview Excerpts and Initial Codes*

Source	Excerpts	Assigned Code
Ramon	It's gonna go terrible. And I've seen some aides are like. Oh, I've been with the student for six years, and they don't even care about their student. They're just on their phone.	Broken System
	and then I see the aides like I don't want to say like me, but the ones who care. And then you see their student, and they're like man, the students doing so well like, I would see the difference, and that motivates me more.	Effective support
	So there are people that really care. And look at their students, just showing interest.	Care
	Then maybe they're not going to be an Albert Einstein or anything. But they're better. They're at a better state than what they were before like.	Realistic expectations
	Sometimes even I've had parents like oh, like I know you're just here as a babysitter, because my kids, they're just too dumb.	Parents expectations
Rayah	I've always since I was young, I wanted to be a teacher, and I always thought I was going to be a kindergarten teacher with the little ones. Never did it cross that I wanted to be in special education.	Career Plans
	Growing up in a very Hispanic family, you see a disability as something bad. I've always grown up and my family was using inappropriate words. They use the word Mongolito, which is like sort of like retarded.	Childhood/ early beliefs
	Especially now that I'm becoming a teacher, I attempt to correct my family and say, no, that's not okay. So it's been a huge change for my family as well as myself.	Anti-ableist actions
	So when I started going to ELAC I just wanted to be a teacher. So then I needed to take a special education class. So then I took it, and the teacher was amazing! she talked about her experience and how she has a daughter. Then I had to do field work hours in a SPED classroom, and that's where I was like. Whoa! This is totally different from what I was used to.	First encounter with SPED
	Because When I was in elementary school, during the summer breaks I used to do volunteer hours with the little ones, so I was familiar with classrooms.	Experience in the classroom

But when I started doing special ED, it was more like wow, this is rewarding like these kids want love, they need more one on one. And I think that's when it hit me that this is where I want to be. Meaningful work

In the following stage of coding, I applied a theoretical coding method (Birks & Mills, 2015). Identifying abstract categories that represent a parallel storyline that were identified with several participants and in several data points. The identified themes gathered interrelated concepts that introduced similar time points, values, or perceptions. Table 3 provides sample code-thematic transitions along with sample interview excerpts.

Table 3
Sample Code Thematic Transition

Excerpts	Assigned Code	Assigned Themes
I was at the same school for, like 6 years I moved around a lot. I became a preschool aide, and that was an all-day thing and the GenEd preschool worked heavily with the special ed preschool. That was my first time interacting with, really, anybody with disabilities. and at that point I was 23. So it's been practically my whole life without really interacting with students in that manner. And it was so much fun. especially because they're preschoolers. So they're like little, and there's no judgment amongst the students which is really nice to see.	First encounters with SWD; Choosing SPED	Choosing to work in SPED/ New excitements
When I started doing special ED, it was more like wow, this is rewarding like these kids want love, they need more one on one. And I think that's when it hit me that this is where I want to be.	Rewarding Work	
I started doing ABA services for in-home with kids, and I loved it! It was tough like I was getting beaten all the time I was getting kicked. I was getting toys thrown at me on my head. But the moments that were like you would see the kids learn that's when I was like man, I love doing this! That really sparked that interest in me. I was like 'I have to that full time.'	Previous Career	
it was very different from what I knew but I loved it. It was something that just clicked, that's it. It just made sense. Watching the students and the behaviors, and I found it so exciting, and I	Exciting work	

love working with this population, and that's how I stayed. I think this is it. I think this is it for me.

I want all my students to be working and enjoying their lives, not possibly on the street, or like living in like a facility. That’s not what I want them to do. I don't. I don't want their lives to look like that.	Hopes for their future	Future of Students with DD
like schools a second home for me, and I've always felt that as a child at school, the second home. So I would want my kids that I work with to feel like this is a safe place. This is a place where you're going to be loved, nurtured, and taught. I would want that type of service to be able to continue with them coming out of school because they still need so much guidance.	Continuing services post-graduation	
With the young ones I don't worry about that, like they'll be long gone. But these kids I do worry about because I think next is high School, and then next is the real world.	Concerns about their future	
I don't think I've heard of people who are living on their own um, but I'm not really sure what's the options or resources out there.	Uncertain options for their future	

The emerging themes and corresponding concepts were then organized into a thematic map that led to the final stage of analysis with a clear storyline that emerged from the theoretical coding (Birks & Mills, 2015). The data was consolidated into a common journey, sentiments, and shared experiences that built the shared storyline.

Validity and Credibility

To strengthen the validity of the research, I used two strategies. First, to address my own bias I used peer debriefing (Noble & Smith, 2015) with a fellow graduate student who is knowledgeable in the area of qualitative research. The peer researcher is familiar with the data and chosen analysis, and provided feedback along the process to ensure that the analysis represents the data accurately. Saldana (2021; p. 52) describes this as a “reality check” and an essential tool to discuss issues of consistency and

methodological transparency as a tool to enhance accountability and validity. The peer debriefing process was valuable as it highlighted emerging codes that I did not address initially, such as types of motivation to the work in SPED. During our meetings, we reviewed parts of the data and discussed the ways in which participants' past experiences may have influenced their beliefs.

In addition, I followed the recommendations of Noble and Smith (2015) and provided verbatim extracts in the analysis section. These direct citations allow the reader to have a closer look at the data and assess the interpretation and its accuracy.

Findings

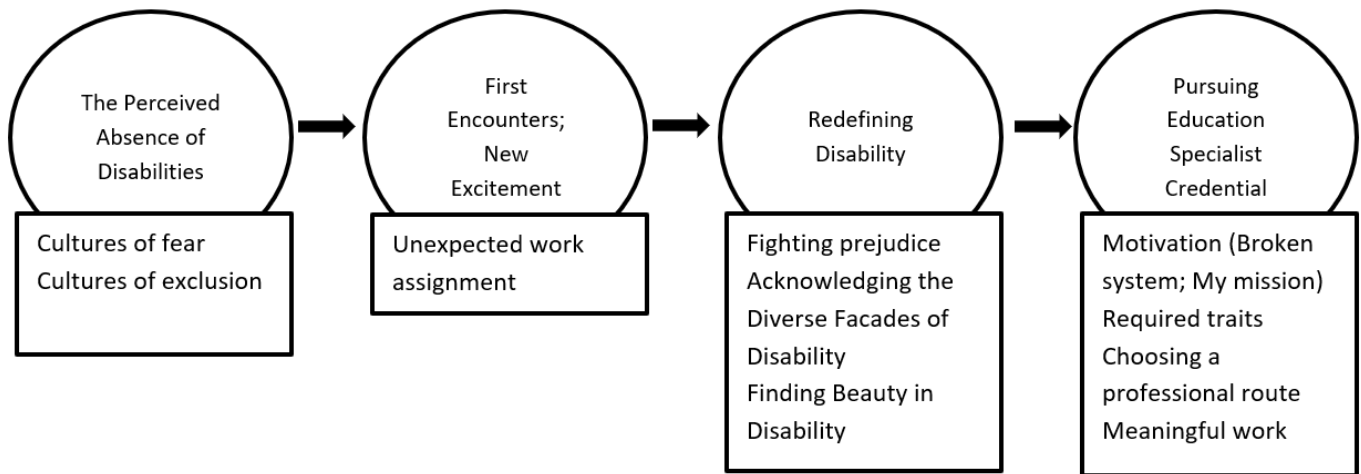
The findings of the study are presented in two parts addressing the two research questions. The first question addresses candidates' discussions, experiences, and motivation to work in the field. I introduce the findings in a thematic map that captures themes and sub-themes. These findings describe participants' experiences and perceptions regarding their students with disabilities, specifically those with DD. This section first introduces the thematic findings, themes, and sub-themes, and portrays the shared storyline described by participants. The second part of the chapter follows the second research question and delves into participants' discussion on the future and opportunities available for students and adults with DD, along with a self-reflection on participants' knowledge or needs in this area.

Part I: The Route to Teaching in Special Education

The first research question looked at the way participants in the study discuss disabilities. It focuses on early experiences, motivation to work in the area, and early and current perceptions of disabilities. Participants were asked to recall their childhood experiences in schools and community and recall if there were PWD around them. Except for one participant, Yessenia, who has a close family member with a disability, nine participants shared limited experiences with PWD and an overall distance from them. Their story followed a similar progression, as described in figure 1, and outlines four themes:

perceived absence, first encounters and excitements, redefining disability, and pursuing a career in SPED. Figure 1 outlines the four themes and the categories that go into each theme.³

Figure 1
Thematic Map Describing Findings for RQ1: The Route to Teaching in Special Education



The perceived absence of disability

Participants described their childhood experiences in schools and their communities; they were asked to recall early experiences and to reflect on the presence of disabled individuals around them. I found that although they grew up in different areas, they shared a childhood characterized by the absence of disabilities in schools and in their community. They shared their interpretation of what may have been the factors leading to this absence and reflected on their family’s beliefs and cultural perceptions of disabilities.

Culture of Fear. Participants discussed their upbringing in traditional communities that viewed disabilities as a source of fear or something to stay away from. They described their caregivers trying to protect them from encounters with PWD. In his interview, Ramon says, “My parents were saying, ‘Stay away from them, don’t bother them, don’t distract them, because you never know how they would react.’” Naomi stresses a similar sentiment, “Growing up in a very Hispanic family, you see a disability as

something bad.” Participants did not recall seeing PWD around them, and if there were students with disabilities at their schools, they were separated and labeled as the others.

Culture of Exclusion. In addition to the familial beliefs, participants described limited opportunities to meet PWD in their childhood. Students with disabilities were not placed in their general education classroom, and the encounters were minimal.

I don't have many memories of kids with disabilities in my school because they were hidden.

We'll see them sometimes, but they were the kids from the back room, they never talked about them, but we knew they were not okay.

In this quote, Ramon recounts encounters with students with disabilities, but their exclusion from their typically developed counterparts was not only physical but also shown through an overall avoidance. Exclusion practices can occur on several levels, and as participants recall their school experiences, they remember anecdotes of seeing a person with a disability once or twice, which registered as unique encounters. For example, Sandra describes, “I remember in high school coming out of the gym, and I saw a boy who had Down syndrome, but it was never really discussed.” These coincidental meetings were rare and lacked context. Participants did not recall meaningful meetings with their peers with disabilities, which to many of them made sense at the time.

First encounters, new excitement

While their childhood experiences were characterized by limited memories of coming across PWD, their adulthood was not different, and participants shared their first meaningful encounters with PWD that they described as impactful.

Unexpected work assignments. In these initial encounters, participants were volunteers, camp counselors, or substitute teachers. Their role gave them a level of control over the situation as they were the instructors of the disabled individuals. For many, these experiences were random or unplanned. Sandra says, “I stumbled into special education.” Others mentioned that their first

encounter happened in an unanticipated assignment as a substitute paraeducator or a temporary assignment in a special education classroom. In these reports, teachers shared that their initial professional intention did not include special education since it was not something on their radar, but once they were familiar with students and the SPED system, they were hooked. Ramon says, "At first, I was getting toys thrown at me on my head. But the moments you see the kids learn, that's when I felt, man, I love doing this!" A similar sentiment came from Sandra, she noted that after taking a few roles in a general education classroom, she found herself in a special day class where she stayed since "I loved it. It just clicked. It just made sense. I found it exciting. I love working with this population, and that's how I stayed." The immediate sense of excitement that originated from a random job assignment was unexpected and resulted in the participants' decision to continue working in the area of SPED.

As mentioned, these first and random meetings took place in various places and not necessarily in the classroom. These initial meetings with persons with disabilities also raised the question of knowledge and awareness. Fionna described her first encounter with a child with a disability during an internship as a high school student.

I was in charge of a group, and we were supposed to do a science project. There was a little girl in the sixth grade who had a disability, and that was the first time ever that I worked with a student with a disability. At first, I was worried, thinking, "Oh, my God! How am I going to interact with her? How am I going to teach her? If I've never been around someone that has a disability, how am I going to communicate?"

In these questions, Fionna acknowledges that there are obstacles when working with the student given this is her first time interacting with a student with a disability. She mentioned how ignorant she felt when in need to adjust to a different form of communication or interaction.

In summary, whether in the classroom or in a different setting, these first encounters left a strong impression on our participants and made them curious about working with students with

disabilities. These were also linked to their motivation to work in the field. Participants mentioned that following that initial enthusiasm, they continued working with students who receive SPED services as one-on-ones, behaviorists, or classroom assistants, and that the random meeting turned into a meaningful career move.

Redefining Disability

Participants' new experiences with students with disabilities offered them the opportunity to reassess their relationship with PWD. While some of the participants discussed the excitement in these encounters, they also mentioned their realization of the absence, judgment, and lack of understanding as to what a disability is.

Fighting Prejudice. With the understanding that disability is different than what they grew up believing due to its perceived absence or families' perceptions, participants discussed how they began advocating for the removal of prejudice in their close environment, family, and community. Rayah described this change:

Epecially now that I'm becoming a teacher, I attempt to correct my family. They use the word *Mongolito*, which is sort of like retarded. So I'm saying, "No, that's not okay." It's been a huge change for my family as well as myself.

Like Rayah, Sandra talked about creating change at her workplace.

One thing that I wish is that growing up I would have learned more about individuals with disabilities. In the school where I am working, we do autism awareness week, and we really try to get our students to be inclusive. We have different activities all week, and I think that's cool, because now these students at this young age, they're learning about different disabilities.

They're learning about being respectful, being accepting.

Participants see themselves as advocates for their students within their community, family, and friends. They acknowledge the lack of understanding they grew up in and try to enforce awareness in their community.

Acknowledging the Diverse Facades of Disability. Along with their new experience, the redefining stage included the understanding that they, in fact, had people with disabilities around them growing up. Although those might have gone unassessed, some participants mentioned that, in retrospect, the signs were there all along. For example, Sandra described that she realizes now that her older sister has a learning disability: “No one ever really diagnosed it or talked about it, but I remember seeing her struggle so much in school. In addition to her status as an English learner, I did see all the struggles that she had.” Expanding the definition of disability allowed Sandra and others to reevaluate the prevalence of disability around them, and to define it beyond the observable feature.

Naomi is another participant whose encounter with disabilities allowed her to redefine it. She realized that her stutter, for which she received services, can be defined as a disability as well:

Now that my understanding of disabilities is more expanded, I realize that I have a speech impairment. I stutter, and I went to speech therapy for about six years. It's not as severe as it was when I was in elementary, but it was really bad.

Expanding the definition of disability was a milestone for all participants as it allowed them to redefine what they thought was a disability and to identify it in their families, themselves, and their close communities. The process of understanding and redefining disabilities, led to another important stage which was unlearning the ableist beliefs they grew up with and finding the strengths and uniqueness in disabilities.

Idealizing Disability. In the process of redefining disability, participants, who did not recall encountering PWD before, started finding the beauty, strength, and value of disability. Sandra discussed one of the reasons she enjoys working with students with DD.

I think that students in that population live so unapologetically. I think that we should all be a little bit like them. They don't live through social expectations or follow the social norms that we do, and they're happy being themselves. They don't care or get embarrassed, and I love that.

This quote from Sandra signifies the shift between the complete absence of disability to the unexplained passion for working with these students. Julie adds, "I have this love and passion that I can't really explain in words." Another participant defined students as "pure." This passion and acknowledgment in the value of students with disabilities draws participants to make their commitment to continue and serve students with disabilities by enrolling in a SPED credential program; in the following section, I discuss themes around the pursuit of a teaching credential.

Pursuing Education Specialist Credential

Following these early experiences with students with disabilities as volunteers, substitute teachers, or paraeducators, participants decided to pursue a teaching credential in the area of SPED. For many, this professional decision is perceived as an opportunity to upgrade their status within the educational system and gain stability. In this section, I will discuss candidates' motivation, perception of the profession, and their decision making on a specialization (ESN or MMSN).

Motivation. Candidates discussed their motivation to choose a credential in SPED with the hope to fix what they have witnessed as a broken system and highlight the positive models they have seen along the way. Hence, their motivation originates from these two sides of the system, the broken and the successful. Many acknowledged that working in SPED can be more challenging than other teaching opportunities, yet these experiences shaped and motivated them even further.

Broken System. Participants described how in their various roles, they witnessed instances of injustice and ongoing mistreatment towards students. They described that because they were temporary or part-time workers, they were unable to change these events and made a promise that once they get to be teachers, they would offer students a better education. Alejandra, who works in a

middle school, described the academic deficits of some of her students as they transition from their elementary schools.

We're getting students who are sixth graders and reading at a kindergarten level. Who have had no intervention their whole lives; they couldn't even identify most letters at the beginning of the school year and had no IEP until last year.

In addition to the academic gap created by the lack of services, participants shared their experience witnessing teachers that used harmful practices that sidelined students in the SDC classroom. Ramon described a teacher who used a reward system to enhance positive behavior but in fact, neglected the lower-functioning students.

The teacher was focused on certain students because those were the higher functioning. In my mind, she was thinking, "Those are the kids that are going to make it." But I feel like they could all have made it, too, if they had just been given a little more time.

Witnessing the unmet needs of students took many forms. Participants discussed social, emotional, and academic negligence, as well as being served by burned-out service providers. Participants witnessed these systemic gaps and made a pledge to do better in their future careers.

My Mission. As part of their motivation to serve students with disabilities, participants in the study described what they see as their mission, their philosophy, and their commitment. Naomi describes her promise to students, "I want to give them an environment where they're able to fulfill their potential and education." Participants described their aspirations to make a change in the lives of their students and to offer them a meaningful educational experience. Fiona described her goal:

These kids have so much potential, and it's unfortunate that teachers believe that if they have a disability, then they can't do it. I'm thinking I want to be that door between them having that full potential so that they can reach it. My personal goal is not to limit kids with disabilities but to help them reach their full potential. That's my main mantra. I want special Ed teachers like

myself to be able to help kids reach their full potential instead of putting barriers in between them.

Discussions of lost potential or barriers were prevalent among participants and often stayed within the context of teachers' and paraeducators' practices; practices that hinder or support students' progress. Participants recalled students who seemed neglected even with one-on-one support, because some of these service providers gave up on their students' education and showed low expectations. Participants then discussed the required traits of a successful educator, one that can promote students' success and exemplify what they see as the ideal educator.

Required Traits. As part of their decision to seek a career in SPED, participants highlighted the importance of thoughtful educators that possess certain traits. Outlining the ideal educator was based on the negative models they have witnessed, as well as the positive ones. The traits described by most participants were not in their professional capabilities, but rather personality traits such as passion, care, patience, and creativity. They emphasized the role of building relationships with students as the main tool to sustain a positive and enriching learning environment. Sandra discussed the need to be passionate about the field:

I think that educators should be passionate about what they do and want to make a difference in these students' lives and really help them develop not just academically but develop skills that they're going to carry on with them. I have met many people who are in it just because of the money or because the hours are great, and I feel that they don't really care about the students. But as an educator, you need to care about your kids. You need to feel that you're making a difference.

In addition to passion as a required trait for educators, Sandra highlights the need to truly care for students, and care came up often in interviews as a significant factor to a successful educator. Ramon stated that without genuinely caring for their students, educators are deemed to fail.

I feel like caring, showing your care, and being involved are what matters. And if they (students) don't get that, they slip through the cracks, and that mentality stays with them. They know what's going on; they have eyes to see when no one cares.

Care came up as a meaningful trait not only to benefit students directly, but also as a vehicle to sustain positive relationships with students' families. "As a parent, it's a relief that you have someone on the inside who's on your side. Who you know cares about your child." Considering family's needs as a factor that can benefit their children's education came up in several interviews and emphasized the importance of providing students with rounded support and a continuum of care.

With describing effective special educators as ones who builds relationships through practices of care and dedication, there was a common notion that when these are absent, educators have probably given up on their students. Ramon described his impression of such cases: "Some teachers didn't care, and that's why their students are all over the place. Some of those classrooms were like a nightmare." This statement emphasized the immense importance Ramon, and others, put on educators as carrying, dedicated professionals, and that with its absence students' experiences are negative and potentially harmful. Participants agree that these are core attributes and predictors of a successful teacher.

Choosing a Professional Route. I asked participants to share their process of determining the type of credential they are interested in (MMSN or ESN). They described decisions that were made based on various reasons such as prior experiences and successful or unsuccessful classroom observations. Some participants who chose an ESN credential said that students in MMSN classrooms require less support and, therefore they find the work less interesting. Julie mentioned, "They just need a little push, a little help, a little more accommodation or things of that sort, and that's not what I really want to do." When asked about working with MMSN, Rayah said: "this is not what I want to do. It was a little boring to me." A similar sentiment came from Sandra, who elaborated on her choice of ESN credential: "I don't want to do MM; I think it's too close to general education. The students have

behaviors, but a lot of it is chosen behavior, and I really like working with students that have more extensive needs.” These responses reflect not only participants’ professional choices but also their perception of needs, invisible disability, and meaningful work.

The perceived thin line between MMSN and general education made Ramon choose the MMSN credential. He witnessed an ESN classroom where the teacher “gave up on the kids,” and that was the deciding moment for him: “In that class, they wanted to do the least possible, and when I was in the mild to moderate classes, it was like you could still do general ed stuff, and you could push the students more.” The decision involves their immediate experiences as well as participants' aspirations to be meaningful educators and work in an environment that offers them opportunities to be successful.

In addition to the aspect of being meaningful, other participants presented incidental decisions derived from a level of limited or insufficient knowledge or random experiences. Alejandra discussed searching the departments’ website and choosing according to the list of disabilities presented there and her personal experience to one of the disabilities: “I looked online at Cal State, and it tells you what the situations are, and since I have experience with traumatic brain injury, I decided to look more into that.” Stephanie, who originally wanted to take on the ESN credential, ended up signing by mistake to the MMSN route and stayed there because of the job opportunities it entails “There’s more need for the MM; there’s not a lot of moderate-severe classes for children.” There was no common line in this decision and while some found it meaningful, others described a rapid decision they had to make during the application process. I will elaborate on those in the discussion.

Yessenia’s Case

One participant, Yessenia, had a different starting point since she had experience with her stepbrother who has Down syndrome. She described her relationship with him:

He's my stepbrother, he's 23 years old and I grew up with him. He was one year old when I met him, and whatever I did, he wanted that too. He was always a very nice kid. But he didn't really

like to socialize or not for a long period of time. So, you could get his attention, he would play sports with you, he could talk about music. So that's mostly how he communicated. I'd help him with homework, go on field trips with him and it opened my mind. So, my experience with my brother made me confident in how I approach people, and it also made me very cautious as to why or how I would approach someone.

While Yessenia had this early experience with her stepbrother, she did not plan on a career in SPED until recently when she changed her major and started working in a transition program. In fact, similarly to other participants this new experience made her decide on pursuing a teaching credential and a career in special education. With the exception of her early experiences, her story fits the analysis.

Summarizing the findings of the first research question, I presented a common storyline. Beginning in childhood and community that perceived disabilities as rather negative, and a perceived absence of disabilities. Participants did not know they wanted to work in special education until their first encounters with PWD, mostly in the classroom. These first encounters created an initial curiosity, interest, and passion for working with a population where they can feel meaningful and make a difference. These experiences led them to pursue a teaching credential and continue working in the field, supporting students and their families.

Part II: Conceptualizing Post-Graduation Experiences Students with DD as Perceived by Future Teachers

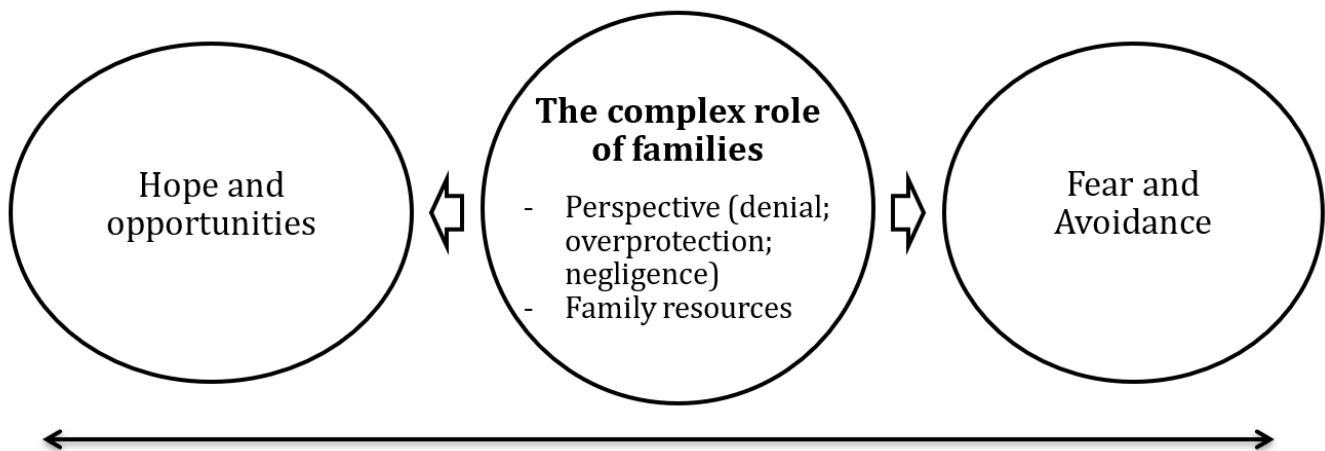
In this section, I discuss participants' conception of the opportunities and expected life experiences of their students with DD. Participants were asked to imagine students' futures, discuss opportunities and obstacles they may encounter, and share their outlooks about these future options. The responses were analyzed, and three major themes emerged from the data. The first theme is voices of hope and opportunities, emphasizing the options that are available in their communities and the ways in which students with DD can flourish. The second theme discusses fear and avoidance, where I

discuss participants' avoidance from thinking about their students' future and transition out of the protected system. Finally, the third theme presents participants' discussion of the complex role of families and communities in students' trajectories. These discussions evolved around families' resources, perspectives, and readiness for the day they will exit the educational system. Figure 2 outlines the findings presented in this part.

Hope and Opportunities

Participants expressed hopefulness when it came to students' futures, specifically when discussing their potential. Yessenia was a fierce advocate for the endless opportunities of students with DD. She said: "I

Figure 2
Candidates' conceptualizing post-graduation experiences of students with DD.



am very optimistic. I think they will be able to do something for themselves financially. If they get a job, they're going to have some sort of understanding of their responsibilities and that they have to contribute." For her, the only barriers are internal, and once students understand their responsibilities and potential, they will be able to work in a job that fits their abilities and be equal contributors to society.

Other participants presented similar sentiments about the potential of students to experience a fulfilling life, but also acknowledged the barriers the students would encounter as adults. Julie described

what needs to be done in order to fulfill the potential: “We really need to work on a transition program. We have to collaborate with the community members and social services.” Julie had experience working in a local group home for people with DD and she described the experience of the individuals she worked with. She said, “Many of them tried to get a job, but in reality, they weren’t able to get one.” This first-hand experience made her acknowledge that potential itself might not be enough and that communities should come together to support their members with DD.

Cautious optimism was expressed by other participants when talking about the future of their students. They said that there are plenty of options out there that can align with their students’ abilities. Rayah gave some examples thinking about her middle school students:

I honestly think our kids, even though they're in the severe program, are able to be a greeter at a market or to bag stuff. One of our students mentioned, “I'm going to be a teacher,” and I said, “Perfect!” She's very caring, and obviously, with assistance, she's able to be a teacher's aide.

In fact, these examples of a greeter or working on stocking shelves were the most common when participants described their students' employment options. But discussions on these options were often followed by other statements that emphasized the gap between hope and the ambiguous reality.

Fear and Avoidance

Participants admitted they avoid thinking about their students’ future because they are afraid of what it entails, and also due to lack of knowledge of the options and opportunities awaiting students after graduation. Many mentioned the importance of the transition program and the avoidance of staying in institutions or special homes. When asked to develop their discussion on these institutions, they mentioned having only heard about these places, and it is more of a symbolic reference for a segregated future. Stephanie described her thoughts:

It's hard to think about the students that I work with being out in the community where people are not looking after them. A lot of them are not capable, so it'd be nice if they were able to

transition to a local college and have the same type of guidance, like aides available for them, just like in school or even after in life.

Stephanie imagines the adulthood of her students with DD so unstructured that she hopes they will continue receiving school services and support as they do now. The future, in a way, can be so frightening that she would rather see them in a school setting or a school equivalent with similar supports and structure. A similar sentiment came up in several interviews. Participants saw the future in a transition program but struggled to hypothesize, or avoided seeing, what could follow that stage. Ramon shared his thoughts, "I worry. I feel like if the family is not willing to take care of them, I would imagine they go to some kind of facility that the state has." In this quote, Ramon shares his limited knowledge of the options that are waiting for his students with DD and states that in the absence of a strong family structure, they might lose their freedom and be institutionalized by the state. He struggled to imagine another option or a community-based inclusion program.

The fear of the unknown future came up in many interviews. Anabelle was worried that gangs that are active in her community would attract some of the most vulnerable students.

A lot of them will be on their own, and I worry about that. Some of them don't have stable homes, and hopefully, it gets more stable as they get older, but what if they don't? What then? I fear a lot of the students, especially because of the area we're in, will fall into gang life. In the sense of a place where they'll feel included and part of a group, and they'll be protected. Which is probably what they need, but not in that regard. I do fear that some of the students could definitely fall into that space because they find a safety net in that.

Similarly, other participants expressed this sentiment of the essential role of a stable home in keeping people with DD safe as adults. Participants discussed the fear that their students will experience homelessness, sexual harassment, and other forms of abuse when they are out of the educational system. Stephanie shared about one of her former students who she recognized in the streets.

One of my students, her mom would work day and night, so she ended up in the streets. She thought that what she was doing was okay because she would get money from these men so that she could buy herself stuff. She had the mentality of a kid, she was ID, so she was thinking I could buy snacks that I wanted for myself.

Stephanie, Anabelle, and others were able to vision two main scenarios for their students' future. Those who have a strong family structure that provides protection will experience a safe life. But its absence will cause a tragic life for students with DD. I will discuss the family's role in detail in the following section.

The Complex Role of Families

Discussing students' trajectories in life, participants unanimously indicated families' characteristics is the lead determining factor. These discussion on aspects of the families included the acceptance of the disability and commitment to supporting the growth of the student, families' resources including immigrant status, access to community resources, and linguistic and financial resources, and lastly, having a long-term plan in place.

Family Perspective. One of the differences between families, according to our participants, is their perception of the disability. Some are reluctant to accept their child's disability as a permanent condition, while others use overprotective parenthood as they deal with the disability.

Denial. The first example of denial is the hope that the DD of their child will miraculously pass. As Sandra describes: "Someone in the church told the mother that they had a vision that when her children are 18, she's going to see them without a disability." Following this promise, the mother is not addressing the question of what will happen in her child's adulthood, and she awaits the promise to be fulfilled. Another aspect of the acceptance of the disability is parents who are in denial of their children's needs and who choose to ignore some aspects of their disability. Rayah described such an example:

I feel some of our families were still in denial. We had a girl who couldn't really work with her hands; she had deformation in her hands. The parents wanted her to do sewing classes to learn how to make clothes. We did as best as we could, but realistically, she couldn't even hold a pencil.

This quote from Rayah emphasizes one of the effects that denial has on students. When parents are reluctant to accept their child's strengths and needs, they may also find themselves requesting unsuitable or unnecessary services. Sandra expands this idea saying, "Sometimes those expectations as parents prevent them from being involved and requesting services because they're hoping that it's just going to go away." Denial of the disability takes different forms, but according to our participants, it can affect the students negatively.

Overprotective parents. Another form of parents' perception of the disability that came up in several interviews is the overprotection or "babying" of students and the way that impedes students' development of independence skills. Alejandra describes her experience, "especially with a disability, parents are just babying them even further, so they do everything for them." Her encounters with such a parenting style strengthened her mission as a teacher who wants to insist on independent skills, even if those will take time. Naomi shares the downfall of overprotection "provide them with opportunities and help their growth. But if you are overprotecting your children, they can't do much, and they'll believe that as well."

Negligence. Participants share the consequences of denial or struggles to deal with the disability and its representation. They described students who seemed neglected, both physically and emotionally. Participants describe families who gave up on their children and had limited expectations from them. Ramon describes such incidents: "I've had parents who said, I know you're just here as a babysitter, because my kids, they're just too dumb or just don't like learning." Ramon expressed how parents' negative perceptions were not indicative of the child's abilities but of parents' mindset of giving

up on any hopes. Rayah recalled a high school student with DD she has worked with who experienced such emotional and physical negligence.

Most days, she wouldn't come with underwear or a bra. She would put her pants down, and she would see things on TV, you know. So it was frustrating because I was just thinking of this girl's future. Where is she going to be at? I didn't want to be too tough on her since it was already hard for her to go home, and she didn't want to go home 90% of the time. So, it was even extra sad. I even asked if I could shower her cause she wasn't even getting showered at home. It was tough. As a parent, why are you doing this to your daughter? Do you need help?

Similar cases of physical negligence were described by other participants. They identified negligence and denial as critical factors that determine students' futures. Without the families' support, students with DD will struggle to find a place to flourish or live independently in their adulthood. Participants linked the lack of family involvement to families' resources, and in the following section, I expand this idea.

Family Resources. Families, as all participants agree, hold a tremendous role in the life trajectory of their children with disabilities. Participants in the study repeatedly emphasized the role of family resources but mentioned a caveat: not all families have access to necessary resources to ensure a better future for their children. The differences in resources were not only financial and in fact, took many facades and forms. Ramon described the multiple-layered reality of many families: "I say it's being overwhelmed with language, so they don't know what to do with their kids. It's lack of knowledge, lack of resources, and fear of deportation." Our participants work in urban areas and serve communities that share similar experiences of immigration and poverty. Julie, who comes from a Korean American background, described the linguistic barrier among her community.

Most of the parents that I met lack English skills. They had a hard time in IEP meetings, talking with general education or special education teachers. They always needed translation, and so

they were marginalized during these meetings and communication with schools. Because of their language barriers, they are excluded from receiving services.

Julie makes the link between parents' involvement and service availability, a link we've discussed earlier. She notes that parents who cannot equally participate in IEP meetings and regular communication with teachers might receive fewer services, and as a result, their transition out of the system is at risk of being more challenging. A similar sentiment was expressed by Stephanie, who discussed Hispanic families she met at her work at a regional center:

A lot of times, we would go home and give them the resources and take them to the service locations. But other than that, I didn't see them wanting to go or whether they could go because of transportation reasons or because they were working. So it's hard.

Stephanie explains that in-home interventions provided families with appropriate tools and increased access, but with the absence of such intense in-home intervention, schools alone were not able to provide the required assistance and students missed out these essential services. Sandra elaborates on the Spanish-speaking community:

Especially in our Spanish-speaking communities, a lot of parents don't know their rights or what kind of services are available for their children. So that's a big thing, they don't know how to ask for help and they're shy, maybe based on their economic situation or their immigration status. And so, unfortunately, that deprives a lot of students of opportunities to be able to have services that can give them those opportunities in the future.

Participants discuss families' involvement in their children's education as a preview to their preparation and understanding of the future and its options. When Rayah described students who continued to college and were on track to get a job, she put a lot of emphasis on their parents' involvement which got them to where they are.

These parents are pushing them. A lot of people think disability is that they can't do anything, as if some of the kids are babies. But this parent pushed her kids; she was on it with the teacher and was able to communicate. So, I think that having that type of backup from the parent got them to college.

Once again, we see that parents' involvement and resources hold a significant role in students' future. And whether the future is bright or dark, our participants perceive family's characteristics as the ones to determine the direction.

Discussion and Implications

This research addresses a gap in the literature regarding teacher candidates' experiences with PWD and perceptions of the life-long trajectories of students with DD. Through a series of interviews with SPED teacher candidates I examined their past experiences with PWD and their motivation to work in the profession. Also, inviting students to imagine the future of students with DD, the possibilities, barriers, and factors that can affect their trajectories in life.

I took a qualitative exploratory approach and used a grounded theory method in data collection and analysis. The data consists of ten interviews with teacher candidates who are in various stages of their credential courses. A thematic analysis and an inductive-deductive approach yielded themes that addressed my research questions. In the discussion, I interpret the main findings by linking them to current research and theory.

Unconditional Care in the workplace

Our participants described the meaning of being a SPED educator and working with students with DD. They expressed genuine care towards their students and an overall approach that highlights students' well-being and strengths. They reported encountering instances of violence or discomfort in their work, such as getting beaten by students or students having low hygiene; but these did not impede their commitment to serving their students. On the contrary, many participants report their most memorable students are the ones who made them face extreme challenges, to which they responded with care, dedication, and an unconditional positive approach.

The philosophical aspects of care and disability are discussed at length in the literature, specifically in relation to children and adults with DD (Carlson, 2016; Kittay, 2011). The ethics of care has been criticized by some disability studies scholars (Garland-Thomson, 2005; Kroger, 2009), given the power relationship and paternalism involved in caregiving. The caregiver, some critiques claim, may assume the needs of the student, and reduce student's autonomy in their decisions. While I

acknowledge the level of paternalism in caregiving that one might argue exists in all forms of teacher-student relations, the unique case of care in students with DD can be considered as a necessary one. SPED teachers address students' needs beyond the academic realm and, therefore, their professional obligation to develop a sense of care and warmth with their students is enhanced (Carlson, 2016). Caring was also found to motivate teachers to do better, as a form of self-meaning and a mission within this demanding profession. I found that along these lines of paternalistic point of view was the use of common tropes to describe students with disabilities. Dolmage (2014) discusses tropes as a myth or stereotype that signals that the disabled individual is lesser than or abnormal in some ways. Some examples of tropes I identified in the data are the perception of students with DD as pure and naïve, or as ones who can inspire others by overcoming the barriers instilled in them by being disabled. Some of the participants held those beliefs regarding their students, beliefs that are considered ableist in nature (Dolmage, 2014).

A Circle of Absence

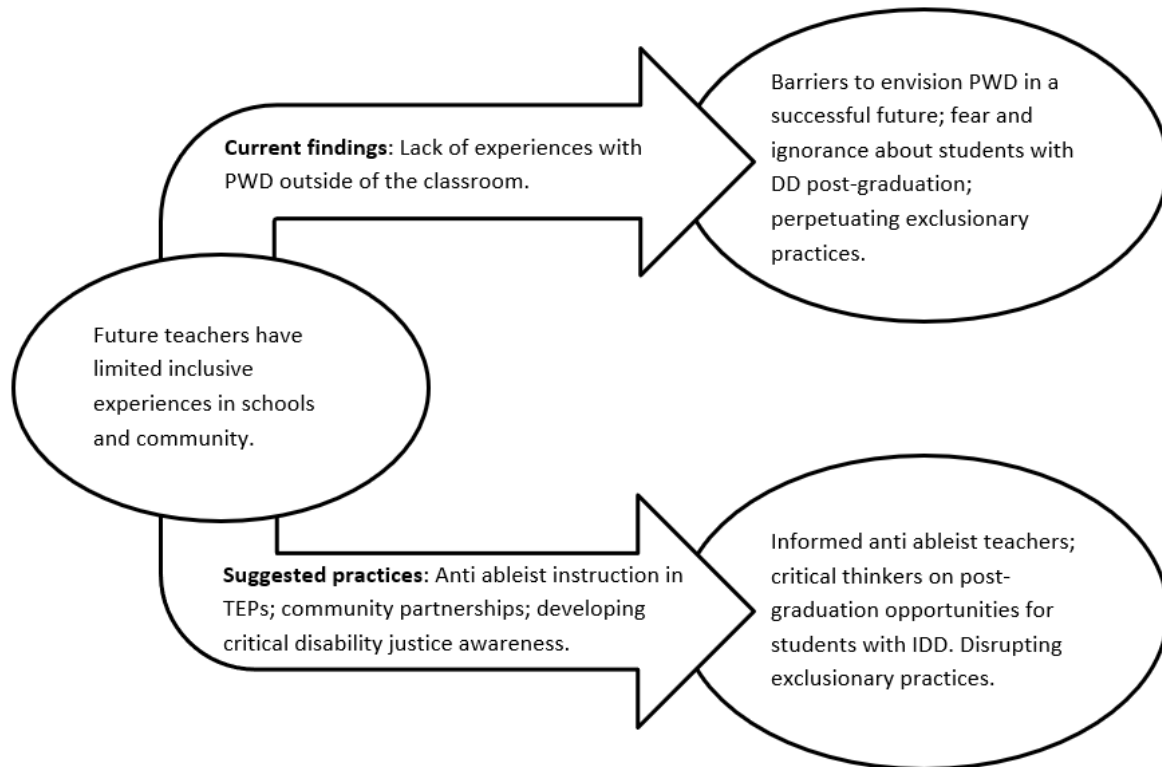
Tying together findings from both research questions, it was evident that the exclusion and absence of PWD throughout their life, and the challenges of describing students' futures originate from a similar perception of absence. Participants in the study shared their limited experiences with disabilities prior to their educational work. Whether it is due to cultural barriers, systemic exclusion, or a seemingly disability-free environment, the candidates described their community as one in which observable disabilities are absent. In many ways, their struggle to imagine a future where their students and people with DD are part of the community is not disconnected from their starting point; it is possible that it is an effect of their earlier experiences and the little change in societal structures. Our participants present a full circle in which they have learned to admire students with DD in the classroom and appreciate their strengths and unique perspectives. But this perspective is limited to the educational space. Once asked to reflect on students' future in their community, they go back to a

similar starting point of exclusion and limited opportunities. Figure 3 outlines the current findings with a suggestion and call for action that address TEPs curriculum to unlearn ableist and exclusionary practices.

Discussing the future of their students and others with DD raised a lot of uncertainty and fear

Figure 3

Current findings indicate perpetuating exclusionary practices with research recommendations suggesting future practices.



among participants. Many struggled to imagine their students with disabilities as successful members of the community, even though they recognized the potential and strengths of this population. This gap raises the question, what hinders their ability to imagine a safe future for students with DD? I find that the answer is in the full circle. Participants shared, almost unanimously, the distance, absence, and separation from students with disabilities they experienced growing up. This lack of successful inclusion models is one of the main possible barriers they experience when thinking about the adulthood of PWD. Our participants do not know how inclusiveness functions in the community and outside of the school gate. While committed to representing and serving the disabled community in the education arena, they

struggle to represent them outside of the system. In fact, some even suggested that the best strategy for a successful future can be a continuation of the structures and support that students receive in schools into their adulthood. This is an interesting suggestion since it captures the thought that educational places are the safest and most predictable for students with DD, and that candidates perceive students with DD through another trope, one that describe them as “eternal children.”

Recent research explores integration of adults with DD in the community and highlights the need to move from physical inclusion to social inclusion as a way to enhance the integration of adults with DD in their communities (Amado et al., 2013; Simpican et al., 2015). Among the researchers in the field, there is wide agreement on the beneficial aspects of inclusion for persons with DD; benefits like contributions to society, higher satisfaction and well-being, happiness, and self-esteem are among the ones cited by Simpican et al. (2015). Another aspect of successful inclusion is the beneficial aspect to the community. Ouellette-Kuntz et al. (2010) explored public attitudes towards persons with DD and found that older generations tend to seek distance from PWD, and participants who knew a person with DD are less likely to seek social distance from others with DD. Although the research is preliminary, it is valuable in showing the importance of an inclusive community in reducing preconceptions and fears of PWD. Yet, the beneficial aspect of social inclusion to society should be further discussed in the literature.

Family and Teacher Influence

In addition to their uncertainty about students' future options, the analysis highlights the extensive role of families as a crucial factor in students' futures. These perceptions align with the literature on parents' involvement (Jeynes, 2017). Parents' involvement and parent expectations were shown to have a long-term effect on typically developing student outcomes (Froiland et al., 2013). It was also highlighted as an essential component in a successful transition program for students with DD

(Martinez et al., 2012). While recognizing the crucial role of families, participants also acknowledged that families differ on many levels, and resources were one of the decisive factors.

Families' resources resurfaced in the data as an essential factor in designing the future of children with DD. In alignment with our theoretical framework, DisCrit (Annamma et al., 2018), participants acknowledged the ways in which intersecting minoritized identities can affect the future and integration of students with DD in society. Participants mentioned families' linguistic and cultural background, SES, immigration status, and even the acceptance of the disability. This multidimensional and intersectional approach to understanding the complexity of families' experiences is essential in the collaboration with families. It is possible that our participants, mostly BIPOC candidates, are more sensitive to the realities of the communities they serve. Research indicates the added value of BIPOC teachers for same-background students (Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019; Castro & Calzada, 2021). It is possible that the cultural competence of teachers enables them to develop a complex understanding of families' experiences and the compounding factors. Yet, research on the predictors of post-graduation results of students with DD shows that the strongest predictor of employment after high school is parents' expectations (Carter et al., 2012). The study used a longitudinal database to examine the factors and they did not find a correlation between SES, parents' education level, employment, or income with students' employment after graduation. An important note on those findings is that their data included predominantly white families with educated parents (high school diploma or more).

I also noted that participants did not discuss educators as a factor in the post-graduation of their students with DD. The effect of students with DD's education and skills acquired during their TK-transition years was not mentioned as a meaningful factor. Participants put the responsibility solely on families and caregivers, stating that they are the ones that need to ensure a safe future for the students. It is possible that this absence of responsibility emphasizes the disconnect teacher candidates experience when thinking about the future of students with DD and their existence outside of the

education system. Koontz (2019) examined teachers' expectations of their students with ESN at the elementary school level. He identified the strong linkage between parents' expectations and teachers' expectations. In summarizing his findings, Koontz noted: "It was unexpected to hear multiple participants (teachers) mention the influence of parent expectations on what they believed were possibilities for students as they became adults" (p.79). With the understanding of teachers' backgrounds and lack of knowledge in the area of disabilities, these findings receive a deeper context. It seems like SPED teachers are centered on the 'here and now' of the students, and in order to conceptualize the future and possibilities of their students, they rely on parents' perspective and approach.

On the one hand, this research identified the depth of care and understanding of the complex realities and marginalization of the student population with DD and their families. On the other hand, it revealed the disconnect teachers experience when discussing students' futures and their role planting the seeds for a better future. These findings highlight the need to expand the discussion on disability beyond the SPED label and connect it with the lived experiences and opportunities that awaits students with DD in their post-graduation life.

Implications and limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the study uses one main source of data, semi-structured interviews, which potentially limits the depth of data. The sample is relatively homogeneous; participants attend the same credential program, share similar demographics, serve urban communities, and grew up in urban areas in southern California. Selection bias is an additional factor of limitation. While I reached out to many potential participants, the ones who are part of the study are volunteers who showed interest in the research. I acknowledge the missing voices of those who did not choose to volunteer. Given the size and scope of this exploratory study, an additional limitation is that future research should take necessary caution when applying these findings to a larger population. The study

serves as a starting point for a more extensive inquiry into the topic, and I would like to highlight some implications regarding teacher candidates' preparation to work with the DD population.

Future Direction

Given the findings and limitations, I believe that there is great importance in continuing the exploration of teachers' experience and expectations from their students with DD. Future research can adopt these research questions and explore larger communities. In addition, a survey development based on these major themes can enable access to larger populations with quantifiable methods. Additional exploration of these themes will allow TEPs to reevaluate their role in the community that they serve, specifically incorporating community partnerships and increased representation of disabled members of the community.

In addition to the practical implications, the research raises theoretical questions. Special education is not disability studies; as Linton (1998) implies, not everything disability is disability studies, but all fields can benefit from the infusion of the critical theoretical frameworks. This study emphasizes the need to develop these theories in TEPs as a framework that leads the instruction. The field of TEPs has the opportunity to evolve and challenge perspectives that are rooted in communities, and by including DSE and DisCrit it can introduce more complex perspectives on disabilities and the ways in which candidates can engage in their communities.

TEPs must consider ways to connect candidates to local organizations that represent and serve adults with DD. These will prepare candidates beyond the curriculum and have the potential to provide them with an essential understanding of DD in their communities. Given the research findings, I believe that by raising teachers' awareness and social responsibility, we can challenge students' trajectories and change the oppressive cycle from its roots.

Appendix 1

Interview Protocol

Part I:

Tell me about your educational journey; what were your experiences as a student?

Where was born and grow up?

Memories of SPED services in your school/ students with disabilities at school or in the community

Prior experience with PWD

Inspiration and motivation to teach/ work in SPED.

Reaction from family and friends

Part II:

What do you know about students with DD? How do you feel about teaching his population?

Example of challenge/ triumph/ experiences with students

What is the role of family/ caregivers?

Which population interested in working with/ not interested?

What's the role of a teacher when working with students with DD.

What kind of future do you imagine for students with DD?

Part III:

Experiences in the preparation program

Content you would like to learn.

Did you disagree with something you've learned about?

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