**Teaching “Subversively Inclusive” College Courses on Disability Identity, History, and Activism: Faculty Reflections on Tensions and Points of Productivity**

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the productive aspects and tensions that arise in the design, planning, and implementation of what were once teacher preparation courses in education that the authors revised to focus on self- advocacy, disability rights, and disabled citizenship through “subversively inclusive” pedagogy. We name these classes “subversively inclusive” because they enroll a mix of traditionally enrolled students and students labelled with intellectual and developmental disability (IDD). The courses were taught by the authors at two different institutions of higher education in the Northeast of the United States. The expressed purposes for the authors in teaching these courses were to: a) to provide opportunity for students labeled with IDD to study disability rights-oriented curricula in an inclusive higher education setting; and b) to enact the goal of orienting professional preparation in teaching toward partnership with people labeled with IDD. In this paper, we use a disability studies perspective in order to reflect on ethical issues, points of productivity, and struggles we encountered while teaching these courses, which included making curricular choices, making pedagogical choices, issues of identity and language, and encountering multiple perspectives on the purpose and benefits of the courses for students. We conclude by providing recommendations for other disability studies scholars interested in attempting to teach similar courses.

*Keywords*:Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities; Disability Studies in Education; Inclusive Postsecondary Education; Disability Activism; Self-advocacy

**Teaching “Subversively Inclusive” College Courses on Disability Identity, History, and Activism: Faculty Reflections on Tensions and Points of Productivity**

Recent years have seen an increase in inclusive post-secondary education (IPSE) programs, which recruit students identified as intellectually and developmentally disabled (IDD) to attend college (Neubert et al., 2001). Characteristics and cohesion across the nature, goals, and objectives of these programs vary greatly (Thoma, et. al, 2011), but efforts are underway to define standards and best practices of IPSE programming (Grigal et al., 2012). For instance, McEathron et al. (2013) and Grigal et al. (2012) have aimed to research, classify, and define common characteristics of programs to better define IPSE programs. The goals and desired outcomes of postsecondary programs for students labeled IDD are most often framed in four domains: academic, social, independent living, and vocational. Each of the domains and outcomes are typically addressed or measured in terms of skill-development or impressions of competence in relation to student participation in a college program (cf. McEathron et al., 2013; Thoma et al., 2011).

Although we agree that many benefits result from IPSE programming, we found very little discussion in the literature that touched upon purposefully exposing students labeled IDD to discussions about disability rights, disability pride, and disability identity. Additionally, we found that traditionally enrolled students, who are taught teacher preparation through a disability studies lens, were exposed to content and ideas that discussed disability rights and identity but were taught this without grounding in the everyday experiences of people labeled IDD. Therefore, we decided to teach what we describe as “subversively inclusive” courses that comprise a mix of traditionally enrolled students studying education and students labeled IDD. The courses are intentionally designed to subvert the naturalized exclusion of people labeled as intellectually disabled in higher education, while also challenging pervasive academic ableism (Dolmage, 2017) common within higher education contexts. The courses explore topics of self-advocacy, disability rights, disability pride, and disabled citizenship; and use inclusive pedagogical approaches. In this paper, we discuss productive aspects and tensions that arose in designing, planning, and implementing these courses. While they fit into some aspects of the broader goals of IPSE programming, such as campus membership and academic access (Grigal et al., 2012), the courses described in this paper differ considerably from most IPSE programming. In particular, they are aimed at achieving several curricular and pedagogical goals developed out of disability studies in education (DSE): first, the curricular goal of engaging with disability as a complex cultural, historical, and relational identity and, second, the pedagogical goal of learning across ascribed differences of intellectual ability in contexts of peer support.

We taught these courses at two different universities in the northeastern United States, partnering with both public and private organizations that serve individuals labeled IDD. The expressed purposes were (a) to provide an opportunity for students labeled IDD to study disability-rights oriented curricula in an inclusive higher education setting; and (b) to enact the goal of orienting professional preparation in teaching toward partnership with people labeled IDD. In what follows, we use a DSE perspectives to consider insights gained and challenges confronted while planning and teaching these courses.

# **Conceptual Framework: Disability Studies in Education**

This paper is grounded in disability studies in education (DSE) scholarship. As DSE scholars, we conceive of educational institutions (including higher education, cf. Dolmage, 2017) as spaces governed by able-bodied/minded supremacy, and in which people who fail to conform to rigid norms and performances of intelligence, sensory engagement, and mobility are regarded as deficient. Building on the work of Broderick and Leonardo (2016), we define intelligence and “smartness” as ideological properties produced and reproduced within educational contexts rather than as biological capacities of individuals. While acknowledging the material effects of these ideologies on students’ lives, our goal in developing these courses, and now here in analyzing them, is to challenge and subvert a history of post-secondary segregation built on the presumed non-belonging of individuals labeled IDD.

We are influenced by Mitchell and Snyder (2015), who argue that the inclusion of people with disabilities in higher education typically widens the boundaries of normalcy, without disrupting it. As an example, they and others point to the reproduction of professionals prepared to police boundaries of normalcy (Ball & Harry, 2010), including teachers, educational administrators, developmental support persons, and medical professionals. As an alternative, DSE strives to emphasize the impact that ableism/disableism has on the experiences, identities, and life opportunities of those who are deemed as or identify as disabled (Linton, 1998; Oliver & Barnes, 2012). DSE is critical of assumptions that acquiesce to or enforce compulsory able-bodiedness/mindedness (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006). Dominant themes in research and practice, for example, often relate to how well disabled people are approximating ways of learning, behaving, interacting, communicating, and achieving that are typically attributed to non-disabled people. As such, IPSE programming often emphasizes teaching skills that are assumed important for disabled people to acquire because they are established as important for non-disabled people; this is coupled with an unevaluated assumption that non-disabled people have indeed *mastered* such skills. Ironically, the ability to perform “normalcy” within educational spaces has been treated as both a requirement of inclusion and as a contradiction of IDD (Carey, 2013), the latter because IDD is defined by an absence of intellectual, behavioral, and developmental normalcy (Kliewer et al., 2015). Thus, a climate of compulsory able-mindedness has created educational contexts in which access to full participation seems predicated on assimilating into normative learning and behavior (Ashby, 2010; Hehir, 2002).

As DSE scholars, we are committed to advancing theoretical work that is epistemologically situated in the critical scholarship and meaning-making of individuals labeled with IDD. We are heavily influenced by activists in self-advocacy movements, both in the United States and abroad. While complex and far from univocal, self-advocacy movements both directly and implicitly challenge the prevailing view of IDD as a label and lived experience, as well as the deficit construction of disability identity and lived experiences more generally. The design of our courses was therefore situated in the historical and contemporary work of these movements, which included discussions of language, history, self-advocacy, civil rights (including access to education, work, community living), and disability pride and culture. The work and words of self-identified disabled advocates like Michael Kennedy (Kennedy, 2014), Simone Aspis (Aspis, 1997), Amelia Baggs (Silentmiaow, 2007), Micah Fialka-Feldman (Feldman et al., 2018), Jenny Hatch (Hatch, 2014), Naoki Higashida (Higashida, 2016), Michael Bernard (Loggins, 2012), Leroy Moore, Keith Jones, Kayla McKeon, Tracey Thresher, Larry Bissonnette, and Betsy Smith were integrated into our courses.

**Review of Literature**

**Disability Studies in Education Curriculum in Teacher Preparation**

Efforts to integrate DSE content into practitioner-oriented practices are proliferating in the United States despite the stronghold of medical-model frameworks of understanding disability and special education (Heroux, 2017). A range of researchers have considered the approaches to and benefits and challenges of infusing DSE into teacher education curriculum. For example, in their review of published literature describing DSE approaches to teacher education, Freedman et al. (2019) found that these approaches integrated disability history, used interdisciplinary examples, and often relied on person-first narratives to present complex views of disability into the classroom. Cosier and Pearson (2016) and Ashby (2012) explain that learning DSE content prepares teachers to be able to enact changes in their schools. In particular, Ashby (2012) demonstrates that DSE provided future teachers with a theoretical framework to destabilize deficit and categorical ways of understanding disability and diversity, allowing them to become empowered to alter the oppressive contexts within which students operate. Such methods counter the traditional approaches that pre-service teachers often expect to encounter within teacher preparation programs (Ferri, 2006) that emphasize understanding the etiology of disability and enacting corresponding teaching practices. Ferri (2006) notes that, while students sometimes resist this approach, their struggles become productive in the learning process.

By analyzing student coursework that described beliefs regarding disability and segregation from the beginning to the end of the semester, Broderick and Lalvani (2017) found that most students shifted their understanding away from conservative ideas about disability as a deficit and segregation as a logical way to meet students’ needs toward more liberal viewpoints. Most students did not, however, become critical of the structural and institutional reasons for the perpetuation of conservative values. Calling this tacit acceptance of structural exclusion “dysconscious ableism,” following King’s work on “dysconscious racism,” Broderick and Leonardo (2016) ultimately recommend engagement with DSE in a way that:

is intellectual but is simultaneously deeper than that—[that] requires experiential learning that engages deeply with personal experience and emotion, and that places the critically self-reflective learner at the very centre of generating and constructing new and transformative forms of knowledge and therefore of practice in schools. (p. 11)

Our hope is that teaching courses that subvert naturalized structures of exclusion of disabled students in higher education will disrupt aspects of all students’ engrained “dysconscious ableism.”

## **Pedagogical Approaches in a Subversively Inclusive Classroom**

While the literature on DSE in teacher preparation programs clearly illustrates the benefits of integrating DSE content into teacher preparation curriculum, the literature does not directly describe the kind of learning occurring within a “subversively inclusive” setting that purposefully teaches DSE content to a group of students who are traditionally enrolled, and who are students labeled IDD. Nevertheless, and while our course design is distinct, the benefits of peer relationships on campus for labeled and non-labeled students have been noted within IPSE literature. For instance, Carroll et al. (2009) studied the perspectives of pre-service teachers who were enrolled in a course that was created to expose college students labeled IDD to various disciplines such as literature, mathematics, and ecology. Teacher education students taught aspects of the course and provided support for their peers with IDD labels. Ultimately, teacher education students expressed that they learned to increase expectations for their peers labeled IDD who could engage in complex academic work, and they felt they could better understand inclusive practices “in action.” Causton-Theoharis et al. (2009) similarly found that traditionally enrolled students benefited from learning alongside students with IDD labels because they learned more about how to include labeled people in conversations and settings; they also learned more about disability from these partnerships than they would have from a textbook.

Baglieri and Bacon (2017) analyzed the experiences of students studying to be teachers who provided peer fellowship to students labeled IDD over the course of a semester as a part of a requirement of a DSE-informed teacher education course. Baglieri and Bacon analyzed the journals documenting the experiences of these pre-service teachers through a theory of an “ethic of care” (Noddings, 2012), and found that, over the course of the sustained partnership, many relationships developed from a one-sided benevolent notion of care, toward an understanding of relationships built on reciprocity. Ultimately Baglieri and Bacon found that the experience allowed teacher education students to imagine peers with IDD labels differently than they would have without the opportunity to develop mutual relationships in a college setting.

Pedagogically, research has described best practices for teaching students with disabilities in IPSE programs and to meet disabled students' needs more generally in higher education. The primary recommended practice, as described by Freedman et. al (2019) in their literature review, is adopting the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in order to meet a diversity of learners in the classroom. UDL considers the needs of a diversity of learners from the outset, and purposefully integrates opportunities for multiple means of representation, multiple means of action and expression, and multiple means of engagement (Meyer et al., 2014). Such approaches have been described to benefit students with and without disability labels (e.g., Black et al., 2015). In planning our subversively inclusive courses, we drew upon UDL, but also made use of frameworks of differentiated instruction (DI) (e.g., Valle & Connor, 2019) in order to provide access to the content for a range of learning needs.

Beyond employing pedagogical elements of UDL and DI, we were also motivated by Mitchell, Snyder, and Ware (2014) who advocate for a “curricular cripistemological” approach to teaching about disability. Rather than emphasizing pathological and medicalized discussions of difference, “curricular cripistemologies insert the creative alternatives of interdependency [and] the politics of atypicality...Consequently, curricular cripistemologies encourage the identification of personal expertise with crip/queer lives as a reservoir of knowledge” (p. 307). Cripistemologies present an alternative to assimilationist curricula where students identifying as disabled must conceal their disabilities in order to belong. Using curricular cripistemologies honors the knowledge of disability experiences and positions disability and queerness as productive sites of knowledge, from which all can learn.

## **Disability Identity**

Despite several examples of research that authentically incorporates student voice into the research (e.g., Gibbons et al., 2015; Love & Mock, 2019; Casale-Giannola & Kamens, 2006) we found little scholarship that explored perceptions of labeled individuals of their ability identity relative to or within the context of higher education. In other words, disability identity is not being discussed, nor is the role of postsecondary access and inclusion in cultivating that identity. This gap was confirmed by Vroman (2019), who explicitly references the “silences” surrounding direct discussion of disability identity among her participants. Vroman identifies a complex of explanations for these silences, including the denial of access to language and discourse around disability, as well as the role of context in enabling such conversations. Notably, developing a positive identity may not align with embracing one’s disability. Prohn (2014) and Vroman’s (2019) research indicates that constructing a positive identity as a disabled person in higher education is bound up with feelings of belonging and social acceptance, such that labeled individuals may construct a positive identity by diminishing differences and emphasizing alignment and commonality with peers. The tensions between claiming a disability identity and claiming a common identity with non-disabled peers is discussed in our findings.

IDD has been definitively constructed from the outside, and overwhelmingly in ways that align with deficiency and lack of value (Carey, 2013; Kliewer et al., 2015), as well as in ways that compel individuals, usually via educational programming, toward resembling normalcy (Ashby, 2010; Carey, 2013). IDD has also been treated as “master status” identity (Carey, 2013), or as an identity that plays a significant role in determining one’s social and political status in the world. Both of these mechanisms of control over IDD status undermine the claiming of disability identity by those labeled. Moreover, like other identity categories, dis/ability is constructed in relation to hierarchies of social power. As scholars in DSE have emphasized, particularly in recent work in DisCrit, disability is a social category and subject position that is created and maintained through racialized, gendered, and classed hierarchies (Connor et al., 2016; Ben Moshe et al., 2014). This is particularly true of IDD as contemporary categories of social difference that have their origins in meanings of intelligence and competence tied to race, gender, ability, class, and nationhood (Carey, 2013; Erevelles, 2002; Taylor, 2020b).

Linton (1998) encourages a complex view of disability identity, underscoring disabled people’s identification with disability even against dominant cultural narratives of disablement as unequivocally undesirable. According to disabled self-advocate Tia Nelis (quoted in Carey, 2013):

I think it is really hard for people who have a label of developmental disabilities to... stand up and say, ‘I am retarded, and I am proud’ because of all the [bad] stuff that goes on with it. Society labels us something different. And the stuff you have gone through, put in institutions, kids not liking you, hit, called names, spit at, beat up because of a label. (p. 61)

The difficulty of claiming disability identity directly challenges the oppressive construction of IDD, even while it creates an avenue for pride. Disabled coming out, critical work on disability pride, and crip identity highlight the important role of claiming identity. Notable is the work of self-advocates labeled with IDD and autism, who use multiple forms of written and artistic expression to push back against the deficit construction of identity (Brown et al., 2017; Loggins, 2012; Kennedy, 2014). In constructing both our curricular and pedagogical practices in these courses, we heavily emphasized the exploration of disability identity.

 Despite the experienced fluidity of ability identity, social and educational practices of segregation mean that a line of distinction between able-minded and intellectually disabled is heavily policed (Carey, 2013; Kliewer et al., 2015). This makes cross-group dialogue very difficult. While a breadth of literature exists within sociological, philosophical, and psychological research on the significance of cross-group dialogue on race, gender, sexuality, class, nationality, and other categories of differences in higher education, our research uncovered nothing addressing peer-to-peer dialogue about disability identity in higher education. Nevertheless, a range of pedagogical and ethical challenges emerged in our courses surrounding the direct discussion of IDD identity in the classroom.

# **Context and Process**

Jessica co-coordinates a newly formed IPSE at a public college in the Northeast, referred to here as Inclusive College Program (ICP). ICP students attend the University through a partnership with a transition program at a local high school and a day habilitation center. Jessica was inspired by Ashley after discussing her approach and experiences teaching a subversively inclusive course. When the opportunity arose to teach a content flexible “special topics in education” course, Jessica decided to pursue a subversively inclusive design. Students with IDD labels who had already been participating in the ICP were invited to audit the course, which was simultaneously a teacher-certification course for students studying to be dually certified, inclusive education teachers. The makeup of the course was 10 ICP students, 26 teacher-education candidates, and one teaching assistant. In order to protect confidentiality, the following demographics are generalized. Of the traditionally enrolled students, approximately 20% self-identified as having a disability, approximately 80% were female, and approximately 80% were White. All ICP students had labels of either Autism or IDD,[[1]](#footnote-1) 60% were male and 40% were female; and 60% were White, 20% Black, and 20% Hispanic. The 16-week course met one time per week for 2.5 hours, and all members of the course attended all sessions. The course was purposefully differentiated, universally designed, student-centered, and integrated heterogeneous cooperative grouping structures. The curriculum incorporated written and multi-media texts, person-first narratives, and included three guest speakers with IDD labels. Students also attended a live screening of the film *Intelligent Lives* (Habib, 2018) and a discussion with filmmaker Dan Habib*.* Over the course of the semester, students were placed into groups for two major, multimedia-oriented assignments: a life-writing assignment that required students to find commonalities of experience around issues of marginalization and oppression and a social action project, where students took action on an issue related to disability oppression. These projects allowed for traditionally enrolled and ICP students to connect around issues of identity and allyship regardless of whether or not they identified as disabled or non-disabled. At the end of the semester, students displayed social action projects at a reception that included students, family members, community partners, and university partners.

Ashley teaches at a private liberal arts university in the Northeast. For this course, Ashley partners with a post-secondary program at a private school, enrolling students labeled with IDD (referred to as Alternative College or AC). Ashley has taught this course twice, and both times there were between 9 and 12 students, with 4–5 traditionally enrolled students and 3–4 AC students. 80% of traditionally enrolled students have been women, about 70% White, and several self-identifying as disabled. AC students were evenly mixed White men and women who were labeled IDD.[[2]](#footnote-2) All students participated in a 75-minute class twice weekly for nine weeks. Because of a difference in the start of the college and program’s semesters, traditionally enrolled students met for five weeks prior to the beginning of the subversively inclusive course. The course was structured in accordance with the principles of UDL, DI, peer-scaffolding, heterogeneous grouping, and student-centered learning. The curriculum was designed to center the voices of authors with IDD labels through books, articles, films, and artwork, and included guest speakers from a regional self-advocacy network as well as field trips (to AC campus and to a play). The course culminated in students’ completion of collaborative social action multimedia projects in which students worked in groups, selected via intentional heterogeneous grouping strategies, to develop projects on topics of their choosing related to course content. These were presented at a reception that included students, community partners, and university partners, and, in some cases, were made public on YouTube.

While teaching our individual courses, we shared experiences and challenges, revealing overlapping insights and tensions surrounding our design, implementation, and reflection on these courses. We decided to co-author a paper in hopes that we might advance critical conversations about IPSE, particularly aimed at the advancement of a DSE approach to subversive academic inclusion in higher education. Our process started with each of us reflecting upon and writing down the key tensions and positive moments experienced in the teaching of these courses. Further virtual and in-person discussions occurred, which eventually led to the development of the four areas of focus discussed below.

## **Positionality**

In endeavoring to do this work, it is necessary to acknowledge our positions within it. Jessica identifies as a White, nondisabled, lesbian woman who has spent her career working with both adults and children with disabilities in a range of community and school settings, some of which include a summer camp, a group home, K-12 schools, a self-advocacy group, and an inclusive college program for early adults with IDD. Ashley identifies as a White, nondisabled, heterosexual woman whose career has included teaching and supporting adults with IDD and physical disability labels in employment and group home settings, as well as learning alongside and providing support for labeled folks within a self-advocacy group.

We acknowledge the tensions that our position as White nondisabled academics create within a classroom that seeks to center the experiences of disabled people, particularly as we both experience the privileges of ascribed able mindedness. These tensions meant that we had to constantly reflect on how power dynamics played out in the classroom between faculty, traditionally enrolled students, and students with IDD labels. Both of us kept reflective journals in which we explored and grappled with these challenges, and both of us sought to use teaching methods and intentional content as a means to address these challenges of positionality.

# **Insights and Challenges**

In this section, we describe four domains in which rich insights and complex tensions arose, providing examples and analysis in relation to our conceptual framework.

## **Curricular Choices**

Both of us developed courses based on a range of texts that provided foundational understandings of disability studies and disability activism. For example, Jessica’s reading list included books by disabled authors (a) Michael Kennedy (2014), such as *My Life in Institutions and my Way Out* (in which Kennedy described his life as a child in and out of institutions, as well as his road to becoming a prominent self-advocate and disability rights activist); and (b) Higashida (2016), titled *The Reason I Jump: The Inner Voice of a Thirteen-Year-Old Boy with Autism.* Ashley assigned intellectually disabled artist M. Bernard Loggins’ *Fears for Your Life* (2012) to structure a conversation about storytelling and multimodal expression, and articles by self-advocates Aspis (1997), Docherty et al. (2005), Hatch (2014), Kennedy (1996), and Ward (in Pelka, 2012). Additionally, both authors used a range of academic texts, such as Shakespeare (1996) and Goodley (2017) for Jessica; and Peterson (2009) and Shapiro (2011) for Ashley. Both authors used video and audio clips such as *A Credo for Support* (Kunc, 2006), *Parallels in Time* (MGCDD, 2020), and excerpts of Wong’s video series the *Disability Visibility Project* (2014-2018)*.*

A particular challenge for both of us was differentiating texts so that all course members could understand core content ideas, while providing options for additional complexity. Jessica assigned recommended and optional readings. Core texts that were recommended for all were bolded in the syllabus and often included a companion video or audio clip, where additional academic texts were also included, which were optional for ICP students and required for students studying to be teachers. Some ICP students completed all readings with support from assigned ICP peers, program staff, and/or family members, where others had minimal support outside of the course, which meant some ICP students did not complete even core readings.

Ashley required traditionally enrolled students to circulate plain language summaries of course texts to all students, based on access recommendations by self-advocacy groups (SABE, 2019). AC’s main instructor used these summaries to pre-teach texts on AC campus prior to coming to the university campus, and AC students often came prepared with notes to class. A significant factor influencing curricular choices for Ashley was the later start date of the AC students’ semester and the inclusion of five weeks of separate learning for traditionally enrolled students, which Ashley used to scaffold the traditionally enrolled students’ understanding of the historical construction of IDD.

### **Analysis of Curricular Choices**

Both authors attempted to provide student access to content via intentional inclusive teaching methods. In doing so, we applied similar frameworks of teaching and learning that we teach in our teacher education courses, such as UDL and curriculum differentiation. This was a productive exercise in thinking through what inclusive teaching practice means, and had the further advantage of involving students in enacting practices that they are learning in other spaces of their programs. For instance, the strategies we described above draw upon the framework of content differentiation, particularly Valle and Connor’s (2019) differentiated pyramid (pp. 130-135), which allows all students to be exposed to core ideas while added complexity is available for students who can benefit from extended learning opportunities. This approach created opportunities for all students to discuss common essential ideas, despite the presence of broad learner diversity. While this was effective to a degree, challenges still persisted, such that there was wide variability for both authors with regard to students’ participation in reading discussions. Ultimately, the depth of conversations, and overall inclusivity of participation suffered when not all students had pre-exposure to at least the major ideas from the course readings. One strategy that we both found effective was to view short video clips during class time that were assigned on the syllabus, and that encapsulated core ideas from the course session. We also feel it is relevant to point out that most ICP and AC students had been educated in segregated systems throughout their lives and were unlikely to have received academic preparation for college-level readings and analysis. Thus, ICP and AC students likely had potential to demonstrate more advanced literacy capabilities but had not previously practiced reading and discussing higher level content in inclusive settings. This meant there was more need for support and guidance in engaging with college-level coursework.

With regard to the content itself, highlighting the words of disabled people through multimedia text provided opportunity for rich discussions through the opening of surprising entry points. Mitchell, Snyder, and Ware’s (2014) “cripistemological approach,” which positions marginalized knowledge as critical content in the classroom proved quite valuable. This approach provided opportunities, many unexpected, for different voices and ways of relating to content to be heard and respected through class discussions. Ashley, though, found that the shift in the curriculum from the pre to post subversively inclusive aspect of the course (based on different semester start times) presented a marked difference in experienced pace and engagement. While unavoidable, this difference complicated traditionally enrolled students’ perceptions of inclusivity in both positive and negative ways, as discussed in Taylor (2020a). In particular, traditionally enrolled students noted that the pace of engagement slowed when the AC students joined, but also observed that their appreciation for inclusivity and their understanding of ableism increased. Both authors noted that traditionally enrolled students wrote in their journals that the experience of sharing a classroom with a mixed group of students transformed their understanding of concepts discussed in the readings such as seeing inclusion in action: the meaning and manifestation of intelligence, presumed competence, interdependence, and communicative diversity. This confirms findings regarding the benefits IPSE programming for teacher education students more generally (Baglieri & Bacon, 2017; Carroll et al., 2009; Causton-Theoharis et al., 2009). Storytelling and sharing commonalities across such diversity provided depth of learning and a rich exchange that benefitted the classroom community as a whole.

## **Pedagogical Choices**

 These courses were rich and engaging when it came to pedagogical challenges and learning moments. Both authors used UDL (Meyer et al., 2014) as a framework to guide pedagogical decision-making. Because we aimed for our courses to be focused on student learning across differences of ascribed ability, we were intentional and careful with regard to the number of students enrolled from each of the two programs, and in designing group work based on heterogeneous grouping structures.

 In order to encourage student peer-to-peer engagement, Ashley explicitly emphasized an ally approach that encouraged shared power and mutual support, alongside the praxis of presuming competence (Biklen & Burke, 2007), or the stance and practice of presuming ability and working to enable and negotiate participation regardless of label. In particular, Ashley encouraged traditionally enrolled students to adopt ally-oriented relationships. For Jessica, the concept of interdependence was introduced early to the course members (Snow, 2010; Reindal, 1999) with hope that natural supports would emerge, particularly as students got to know each other and form relationships through “home” and “assignment” groups. Home groups were heterogeneous groups that met throughout the semester for class activities and reading discussions. Assignments groups were a different configuration of heterogeneous groupings that were responsible for collaborating on two major assignments. For both of us, consistent grouping structures provided opportunities for students to get to know each other more deeply and for natural supports and relationship development to occur in productive, and often unexpected ways. Assignment groups worked particularly well in both courses as students integrated personal stories and experiences into their projects and we bolstered collaboration by requiring students to identify commonalities across all group members. These grouping structures also allowed for the opportunity for traditionally enrolled students who identified as disabled to find common pride and identity-based connections with ICP students. The strongest relationships developed between members of assignment groups, likely because of the labor required including out of class work, and the requirement to find common experiences within group members’ personal stories.

However, out of class work also presented challenges. In Jessica’s course, some traditionally enrolled students met with ICP students outside of class to work on projects, but, based on issues of students’ often mismatched schedules, transportation limitations of ICP students, and access to support and technology, not all ICP students had equal collaboration on projects. Course time was often dedicated to project work in order to mitigate such issues. Because of the large geographical distance separating traditionally enrolled and AC’s campuses (one hour by car in a rural area), students in Ashley’s course were largely limited to class time to complete group projects. However, several groups communicated by text, email, and, in at least one case, met via skype to discuss their project. Nevertheless, some tensions emerged in both our courses regarding participants’ shared labor, and these necessitated interventions to support intra-group collaboration and interdependence.

### **Analysis of Pedagogical Approaches**

A goal and challenge for both of us was to help students form natural peer-relationships and to dissuade students interested in becoming teachers or educational professionals to take on the role of a teacher, rather than peer. We attempted to develop class communities where support was natural and reciprocal, and we attempted to use class activities and discussion topics that de-centered the epistemic privilege of traditionally enrolled students as able-minded learners. This included strategies of DI and UDL such as station-based learning, scaffolded inquiry, and the integration of multiple modes of representation, engagement, and expression (via simultaneous written, artistic, aural, and expressive activities). Many of the multi-media, differentiated, and interactive strategies that we deployed were described as beneficial by all students in the classroom, evidencing the theory of UDL as improving instruction when planned for those on the margins (Meyer et al., 2014).

Via these strategies, most students did, over time, adopt an ethic of mutual support, while developing relationships and finding empowering commonalities within and across identities through their work together. However, appropriate support was often challenging to assure within the classroom community, and occasionally power dynamics emerged in complex ways. Both of us observed that during group work, deeply embedded notions of helper-helped were reinscribed in the completion of assignments, reinforced by traditionally enrolled students’ fears of turning in an “imperfect product.” Notably, such tensions became apparent to traditionally enrolled students from self-acknowledged anxieties about evaluation structures, particularly due dates and grades. Both of us used strategies to counter these anxieties, such as situating project work within the context of a unique curricular and pedagogical context. We also emphasized individual accountability via student journal reflections and paper assignments in addition to participation in group work, a strategy that reflects the UDL practice of providing students with multiple modes of expression (Meyer et al., 2014) and that aligns with best practices within cooperative grouping structures (Putnam, 1998). Our use of pedagogies based in inclusive education practices and DSE principles, which attempted to address tensions and challenges in teaching and learning within our diverse classrooms, reaffirmed for us the importance—and imperfections—of enacting inclusive education.

## **Identity and Language**

As these were courses explicitly focused on disability, the topics of language and identity were prominent both implicitly and explicitly. In conversations that Jessica had with teachers and support staff from her partner programs, it was a common mantra that many ICP students did not know or acknowledge that they had a disability, despite being educated in highly segregated settings throughout their lives. Thus, a goal for Jessica was to introduce the topic of disability identity in a way that might evoke pride. Journals that were completed by all students asked students to reflect on disability labels and constructs within society. Some traditionally enrolled and ICP students directly identified as being a part of the disability community by the end of the semester, whereas other students with IDD labels never overtly identified as such, and vice versa. However, all 36 students found ways to personally relate to course content despite how they identified, allowing for complex discussions of identity and language to arise about disability as well as other marginalized identity categories and their intersections with disability. As students collaborated over the course of the semester, commonalities were found among peers where students found ways to relate to concepts of both disability pride and internalized ableism that both ICP and traditionally enrolled students had experienced. For example, one group took on the idea of bullying in their life-writing assignment. All students, regardless of whether they identified as disabled or not, related to the larger topic of bullying, and several traditionally enrolled and ICP students identified ableist structures as the root cause of bullying, thus deepening cross-disability connections and understanding about disability identity.

For both authors, particularly interesting moments arose during guest speaker lectures. For instance, Kayla McKeon, who is the first ever registered lobbyist to the United States Congress with down syndrome, visited both classes (in person or via Skype) and discussed, among other things, her work on ending the practice of sub-minimum wage. During the Q & A portion of McKeon’s lecture in Jessica’s class, several ICP students who had not previously identified as being disabled, asked Kayla for advice on having down syndrome and gaining employment. Similar questions occurred at the end of the semester when local disability rights advocate Betsy Smith, who also has down syndrome, came with her mother to discuss her route to an inclusive adult life in our local community. The guest speakers added a rich layer for all members of the classroom, and Q & A sessions revealed complexity about language and identity beyond what Jessica noticed occurring during regular class sessions.

Ashley observed variability in all student’s explicit identification with labels of disability, as well as student comfort level in discussing that identity. Some AC students took pride in identifying as disabled, and some with “having down syndrome,” and this pride was amplified by texts and videos describing the work of self-advocates. On the other hand, few traditionally enrolled students openly discussed their own labels or identifications with disability. The challenge of language use was productive and important in politicizing conversations around identity and pride in the course, but it also created tensions in the classroom, particularly for Ashley in her lesson planning and linguistic choices in class discussions. Not all AC students in Ashley’s course found language of disability welcome, and one student was quite upset with its frequent use. Not wanting to force or require that AC students render themselves as spokespersons for their ability identity, Ashley made pedagogical decisions that complicate a reading of the course as advancing DSE commitments. In particular, in her first time teaching the course, Ashley found herself, despite theoretical, pedagogical, and ethical commitments, and the explicit goals of the course, avoiding explicit reference to IDD in class discussions. This avoidance both reinforced and was reinforced by traditionally enrolled students' avoidance of IDD terms as the semester proceeded. Thus, in the second iteration of the course, Ashley focused more intentionally on designing opportunities for students’ reflection on identity through storytelling, artistic expression, and journaling. This included facilitating students’ engagement with the work of Krip Hop artists Keith Jones and Leroy F. Moore, Jr. Because of Jones and Moore’s explicit focus on the intersections of racial and ability injustice, their work invited important cross-group dialogue about oppression for traditionally enrolled students of color and AC students marginalized by ability, culminating in an engaging and creative spoken word exercise.

**Analysis of Identity and Language**

Discussions of disability identity and use of disability language were both challenging and transformative for students, as well as for us as instructors. One clear challenge was to avoid what Mitchell and Snyder (2015) call inclusionism, which expands “the inclusion of some nonnormative bodies, those whom we have referred to as ‘the able-disabled,’ while further solidifying the nonnormative, less easily integratable bodies” (p. 72). The avoidance of explicit discussions of disability can occur when one privileges a kind of inclusionism over substantive and meaningful change, which aligns with Broderick and Lalvani’s (2017) concept of “dysconscious ableism,” or a “distorted way of thinking about dis/ability (particularly when compared to criticalist conceptualisations of dis/ability), one that tacitly accepts dominant ableist norms and privileges” (p. 895). This avoidance can also be understood as a kind of sanitizing of disability, or a fear of naming and claiming disability as more than a deficit oriented special education construct. Avoiding the discussion of disability undermines attempts to disrupt structural inequities and silences that surround disability identity and the perpetuation of ableism. Our classroom experiences thus reinforce the importance of critical work examining pedagogical projects of cross-group dialogue surrounding discussions of ability and disability in higher education.

Our classroom observations dovetail with Prohn (2014) and Vroman (2019)’s findings that students labeled as IDD experience tensions surrounding claiming disability identity versus claiming a common identity with their traditionally-enrolled college peers. In particular, while some students claimed a disability with pride, or emerging pride, some ICP and AC students expressed identification with nondisabled (or able-minded) peers and a desire not to be framed as different. Such a stance is understandable within contexts of entrenched ableism. As Carey (2013) points out, this “pursuit of normality” via passing brings with it the promise of social belonging and social protection, even while it “serves the interests of the nondisabled” (p. 154). While it is important to acknowledge the potential role of internalized ableism within the claim to a common identity with traditionally enrolled peers, it is also important to recognize the role of peer relationships and social cohesion at work in this expressive desire, namely the feelings of social belonging that emerged via group work and class discussions.

At the same time that instances of inclusionism appeared and re-appeared within the context of pedagogical encounters, inclusionism was also resisted by the actions and interpretations of students in the classroom. In particular, traditionally enrolled students frequently challenged their own expectations of normalcy in light of the alternative modes of expression and intelligence exhibited by their labeled peers, as well as by their peers’ complex discussions of their disability identity. For instance, one student in Ashley’s class challenged peers’ conceptions of intelligence and knowledge-making through her prolific and expressive poetry. In Jessica’s class, an ICP student who was a strong activist was a role model among traditionally enrolled and other ICP students for taking a politicized stance toward disability. This occurred throughout the semester when this ICP student shared video clips of him marching with his family at the U.S. capitol for disability rights. Through this example, this ICP student empowered other students to see firsthand the benefits of identity-pride; and claiming disability pride became a more dominant way of being part of the group in the classroom, even for traditionally enrolled students who identified as disabled.

## **Multiple Perspectives on Purposes of the Courses**

Another domain in which productive tensions emerged was in relation to our work with partner programs, in particular around multiple and sometimes dueling goals for what was believed to be the purpose of participating in the class for the students labeled with IDD. Ashley experienced a high degree of support and encouragement from her partner organization on most curricular and pedagogical aspects of the course and found that staff had reasonably high expressed academic expectations for students. However, these expectations did not always manifest as AC staff were very protective of AC students. In particular, Ashley received some pushback while teaching about the historical roots of self-advocacy and disability rights. In particular, the partnering programs’ lead instructor asked her not to show visuals from institutions because (as Ashley was told) these would be “particularly upsetting” for AC students because of their diagnoses. This request challenged Ashley’s ability to carry out the curricular goals of the course and, as we discuss, presented a dilemma for Ashley in respecting the program’s request (in the context of a longstanding relationship between her university and the program) while confronting what felt like a sanitizing of content and the denial of students’ access to their own history.

Because of the connection to the larger IPSE program, partner programs justify coming to Jessica’s campus as part of ICP students’ Individual Education Program (IEP) or the pre-employment plan. Thus, a primary focus of campus participation was directed toward skill-development as related to individualized goals. This focus at times conflicted with Jessica’s goal of facilitating ICP students’ development of academic interests, a sense of belonging, and a pride-based approach to understanding disability. Another challenge was that partner staff often had low expectations regarding the academic ability of ICP students, and often felt higher level academic conversations were out of reach for them. For instance, one student was often described as unable to read by partner staff despite this student having completed many readings at home with support from her mother, and subsequently demonstrated through deep understanding of the content during class discussions. However, in this and other similar occasions, we have also seen growth in the expectations of staff for ICP and AC students because of the nature of the college context within which people excelled. For example, after several years of this student participating in the IPSE program, her staff and teachers began to describe her academic abilities differently.

Most parents and guardians of ICP students in Jessica’s course supported its goals and values, but this was not the case for all. One particular incident that occurred at the end of the semester highlighted conflicting perspectives on goals and purposes. For the final social action project, one group created an online diversity acceptance campaign. In this campaign, each student wrote a personal narrative about their relationship to the topic that included hashtags connecting their work to similar campaigns. One ICP student in this group wrote a personal narrative about a high school experience featuring disability rights hashtags that included words associated with both queer and disability pride. The student was proud of the work his group did and shared a screenshot of the product with his father, who was unable to attend the end of semester event. His father, who is his legal guardian,[[3]](#footnote-3) became very upset with the content of the project and voiced his concerns to both the university and partner school district. The issue was discussed and an understanding between the ICP student, the parent, the district, and Jessica was eventually reached. In particular, since this incident, the ICP has asked any legal guardians of participants to acknowledge that participation in the program means that ICP students will be exposed, within a supported decision-making framework, to ideas and opportunities available to all college students.

### **Analysis of Multiple Perspectives on Purposes and Goals**

Our experiences interacting with partner programs and parents revealed challenges faced within IPSE programming when DSE-oriented goals like identity exploration and disability activism are foregrounded in a college setting. This is particularly true because DSE approaches challenge dominant cultural understandings associated with ableism, homophobia, and protectionism. Both of our experiences are illustrative of the tensions involved when classroom contexts that create opportunities for students labeled IDD to explore their complex and multifaceted identities and histories clash with the expectations of caregivers or professionals. Further, meanings about the capabilities, needs, and potential of individuals labeled IDD remain embedded in narratives of child-like innocence that reinforce protectionist attitudes (Gill, 2010), sometimes undermining access to curricular content or more challenging learning. Moreover, the resistance around curriculum exposure that Ashley experienced reinforced both this protectionist narrative and the view that intellectual disability is a biomedical condition (Kliewer et al., 2015). As instructors, we had to make difficult choices between upholding our values and acquiescing to our partners’ requests and concerns. Most challenging is that these requests and concerns were expressed in the absence of disabled people, thus reinforcing their lack of agency.

Another challenge and productive tension that arose was the conflict between a dominant special education paradigm and the goals of higher education more generally. The literature base in IPSE programming often highlights the outcomes of student participation through skill-based discourses common in special education framework (McEathron et al., 2013; Thoma et al., 2011). We found that the dominance of a medical model paradigm (Goodley, 2017) played out in the experiences of our participants through special education discourses and through the structuring of adult services for people with IDD labels. Thus, even when given the opportunity to partake in an inclusive higher education experience, medicalized and deficit-oriented interpretations of the purposes of participation still manifested.

Nevertheless, we found that ICP and AC students’ opportunities to partake in higher education, and to engage in challenging academic work with their same-aged peers, led traditionally enrolled peers, program staff, and parents to question their perspectives and, in general, to regard ICP and AC students as less disabled because of their rich contributions and academic success in a college classroom. Thus, while we continue to justify our courses through a framework of labeled students’ equal access to higher education, we note these important benefits and opportunities alongside our continued commitment to address the challenges of promoting access to higher education, and disability rights and disability identity content, through the collaboration with partner agencies and programs.

# **Conclusions**

We both took a risk when building subversively inclusive courses in collaboration with local community partners that support people with IDD labels. Our goals were to create possibilities and enrich the learning experiences of students studying education, as well as to create opportunities for people labeled IDD to study disability and disability identity from a DSE oriented and pride-based framework in a subversively inclusive setting. Yet, as DSE scholars, we struggled because the simultaneous historical legacies in which we were engaged, deconstructing through course curricula and pedagogy, arose in the real-time teaching of the courses. We faced difficulty creating an inclusive higher education classroom, because at times inclusivity seemed unclear and untenable. The very power dynamics we hoped to undo through the teaching of these courses often bubbled up in nuanced ways during class time, despite our planning efforts. At the same time, there were powerful, and often unexpected moments among students that both showed that many of our goals had been met and illustrated the powerful potential of the subversively inclusive model for disrupting higher education inequity and ableism more generally. Similar to the productive tensions described by Ferri (2006), we hope that in writing this paper, we have opened a dialogue to consider that the tensions and struggles we encountered were in many ways productive for all members of our class communities. Our hope is not only that this paper will motivate and guide others in their teaching, but also that it will illustrate the multitude of ways that the field of disability studies can challenge itself to transform traditionally enrolled students’ knowledge of disability and become inclusive of students who are so frequently left on the sidelines of academic structures and social transformation in general.

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1. ICP students’ specific labels were not known to Jessica. Rather, ICP students were already participants in the partner program for students labeled IDD. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. AC students’ specific labels were not known to Ashley. Rather, AC students were already participants in the partner program for students labeled IDD. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a discussion of issues of guardianship as connected to DSE perspectives and transition-planning practices see Rood et al. (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)