



# When Special Education and Disability Studies Intertwine: Addressing Educational Inequities Through Processes and Programming

Audri Sandoval Gomez<sup>1\*</sup> and Aja McKee<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Thompson Policy Institute on Disability, Chapman University, Orange, CA, United States, <sup>2</sup> Department of Special Education, California State University, Fullerton, CA, United States

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### \*Correspondence:

Audri Sandoval Gomez  
agomez@chapman.edu  
Aja McKee  
amckee@fullerton.edu

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The inception of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) in 1975 provided hope and the opportunity for equitable educational experiences for individuals with disabilities. Forty-five years later, the United States remains in a deficit-driven, medical model educational system with deeply rooted inequities continuing to segregate students because of their disability. A disability studies in education framework allows for complex components of teaching and programming for students with disabilities to be explored in a practical way that promotes inclusive education for all students. Examining special education practices through a social model of disability with a focus on ability and access can eliminate the existing narrative. When impairment is viewed as a difference rather than a deficit, it compels educators to consider alternatives to pedagogy and programming. More importantly, it allows educators to focus more on access to curricula and less on students overcoming their disability. This manuscript examines how educational leaders can shape school culture, guide special education processes, and influence educators in their teaching practices, with a disability studies in education framework to address the educational injustices students with disabilities continue to face in our educational system.

**Keywords:** disability studies in education, special education, universal design, school culture, teacher training, school leadership

## INTRODUCTION

Individuals with disabilities have experienced long standing educational inequities. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975 afforded individuals with disabilities the right to schooling with appropriate supports (Education for All Handicapped Children Act and Pub. L., 1975; Yell et al., 1998). This momentous time moved many individuals with disabilities out of institutions and into public schools. Disability rights activists, families, and those with disabilities believed their advocacy for educational equality had finally materialized. In 1990, EAHCA was amended to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) which afforded additional educational opportunities for students with disabilities (Ashby and Cosier, 2016). Although it was perceived that IDEA was a just law, we soon realized segregation and inequities would continue in the educational system through special education.

Under IDEA, special education provides “specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability” (section 300.39) in the least restrictive environment stating, “To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are non-disabled” (section 300.114) (Individuals With Disabilities Education Act 20 U.S.C. §, 2004). Least restrictive environment regulations have created a range of special education placements (Taylor, 1988). Inclusion or inclusive education are not defined under the LRE statute, leaving interpretation of this regulation to educators, which has caused continued segregation for students with disabilities (SWD). Furthermore, special education highlights the needs of the child with a disability through the medical model framework (Valle and Connor, 2011) focused on identification and remediation (Ashby, 2012), exacerbating the focus of the disabled from able-bodied individuals.

Since the inception of IDEA, disability scholars, advocates, and individuals with disabilities have sought to examine least restrictive environment and respond to the medical model framework, as it continues to limit, label, segregate, and oppress individuals. In the 1990’s, the social model of disability became a popular notion that rejected the deficit-driven focus, pathologizing disability in education (Gabel, 2009). Naraian and Schelssinger (2017) explained, “Adopting a social model of disability in education requires that we deflect a focus on deficit-within-students to the (in)capability of the schooling context to be supportive of a range of learning differences” (p. 82). Connor et al. (2008) posited the social model embodies the tenets of Disability Studies in Education (DSE), which include

- (a) contextualize disability within political and social spheres;
- (b) privilege the interests, agendas, and voices of people labeled with disability/disabled people;
- (c) promote social justice, equitable and inclusive educational opportunities, and full and meaningful access to all aspects of society for people labeled with disability/disabled people; and
- (d) assume competence and reject deficit models of disability. (p. 448)

In this article, we examine how school leaders provide leadership through a DSE lens to transform school culture, the individualized education program (IEP) process, and classroom teaching, all resulting in programming for SWD.

## Shaping an Inclusive School Culture

In creating equitable learning environments and opportunities for SWD, Connor (2016) reminded us that educators should “be aware of the history of people with disabilities, their subjection to ableism, and their struggle for rights as citizens” (p. 228). Understanding the “why” of inclusive education and equality can shape educators in “how” to move forward. A school culture that does not embody inclusive education and its beliefs and values can impact the success of SWD in general education classrooms (Carrington, 1999).

School leaders can influence an inclusive and equitable school culture, resulting in how educational practices are delivered

(Carrington, 1999). As school leaders advocate for equality, they set the tone for educators; however, this does not always come without pushback. School leaders must impart knowledge of injustice, deficit-driven models, and ableism to promote a culture of equality and social justice. They must acknowledge and embody the notion that all students are deserving of equal educational opportunities. School leaders have the responsibility to promote full and meaningful educational access by providing training opportunities, resources, and time for educators to implement equitable instruction and educational spaces. We must also acknowledge “changes in the deep structure of schooling require the kind of substantive support that can come only from policy changes, accompanied by significant shifts in public perceptions of what schools should be and do” (Tye, 1987, p. 284). The role of school leaders can greatly influence the culture of a school.

## The Shift From a Deficit-Driven IEP

School leaders can reinforce and support how the individualized education program (IEP) is developed and implemented by imparting a strengths-based approach with their teachers, rather than focusing on a deficit-driven model. The IEP is a compulsory process and document that governs the education for SWD. The law-driven approach of the IEP serves several purposes, including making sure (a) all components of the program are addressed, (b) parent participation is included, and (c) a continuum of services and placements are considered (Sweet and Williams, 2006). The prescriptive IEP process tends to focus heavily on disability, which derives from a medical model framework. McLaughlin (2016) stated, “At the core of unearthing how this document defines disability, then, is the understanding the deficit ideology of disability” (p. 86). It is necessary for school leaders to ensure teachers are following the mandated guidelines to ensure SWD are provided with a sound and legally defensible IEP (Sweet and Williams, 2006).

The 1997 and 2004 United States IDEA revisions of the IEP requirements provided a more thorough, accountability-driven document, but it also brought focus on disability, contributing to a negative perception of disability and ableist ideologies (McLaughlin, 2016). Further, the IEP has become rife with scientific and psychological terms, which is daunting for many parents and inhibits quality collaboration from general education teachers and families (Valle and Connor, 2011). The focus on IEP goals driven by student deficits “suggests an individual focus in terms of intervention outcomes rather than a societal focus, which would include the child’s participation in activities that are meaningful and that involve interaction with other people” (Klang et al., 2016, p. 47). Jozwik et al. (2018) posited a similar sentiment, stating IEP goal development has lacked relevant and meaningfulness for students, including those with culturally and linguistically diverse needs. School leaders can guide their teachers in using a strengths-based approach to IEP goal development, which would provide more inclusive opportunities for SWD (Elder et al., 2018). As IDEA points out, annual goals must also “enable the child to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum” (McLaughlin, 2016; 34 CFR 300.320 through 300.324, 2014, p.

85). This latter part of goal development is often forgotten, and goals are used to keep students out of the least restrictive environment. The school leaders' role is critical in shifting the dialogue from a focus on student deficits to supporting the team in identifying ways to strategically support the student in a more inclusive educational setting. When IEP goals are examined from a DSE perspective, rather than a deficit-driven focus, we can begin to look at IEP goals differently. A DSE framework diverts us from a place of *overcoming* and *normalizing* (Linton, 1998) to a place of access and equity.

In the IEP, part of the school leaders' positions may be to question the assumptions of others surrounding disability (McLaughlin, 2016) and to "question and reconstruct the IEP as a tool toward inclusive and equitable school for students with disabilities" (p. 98). School leaders may have discussions with school staff, outside of the IEP, to explore general beliefs and values related to disability. Everyone brings their personal and professional experiences and education, related to disability, to the IEP. This is important because while this should not influence IEP recommendations, this can essentially shape the ways in which team members access the continuum of services and placements.

Additionally, school leaders should facilitate an IEP without a predetermined agenda-driven mindset that supports meaningful and deep conversations with parents, teachers, and service providers. Parents need to feel at ease to share their thoughts, whether those align with checking off the "IEP boxes." The reason for this is "the bulk of litigation concerns the central obligation for school districts to provide each eligible student with a 'free appropriate public education' (FAPE), with many of these FAPE cases including alleged procedural violations" (Zirkel and Hetrick, 2017, p. 220). IDEA defines FAPE as special education and related services being provided without charge, at public expense and under public supervision. This includes meeting the standards of the state educational agency, including an appropriate education through the state (preschool to secondary), which are provided in conformity with the IEP (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. § 1400).

Zirkel and Hetrick (2017) implemented a case law analysis, examining the frequency and outcomes of procedural violations in IEPs. While it was found violations occurred in parent participation, IEP components, IEP development, and the IEP team, it was recommended the "priority should be on developing a relationship of trust with the child's parents and producing notable progress for the child" (Zirkel and Hetrick, 2017, p. 232), as opposed to a focus on case law. Although case law tends to drive educator practices, teachers must still have the ability to ensure access in the classroom.

## Ensuring Access in the Classroom

Access in the classroom refers to the physical space of the general education classroom, as well-access to general education curriculum. Further, access to general education means that SWD will have meaningful education opportunities with their non-disabled peers (Cosier et al., 2013). School leaders can support student access by guiding their teachers in utilizing Ashby's (2012) four factors which prepare teachers for inclusive education

from a DSE framework. These include (a) strengths and needs-based approach, (b) teachers as problem solvers, (c) rethinking student assessment, and (d) teachers as agents of change. These four factors charge educators to resist the dominant discourse surrounding able bodied and disabled, or normal and abnormal. Educators can then focus on how to support, accommodate, and universally design instruction for all rather than targeting the individuals' impairment. Using Universal Design for Learning (UDL) creates learning opportunities and access to instruction for all students with a strengths-based approach, rather than a focus on remediation (Cosier et al., 2016). UDL is a framework which aims to make learning accessible for learners with varied needs by offering multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement (Rose and Meyer, 2002). When school leaders support teams in viewing disability not solely as a deficit, but understanding how disability can be socially constructed, we can begin to move further away from the notion that general educators can only teach able-bodied students.

Special educators' roles vary from self-contained special education teachers to co-teaching with their general education counterparts. School leaders can support educators in the complexity of navigating these various roles, coupled with adhering to policies and federal mandates, subsequently having an impact on how and where they teach. Special education becomes "remediation of identified deficits, with a goal of moving the person toward more normative ways of being" (Cosier and Ashby, 2016, p. 5). The structure of the special education system demands identification and remediation of deficits that have resulted in special educators struggling to presume the competence of the individuals they teach (Biklen and Burke, 2006). This is not the fault of special educators, as the system enforces and perpetuates this notion.

Collaboration is a key factor in successful inclusion practices. As inclusive opportunities have increased over the years (US Department of Education Office of Special Education Rehabilitative Services, 2014), there has been a great shift in collaboration between general and special educators (Connor, 2016). Special educators are taught to collaborate; however, that may look different when using a DSE lens. Disability studies in education reminds us we must intentionally "promote social justice, equitable and inclusive educational opportunities, and full and meaningful access to all aspects of society for people labeled with disability" (Connor, 2016, p. 223). To advocate for equality for all students, school leaders must foster relationships between general and special educators by encouraging shared decision making and responsibilities. School leaders can cultivate co-teaching partnerships and ensure these teams have sufficient, quality meeting time, resources, and training. School leaders can guide the conversations on their campus to focus more on providing appropriate educational supports for SWD to ensure all students receive equitable educational opportunities.

We cannot continue to expect educators to make systemic changes in their pedagogy and recommendations of educational placements without education, training, and administrative support. School leaders must seek the necessary resources and professional development so teachers can implement research-based interventions, accommodations, modifications,

assistive technology, and universally designed instruction to meet the needs of various learning profiles in the least restrictive environment.

## DISCUSSION

School leaders play a significant role in shaping school culture and influencing the operations at school sites. Leaders who seek for equitable and inclusive educational opportunities for all students can support educators in achieving this by providing teacher training and resources (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011). Additionally, with revisions of IDEA in 1997 and 2004 (Public Law 105-17 and 108-446), we have begun to see a concerted effort to increase inclusive practices by integrating SWD in general education classrooms (Blanton and Pugach, 2007; Young, 2011). A DSE perspective forces leaders and educators to view educational placements as a civil right, where all SWD should have access equal to their non-disabled peers. In this way, educationally based work becomes socially just. Danforth (2014) may have said it best when he stated, “Educators who are devoted to the ethical mission of inclusive education often view their work as an important strand of the larger Disability Rights Movement” (as cited in Danforth, 2016, p. x).

Furthermore, school leaders can cultivate a community of learners by shifting the lens of teachers who view disability in a way that inhibits an inclusive educational environment

(Sapon-Shevin, 2003). When disability is not considered a deficit of the individual, but instead an impairment in which society has created and is responsible for addressing (Linton, 1998), the problem is no longer within the individual but instead with the environment surrounding the individual (Linton, 1998). Further, Biklen and Burke (2006) argued:

The observer’s obligation is not to project an ableist interpretation on something another person does, but rather to presume there must be a rationale or sympathetic explanation for what someone does and then try to discover it, always from the other person’s perspective (p. 168).

Presuming competence elicits the idea all individuals are part of a community to which they are important and belong. This notion of community must be addressed within the school culture. Furthermore, to promote social justice, equitable and inclusive educational opportunities, and full and meaningful access, school leaders must build the learning capacity of their educators to teach all students. This would allow for meaningful inclusive education to occur.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The manuscript was collaboratively worked on by both authors.

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