



Research Article

Preparing Teachers in Freedom Struggles for and with Disabled Youth

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Abstract

While many disabled youth spend most of their school day in education settings with non-disabled peers, research indicates that teachers report feeling underprepared to support disabled youth. Teacher education is an area of improving teacher preparedness to better support the full range of human expressions that exists in classrooms. In this essay, we argue that preparing teachers in solidarity struggles with disabled youth requires that teacher educators approach this work as part of the broader struggle toward freedom while underscoring the central role of freedom dreaming. We propose radically rethinking general education teacher preparation by unpacking two overlapping issues: (a) teacher education's role in promoting the status quo; and (b) general education teachers' centrality in maintaining the status quo. In response, we synthesize disability solidarity concepts as well as tenets of rightful presence to propose a conceptual framework for teacher education, particularly in the area of preparing general education teachers to engage in imaginative labor with disabled youth to transform future classrooms, schools, and communities. Such synthesis is rooted on key values of pandisability, interdependence, authentic care, reciprocity, and anti-oppression. We intend such a conceptual framework to inform justice-oriented teacher education programs within and beyond the U.S., thereby contributing to global conversations.

Keywords

Disabled Youth, Intersectional Justice-Oriented Teacher Education, Teacher Political Knowledge, Freedom, Disability Solidarity

1. Introduction

R. D. G. Kelley [1] asks a set of crucial questions that challenge us to dream with youth: “What are today’s young activists dreaming about? We know what they are fighting against, but what are they fighting for?” (p. 8). We argue that teacher educators and practitioners turn to the disability community to guide a more comprehensive set of freedom dreams [2, 3]. Be-

cause teacher education programs are largely designed to uphold the status quo of Western and capitalistic interests (e.g., [4-6]), which are often outgrowths of racist, patriarchal, and ableist logics, we argue for a substantive change in teacher preparation. We are intentional in using the word *with* when arguing for dreaming with disabled youth. Many disabled youth and their families have experienced frustration within

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existing school structures (including special education) and this work aims to return agency and autonomy to those youth and families. Our purpose is to add to the conversation about the ways of knowing that are needed in social justice-oriented teacher education [7, 8]. We do so by calling to the consciousness of teacher educators and prospective teachers to engage in solidarity with disabled youth and their families to collective dream and create more just systems. This is particularly important in the current and unstable U.S. political context that includes the removal of federal educational resources and protections for disabled youth [9].

For the more immediate future we promote shifting away from notions of inclusion and toward the rightful presence [10] of disabled youth in general education classrooms. The decades-long inclusion movement in the U.S. and the ambiguity of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act's [11] Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) provision have not led to inclusion for many disabled youth, particularly disabled youth of color and those with more "severe" disabilities [12]. Thus, having both collective short- and long-term intersectional disability justice imaginations can better guide research and practice [13] in the area of preparing teachers to better support and struggle with disabled youth here and now.

2. Importance of Radically Transforming General Education Teacher Preparation

We begin by describing the importance of rethinking general education teacher preparation and unpack two overlapping issues: (a) teacher education's role in promoting the status quo; and (b) general education teachers' centrality in maintaining the status quo. We note that, in these conversations, our goal is not to blame teacher educators and general education teachers or absolve others of responsibility for reimagining teacher education. Our goal is to dialogue around these issues and recognize how these forces have become mainstays.

2.1. Teacher Education Promotes the Status Quo

Teacher education is part of larger systems that benefit from the status quo. In U.S. education, as in other aspects of society, the status quo is undergirded by ableism and racism through the maintenance of non-disabled and White interests. We can therefore articulate several assumptions that reveal the ways in which the status quo is sustained. The first assumption is that disabled youth "need" special education [14]. This assumption points to a second assumption, which posits that if disabled youth "need" a special kind of instruction they necessarily require teachers who have specialized knowledge in order to deliver "specially designed instruction" (i.e., special education [11]). These assumptions reflect how the discourse

of "need" has been used by dominant groups to exclude others or to position them as passive (rather than agentic [15]). The history of this discourse causes us to be skeptical about disabled youths' purported "needs" and look to disabled folks to articulate for themselves what they actually need within educational spaces, perhaps extending well beyond the status quo.

If society believes that disabled youth "need" a special type of teacher, it is unsurprising that the current system of teacher preparation exists and persists. Many teacher education programs are structured in ways that include both general and special education courses and faculty, and in most cases as part of separate departments. Upholding these intellectual silos may have unintended consequences, like reinforcing disparate ideas about the role of each teacher in supporting the learning of disabled youth (e.g., [16]). Messages, practices, and organizations that reinforce existing intellectual silos contribute to the maintenance of the status quo. Thus, the preparation of teachers involving coursework, field experiences, and other credential requirements are all part of an ecosystem that remains complicit in maintaining the status quo [17]. We recognize that by naming general education in this paper we are paradoxically reinforcing the status quo that we are criticizing. Naming this structure specifically allows us to point to disabled youth's disparate outcomes which, for us, raises the following question: to what extent does the status quo of "specially designed instruction" actually restrict what is possible for disabled youth, and in particular, those of color and those with more "severe" disabilities?

To begin to address these questions we briefly summarize some of these disparate outcomes. Disabled youth face poorer outcomes compared to their general education peers along conventional dimensions such as the opportunity to engage in rigorous learning experiences [18], graduate from high school [19], and attain post-school employment [20]. Here, we notice that being affiliated with special education has in fact restricted youths' access to learning and life experiences that are not only available to their non-disabled peers but are aspects of schooling and society considered fundamental. All of these outcomes are exacerbated for youths with "severe" disabilities who are at higher risk of experiencing violent physical, emotional, and psychological harms at school [21].

For example, scholars have argued that a society that values the perspectives of those with disabilities can indeed enrich the lives of all of us (e.g., [13]). Many of the assistive technologies that have become a central part of many of our lives (e.g., smart phones) can be traced to origins of addressing accessibility [22]. Thus, the poor educational outcomes of disabled youth might threaten the outflows of potential disability enrichments, the benefits of which extend to society. This underscores the importance of teacher education in critically recognizing its role in maintaining the status quo and working to dismantle dysfunctional schools, curriculum, pedagogy, and relationships [23]. Importantly, such dismantling and liberatory aims must be informed by and in conjunction with those who are oppressed [2].

2.2. General Educators Have a Central Role in Maintaining the Status Quo

Most disabled youth receive the majority of their instruction in general education settings [12]. As in many parts of the world, the U.S. operates two distinct education systems for youth during their primary and secondary grades: general education and special education. However, general education teachers consistently report receiving minimal preparation around supporting disabled youth [24, 25]. This is likely, in part, due to the reality that nearly all general education teacher preparation programs require only one course about special education or teaching disabled youth [26]. Aided by the logic that disabled youth need “specially designed instruction” that is created and delivered by teachers who have specialized training, general education teachers may maintain the status quo by upholding the systems that perpetuate these arbitrary intellectual and professional silos.

Beyond additional learning opportunities, many teacher preparation programs in the U.S. are designed to offer dual certification in both general and special education. Yet, the existence of certification programs that arguably support a more well-rounded preparation for teaching disabled youth do not necessarily have desired results. Teachers’ certification status has not been linked with overwhelming or clear benefits to disabled youth [27]. Further, dual certified teachers tend to end up in general education settings [28], which again suggests that dual certification alone may not be sufficient.

Instead of asking which certifications prospective teachers should pursue, perhaps the question is what should prospective teachers be prepared to do? The status quo of teacher preparation promotes a way “of thinking about dis/ability [...] that tacitly accepts dominant ableist norms and privileges” [29]. For example, the medical model reflects the dominant view of disability and conceptualizes disability as a deficit. Viewing disability as a deficit relates to the belief that deficiencies are located within individuals. In practice, deficit thinking places blame on disabled youth (and their families)

and absolves the teacher from instructional responsibility. Empirical evidence supports the relation between teachers’ deficit views and lowered academic expectations [30] and the nature of instructional opportunities afforded to disabled youth or those perceived as struggling. The relation between general education teachers’ deficit views and disabled youth’s opportunities has been punctuated by a study which revealed that “having an IEP and low teacher perception [...] was virtually prohibitive of placement in algebra, even in the presence of high math performance” [31]. In other words, being a disabled youth and having a teacher who perceived that youth as less mathematically capable was more influential in course placement than was the student’s actual performance. Therefore, it is increasingly important for teacher preparation programs to move beyond equipping future educators with the pedagogical skills necessary for effective instruction and shift toward developing conscious educators who approach their work as part of a larger freedom struggle.

3. Collective Dreaming and Freedom: An Offer for Teacher Education

“Taking up space as a disabled person is always revolutionary” [32]. For us, such assertion from a US-based disability advocate, Sandy Ho, means that although disabled youth, and in particular, those of color, may not identify as activists, they do enact daily acts of resistance by asserting their rightful presence in schools while bearing the brunt of intersectional oppressions. So do many teachers of color [e.g., 9]. Sites and acts of resistance also foster knowledge generation [23]. Thus, we offer two threads within teacher education that can support solidarity with those taking up space and generating new knowledge: (1) youths’ rightful presence in general education classrooms and (2) disability solidarity. We intend these two threads not to be additive but rather centrally woven into existing programs (see Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of teacher education programmatic threads, features, and cross-cutting values.

Programmatic threads	Features	Cross-cutting values
Youths’ rightful presence in general education classrooms and beyond	Rightful presence is immediate, unconditional, and involves all	Pandisability
	Beyond access to spaces as they exist toward radically transforming them	Interdependence
Disability solidarity	Engage in collective freedom dreaming	Authentic Care
	Engage in intersectional, socio-political struggle toward social transformation (e.g., acts of resistance)	Reciprocity
	Leadership of most impacted	Anti-oppressive (e.g., anti-ableism)

3.1. Youths' Rightful Presence in Schools

Preparing general education teachers to work with disabled youth requires a programmatic commitment to the rightful presence of disabled youth beyond just their inclusion. The framing of inclusion in education is inherently problematic and scholars suggest the notion of rightful presence to address shortcomings associated with inclusion [10]. These shortcomings are not necessarily an issue with inclusion or inclusive education involving disabled youth, rather they are the result of years of co-opting and watering down what inclusion or inclusive education means (E. Kozleski, personal communication, April 14, 2023). More than replacing the language of “inclusion” with “rightful presence,” we concur that this shift is socio-political in nature [10], where all students are central to the learning community and co-authors of classroom and social change. We therefore extend Calabrese Barton and Tan's tenets of rightful presence by centering disabled youth.

The shift to rightful presence involving disabled youth also has the potential to address the “inclusion rate” in the U.S. which has remained stubbornly flat for the past decade [12]. The “inclusion rate” thus reflects a view of inclusion as something that will happen in some abstract future. We turn to the rightful presence tenet of immediacy and unconditionality [10] as a central teacher education programmatic thread. At the same time, simply increasing the inclusion rate of disabled youth in general education classrooms raises at least two other concerns: the quality of “inclusion” and similarly, the issue of inclusion into Lorraine Hansberry's analogy of a burning house [33]. With the former, for example, disabled youth may still receive watered-down instruction and services at “their level” within general education spaces (e.g., [34, 35]). With the latter, Hansberry and others questioned the value of integrating Black people into existing and problematic White-supremacist American culture [33], thus racial “inclusion” was akin to inviting Black people into the broken systems that existed (and still exist). Applying this analogy to the “inclusion” of disabled youth, general education classrooms and society inherently attend to “normal” youth and, thus, as with teacher education programs, such spaces maintain systems of privilege and oppression. In essence, for us, rightful presence is not simply having access to existing systems and structures how they currently are, but it is also about radically transforming them.

In our view, evoking rightful presence moves beyond the question of who to include. In courses with prospective teachers, we have a hard time drawing the line of where inclusion stops. For example, prospective teachers generally agree that disabled youth with “severe behavioral and medical issues” should not be included in general education for anything other than the opportunity to develop social skills (e.g., Prospective Teachers, personal communication, October 19, 2019). These conversations can be contentious with prospective teachers often weaponizing emotionality to deny inclusive practices for certain youth, particularly those who are multi-marginalized [36]. However, through a rightful presence lens, then the central questions shift from *who*

to include, under what conditions to how do we collectively ensure students' rightful presence [10]? Thus, struggling in solidarity becomes a crucial component of preparing general education teachers to work with disabled youth.

3.2. Disability Solidarity

The second teacher education programmatic thread we offer is disability solidarity. At the heart of this thread are ways that teacher education can deepen general education teachers' understanding in three interrelated areas: (a) engaging in collective freedom dreaming, (b) engaging in intersectional, socio-political struggle toward social transformation, and (c) leaning on the leadership of those most impacted by multiple forms of oppression [36].

3.2.1. Engaging in Collective Freedom Dreaming

We began this paper with a set of questions from R. D. G. Kelley [1] that evokes the importance of dreaming in the struggle for liberation. We highlight the importance of collectively dreaming about what we are working towards. We agree with the critique [13] that many dominant future dreams entail the erasure of disability, prompting the question *who is doing the dreaming* (i.e., is the dreaming coming from a mostly White, male, middle-class, non-disabled perspective)? For us, much of this erasure points to the need for what Kelley and Kafer argue for—a collective approach to freedom dreaming while dismantling dominant dreams that we live in the present [37]. Doing so provides crucial direction and touchstones to guide teacher educators in preparing general education teachers to work in solidarity with disabled youth.

3.2.2. Engaging in Intersectional, Socio-Political Struggle Toward Social Transformation

Earlier in this paper we noted the importance of preparing general educators to work with disabled youth intersectionally. Here we add the importance of solidarity in this struggle. Understanding the nature of ableism, how it operates in service of other systems of oppression, how it shows up in schools, and consequently general educators' responses are of particular interest. Because the majority of teachers and teacher educators occupy positions of privilege, they can work toward changes across many levels [38]. School-based Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings are particular sites where intersectional oppression shows up as well as opportunities for rightful presence transformation through solidarity, learning, and authentic listening [39, 40]. General education teacher programming must support teachers to work in solidarity with disabled youth and their families, especially within existing contexts, such as IEP meetings, where major decisions are usually made for disabled youth. Classroom practices provide another opportunity for general education teachers to contribute to social transformation through thinking about access as an act of love [41] while challenging ableism [22].

3.2.3. Leaning on the Leadership of Those Impacted by Multiple Forms of Oppression

The disability community has long recognized the importance of leaning on their leadership. There has also been increasing attention to the importance of intersectionality and recognizing the material experiences and expertise of multi-marginalized disabled folks (e.g., [42]). We assert that teacher education programs must prepare general education teachers to recognize and work in solidarity with the leadership of those impacted by multiple forms of oppression. General education teachers can, for example, recognize and build on the brilliances of disabled youth [43] while having the humility that “acknowledges that multiply marginalized Children of Color have gifts that many educators do not” [23]. As with Black youth [44], the brilliances of disabled youth of color must be axiomatic to teacher education programs.

4. Conclusions

In this paper, we offer key threads for teacher education to better prepare general education teachers to support disabled youth toward collective dreaming and liberation. We sought to address general educators’ persistent feelings of unpreparedness in working with disabled youth. Even though prospective special education teachers may feel relatively more prepared to support disabled youth given the focus of their teacher education programming, we would also call special education teacher preparation programs to interrogate the degree to which they centralize equity and social justice, particularly in the ways described in this paper. As teacher education programs consider the role of disability, such as the threads we offered in this paper, we recognize the problematic groundings of much of teacher preparation. By recognizing problematic components of general and special education, we press the field toward more expansive views of disability, identifying what it takes to prepare teachers to support powerful learning of and with disabled youth.

We return to R. D. G. Kelley’s [1] call for freedom dreams. As we work to dismantle the oppressive aspects of teacher education, we must know what is on the other side that we desire. To that end, in this paper, we offer a conceptual framework that makes possible multiple and varied entry points for current teacher preparation programs interested in undergoing this type of radical transformation. Perhaps that transformation will be taken up with gusto and the community will bring about radical change; perhaps too, transformation will be smaller in scope and will inch toward the community’s dreams. We also recognize that these dreams are incomplete. They are our best attempt in this space and time during our own process of learning and unlearning of history, racism, and ableism. We invite others to dream with us, their colleagues, disabled youth and their families, and the communities in which they are bonded [45].

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We use identity-first language rather than person-first language (e.g., disabled youth versus youth with disabilities) to highlight systemic oppressions associated with disability in the political, social, and institutional realms; while the context of our paper is the U.S., we also recognize the global interconnectedness through structures of settler colonialism, imperialism, and racial capitalism.

Author Contributions

Paulo Tan: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Project administration

Erica N. Mason: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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