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## Understanding Equitable Assessment: How Preservice Teachers Make Meaning of DisAbility

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## Understanding Equitable Assessment: How Preservice Teachers Make Meaning of DisAbility

### Cover Page Footnote

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## **Understanding Equitable Assessment: How Preservice Teachers Make Meaning of (Dis)Ability**

*Melissa K. Driver, Kennesaw State  
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When the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), or P.L. 94-142, passed in 1975, this landmark rule significantly increased access and inclusion for students with disabilities (SWD) in public schools nationwide. This law was seminal in that it federally mandated a free and appropriate public education and also represented a societal shift towards equitable opportunities for SWD (Zettel & Ballard, 1979). Individuals with disabilities have historically been marginalized, oppressed, and segregated in society (Mackelprang & Salsgiver, 1996). Education for SWD prior to P.L. 94-142 was often restricted to special classes or residential programs, which ranged vastly in quality (Hendrick & MacMillian, 1989). Over the past 35 years, educators, parents, and advocates have continued to press for law and policy that promotes equitable treatment, opportunities, and outcomes for SWD. The most recent authorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) states:

“Disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to participate in or contribute to society. Improving educational results for children with disabilities is an essential element of our national policy of ensuring equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities.”

Legislation such as No Child Left Behind, and the subsequent Every Student Succeeds Act, have further shifted the focus from access to outcomes for SWD, including

performance on high-stakes assessments (Brownell, Sindelar, Kiely, & Danielson, 2010; *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District*). Current federal law mandates that SWD are educated in the least restrictive environment, which often results in the general education classroom, and engage in the same curriculum and assessments as their typically developing peers to the greatest extent possible (West & Whitby, 2008). As SWD are increasingly being served in the general education classroom, the role of a special education teacher also continues to shift and evolve (Brownell et al., 2010).

The responsibilities of a special education teacher are vast and increasingly complex. The current educational landscape calls for special educators to identify and address the needs of students with disabilities; collaborate with multiple entities; seek out and implement research-based, systematic intervention through multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS); frequently progress monitor student learning; and navigate legal processes, all in addition to typical instructional responsibilities expected of educators (Leko, Brownell, Sindelar, & Kiely, 2015). This shifting ideology has significant implications for the instruction SWD receive, and the level of preparation needed for special education teachers.

How to best support SWD in curricula and assessments designed for students without disabilities continues to be an area of question for many educators. General and special educators are charged with understanding the range of disability classifications and manifestations to ensure fair and equitable education for all learners. Educators must also be aware of, and guard against, the implicit biases and microaggressions that can lead to misidentification of a disability in the absence of effective instructional supports. The identification of SWD is a multi-faceted

process that involves assessment at every step. Assessment data is collected, reported, analyzed, and used to make decisions that will impact the future trajectory of an individual's life. Ensuring the assessment process is fair and equitable for all learners is vital to correctly identifying students with a disability and to designing an individualized education plan to support their unique learning and socio-emotional profile. Yet research on how to best prepare preservice teachers to conduct equitable assessment is scarce, particularly in the area of special education.

The purpose of this research study was to explore the perceptions of preservice teachers regarding culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy and special education law, specifically related to the federal mandate of nondiscriminatory assessment, and to understand aspects of methods coursework that influenced these perceptions. The study also sought to understand preservice teachers' perceptions of instructing and assessing students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. Because of the heterogeneous nature of today's classrooms, preservice teachers must be prepared to serve students from different racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. For teachers of students with disabilities, it is critical to also consider the ways in which the various aspects of their identity intersect and overlap. This is particularly salient when working with SWD who also identify with historically marginalized populations.

### Literature Review

Before proceeding, several terms will be described for the context of this study. A *disability* is legally defined as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity and can also include individuals who do not have a

disability but are regarded as having a disability (Americans with Disability Act, 1990). It is critical to consider both aspects of this definition. The present study focuses on the *identification* practices that occur at the school-building level (i.e., specific learning disabilities, emotional/behavior concerns, etc.), which most impact preservice teachers as they will have a future role in the decision-making process.

School-based identification of SWD should involve a multi-faceted approach including multiple assessments and stakeholder (i.e., teacher, parent/guardian, and school psychologist) input. However, the most recent reauthorization of IDEA (2004) still permits the use of the widely criticized discrepancy model provided states also allow for alternative models of identification. The discrepancy model relies heavily on standardized measures of intelligence (i.e., IQ tests) and achievement scores (i.e., state test scores), both of which do not give a holistic picture of the child and can be culturally and linguistically biased. Identification practices typically take the form of the above-mentioned discrepancy model, a pattern of strengths and weaknesses on cognitive assessments, and by measuring responsiveness to research-based instruction (McGill, Styck, Palomares, & Hass, 2016).

The latter is most commonly referred to as *Response to Intervention (RTI)* and is the most prevalent school-based means of identifying SWD. Regardless of the approach taken, educators are charged with ensuring the process is followed with accuracy and fidelity from the moment a referral is initiated through the evaluation and Individualized Education Plan (IEP) development. *Disproportionality* occurs when a student group is over- or underrepresented in special education relative to their overall school or population representation. Disproportionality is

problematic in that students may be inappropriately identified as having a disability when they do not, and likewise, that students are inappropriately passed over and do not receive necessary support. The subsequent literature review will further describe disability, explore the role of assessment in the identification process, and consider disproportionality concerns.

### **Defining Disability**

Students with cognitive or learning disabilities which impact the ability to process, organize, and retrieve information. Such disabilities can impact areas of literacy, speech/language, and/or mathematics (Hallahan, Kauffman, & Pullen, 2018). There are also students impacted by emotional and/or behavioral disorders that influence their ability to self-regulate their behavior, impulse control, attention, and/or motivation (Hallahan et al., 2018). Regardless of the disability classification, academic, behavioral, emotional, and social areas of the child's life can all be affected. For each child, how the impact of a specific disability manifests as a part of their broader identity is highly individualized and is influenced by their dispositions, interests, support network, socioeconomic resources, racial/ethnic background, culture, language(s), environment, etc.

In addition to the above-mentioned students, there is also another critical group of students to consider in the context of special education. These students may not experience disability in the clinical description, but rather as a socially constructed and imposed phenomenon. Students may be inappropriately identified with having a disability as the result of ineffective and inequitable educational practices throughout all levels of schooling. This is particularly problematic for students

of color and/or those living in historically marginalized communities who have experienced sustained school failure over time (Trent, 2010). Culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students have historically been disproportionately represented in special education (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Trent, 2010). This trend of disproportionality is consistent for emerging bilingual students as well (Sullivan, 2011).

### **Disproportionality and Identification Concerns**

Disproportionality is a multidimensional and complex issue with the construct of identification at its core. Disabilities in which disproportionality is most prevalent (i.e., learning disabilities and emotional/behavior disorders) are typically identified at the school-building level. This identification process relies heavily on educator judgement on what might be a moving target of eligibility criteria, validity and reliability of the assessment measures, and the cultural appropriateness of the process (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010).

Recent federal estimates indicate that in 2016, American Indian or Alaska Native, Black or African American, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander students ages 6 through 21 were more likely to be identified with a disability than comparison students in all other racial/ethnic groups combined (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Asian and White students in the same age range were found to be less likely to be identified. Hispanic/Latino students and students associated with two or more races, ages 6 through 21, were found to be as likely to be identified with a disability as students ages 6 through 21 in all other racial/ethnic groups combined. Disparities also exist across specific disability categories. For example, American Indian or Alaska Native were found to be four times as likely to be

identified with a developmental delay. Black or African American students were twice as likely to be identified as having an emotional disturbance and/or an intellectual disability. In the category of specific learning disability, the most prevalent disability for school-age, American Indian or Alaska Native, Black or African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander were all found to be more likely to be identified when compared to the proportion of all other racial/ethnic groups combined (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

In the decades of research on disproportionality concerns, educators have drawn attention to structural inequalities, educator bias, and the role of assessment in the identification process. A recent review conducted by Cooc and Kiru (2018) found that disproportionality is often explained in the literature as the result of sociocultural barriers and bias, as well as structural barriers and inequalities within society and schools. While the focus in these studies emphasized the role of larger social and structural inequalities, specific policy recommendations in the sample centered around the need for better assessment, data collection processes, and teacher training in culturally relevant instruction (Cooc & Kiru, 2018).

Culturally relevant instruction refers to the teacher knowledge, beliefs, and practices that promote student critical thinking, value funds of identity and knowledge (i.e., the experiences and understandings students bring into the classroom), and incorporate issues of power and social justice in education (Aguirre & del Rosario Zavala, 2013; Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014; Green, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Culturally relevant instruction also extends to the educational materials used in classrooms. Educational materials and opportunities students engage

with can privilege certain student groups while further marginalizing others. Despite the stressed importance of providing evidence-based culturally relevant and sustaining instruction in the core general education classroom, often referred to as Tier 1 instruction in a Multitiered System of Supports (MTSS; Klingner & Edwards, 2006), there is little evidence to confirm that this core instruction is taken into account when special education eligibility decisions are made. The emphasis is instead focused on student performance and progress on classroom assessment data.

The results of inaccurate disability evaluation and identification can be staggering. In addition to the social stigma that accompanies many disabilities, students may be steered into unnecessarily restrictive environments and passed over for educational opportunities presented to peers without such labels. Students from historically marginalized populations identified with a disability are more likely to be placed in a more restrictive and segregated environment than their White peers with the same disability label (Cartledge, Singh, & Gibson, 2008). Such practices underscore the inequity for historically marginalized groups, such as African Americans and Native Americans, who have historically been systematically denied opportunities through segregated policies and practices (Artiles et. al, 2010).

### **The Role of Assessment**

The use of assessment to drive educational decisions related to policy and instruction, while highly controversial, continues as standard practice (Wiggins, 2011). Assessment remains at the core of special education identification practices, although its role has evolved over the last twenty years. The most recent reauthorization of the Individuals with

Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 2004) required schools to use a process based on the student's response to scientific, research-based, intervention to determine whether a child has a disability (Vanderheyden, 2011). The previous IQ-discrepancy model of identification often relied solely on reports from IQ tests and student academic performance, often on high-stakes standardized tests. Under this previous identification model, once the referral process was initiated for a CLD student, he or she was more likely to be diagnosed with a disability (Artiles & Trent, 1994).

In response to IDEA (2004), the use of a Multitiered System of Supports (MTSS) to support "struggling" students became a prevalent approach in schools nationwide. MTSS involves implementing tiered systems of prevention and intervention to meet the academic and behavioral needs of students. Response to Intervention (RTI) for academic supports and Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS) for behavioral supports are commonly observed frameworks in P-12 schools. Since IDEA (2004), the RTI framework has been widely used to identify students who demonstrate poor academic performance, often in literacy and mathematics, who may be in need of special education services (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). RTI continues to be one of the most prevalent methods for identifying and intervening for students with specific learning disabilities. RTI consists of several tiers of instruction that increase in intensity of support and intervention, beginning with general education classroom instruction and incorporating toward small group systematic instruction at the higher tiers (Bradley, Danielson, & Doolittle, 2007; Hoover & Patton, 2008). RTI is not a prescribed curriculum, rather a framework, and its implementation differs by state, district, and school context (Zirkel & Thomas, 2010). If a student continues to be nonresponsive to

the most intensive levels of intervention, a team of school personnel may initiate a special education referral (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003).

Appropriate measurement and understanding of "responsiveness" is central to the efficacy of this framework. Frequent progress monitoring should occur throughout each stage of RTI, and this data is what ultimately drives educator decisions to move towards more or less intense approaches. Progress monitoring is often measured through curriculum-based probes that measure such as oral reading fluency (i.e., how many words a student can read correctly in a timed period), comprehension (i.e., students select from a word bank to demonstrate contextual understanding), computation (i.e., measured by digits correct of problems solved in a timed period), and problem-solving (i.e., demonstrating algebraic and equivalent understanding). While RTI is considered to be better than previous "wait to fail" models, such as the discrepancy model (Bradley, et al., 2007), further research is needed to determine how RTI practices influence and/or address disproportionality concerns for CLD students.

A key tenant of IDEA (2004) is the notion of nondiscriminatory assessment. Experts across the field agree that assessment of students, particularly when using such data for eligibility decisions, should be fair, valid, reliable, and free of bias. Yet how to create, design, and administer normed and accurate measures for the range of student learners represented in the current educational landscape remains largely unanswered. This is especially complex for emerging bilingual students for whom language is a critical consideration and for students from historically marginalized populations for which issues of access and opportunity may be at play.

Assessment and identification of CLD

students in special education has been an issue of study for decades in the field. Artiles et al. (1997) conducted a literature review to determine the topics of study related to CLD students and special education over the period of 1972 – 1994. Assessment emerged as the most prominent topic of study (35%) for the sample. Trent et al. (2014) replicated this search from 1994 – 2012 and again assessment was identified as the most prominent singular topic of study (27%), second only to the ambiguous “other” category. Aronson and Laughter’s (2016) review of culturally relevant education identifies instances of authentic and meaningful assessment as a supportive practice for students, and advocate for teacher preparation programs to integrate culturally relevant practices in coursework and field experiences.

Despite the recognized importance of assessment in P-12 education, preservice teachers receive minimal instruction on how to select, design, administer, and evaluate measures of student learning. Issues of equity are often siloed and predominantly addressed through diversity coursework, introductory coursework, or field experiences when compared to methods coursework (Bennett, Driver, & Trent, 2017; Trent, Kea, & Oh, 2008). Equitable assessment should authentically measure the goals and language of instruction, be culturally and linguistically appropriate, challenge student thinking, elicit understanding, scaffold and support student learning (Siegel, 2008). This is a complex skillset for which preservice teachers need rich and meaningful opportunities to practice and grapple with potential inequities. How preservice teachers understand and learn to apply assessment principles has significant implications for the future students they will teach. Understanding effective pedagogical methods to support preservice teachers’

critical reflections of assessment is an area that warrants further research. In order to holistically study preservice teacher meaning-making it is critical to consider the layers of influence at work.

### **Theoretical Framework: Cultural-historical Activity Theory**

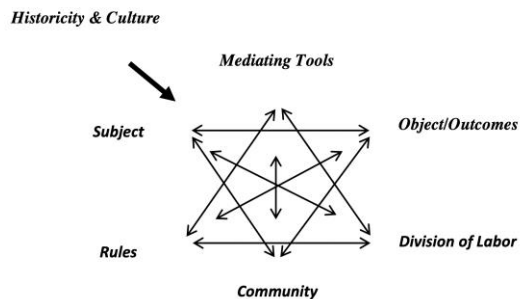
Practices related to instruction, intervention, and identification for special education can be influenced by historical perspectives of “failing” students, socio-cultural issues regarding disproportionate representation of minoritized and low-income students, and the politics of power and institutional structures in localized classroom and national context (Trent, 2010). Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) is an appropriate conceptual framework for exploring educational practices related to culturally and linguistically diverse students (Trent, Artiles, & Fitchett-Bazemore, 2002), because it analyzes interactions within context at a systematic level. The CHAT framework approaches human development and learning as situated in cultural and historical contexts (Trent et al., 2002).

Activity theory originated within Vygotsky’s (1978) cultural historical psychological theory of human development, which examines the internal and external tools that influence interactions and meaning making. Two of Vygotsky’s students, Luria and Leont’ev, incorporated societal, cultural, and historical analysis into activity theory, in what is considered second-generation activity theory (Eilam, 2003; Stetsenko, 2003). Since its origins, CHAT has continued to evolve given the socio-cultural environments in which researchers engaged (Roth & Lee, 2007). The CHAT framework assumes that history and culture are always present in human activity, and these layers can act as both constraints and resources (Sannino &



Engeström, 2018). Collecting and analyzing data through a CHAT lens can provide insight into the complexity of what preservice teachers do and why, considering the influence of the community and context. See Figure 1 for a visual representation of how the CHAT conceptual framework organizes the discourse, actions, tools, and group members to understand a phenomenon.

Figure 1. Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) Framework.



CHAT is a useful framework in investigating larger systemic tensions that may covertly or overtly influence the unit of analysis (Hopwood & Stocks, 2008). This framework can be useful in education as its tenants consider the system as a whole (Roth & Lee, 2007). CHAT can be used to investigate a range of educational phenomena, ranging from large scale system analysis in education (i.e., van der Walt & Wolhuter, 2018) to the interactions in one school or classroom setting (Driver, 2014). Specific to assessment, Asghar (2013) used CHAT to investigate the pedagogical practices of formative assessment in higher education. While the focus of this study was on the selection and use of assessment for university students, Asghar's (2013) findings speak to the complexity of assessment as a construct and the value of CHAT as a framework to explore this construct. In the context of inclusive teacher education, CHAT can be used to recognize the various influences on how preservice teachers learn to teach by identifying

activity systems, examining tool appropriation, and discovering tensions that can expand learning (Hancock & Miller, 2018).

CHAT is appropriate for the current study, as teacher education does not occur in isolation. In Fall 2017, a cohort of preservice teachers participated in this study in the midst of a racially and politically charged environment, both at the local and national level. Several of the preservice teachers enrolled in the course had personal connections to special education, either through prior professional experience or as a family member to an individual with a disability. These lived experiences influence what they perceive to be fair and equitable practices in education. To neglect or overlook this larger context would give an incomplete picture of how participants made meaning of issues of educational equity. Using CHAT as a theoretical framework enables the researcher to ground inequities in a historical context in order to analyze interactions and perceptions in the present. Given the charged context, the research was interested in studying if and how focusing in on the aspect of disability might lead to broader conversations of equity in the context of race/ethnicity, culture, language, gender, etc.

Specifically, the research questions for this study are:

1. How do preservice teacher candidates' attitudes and beliefs evolve during an assessment methods course focused on equity (i.e., race, ethnicity, culture, language, and ability)?
2. What learning experiences elicited critical preservice reflections regarding equitable assessment throughout the course?

## Method

### Setting and Context

The study took place within a 15-week assessment course in a teacher education program in a large southeastern university. The Special Education Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program is designed to lead to initial P-12 certification in Special Education for students with mild to moderate disabilities. Preservice teachers take the assessment class in the second semester of their program (i.e., Fall 2017). This course is offered in a face-to-face learning environment. In the semester of study, course materials and assignments were selected with an emphasis on promoting critical discussion regarding issues of educational equity pertaining to the assessment of student learners. This study qualitatively investigated how a cohort of preservice special education teachers learn about and make meaning of equitable assessment for a diverse range of learners by focusing on shifts in student understanding and the associated learning experiences in the course. At the time of data collection, the university community was experiencing a relatively tense climate related to local and national issues related to race, politics, and freedom of expression. This divisive context may have influenced student willingness to engage deeply in conversations and assignments related to social justice with their peers.

### Participants

Preservice teachers in the Special Education MAT program are typically considered nontraditional education students who are “career changers” and hold an undergraduate degree in a field unrelated to education. Five of the participants were enrolled in the MAT program, with the sixth participant was taking the course as an

elective. Following university Institutional Review Board procedures, all of the students (i.e., preservice teachers) ( $N = 6$ ) in the assessment course consented to participate in the study. Four of the six preservice teachers identified native-English speaking Caucasian and two were African American native-English speakers. Five of the participants were female, one was male. Participant age ranged from 23 – 50, with the majority of preservice teachers in the 25 – 35 age range. Two of the participants had children, and at least one had a child with a disability. At the time of the study, five participants were employed in a school setting, two as a paraprofessionals and three as provisionally licensed teachers. The sixth candidate did not have any prior P-12 school experience was enrolled in a field experience consisting of 75 hours in elementary school during the semester of study. All participants were assigned a pseudonym and all data was collected and coded under the pseudonym to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

### Data Sources

Multiple sources of evidence are essential to triangulate data and understand the phenomenon of study (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Erickson, 1986). Over the course of four months (August 2017 to November 2017), data collection consisted of class session audio recordings, informal conversations to inform pedagogical decisions, and student reflections. Each data source included a different perspective on how preservice teachers make meaning of equitable assessment.

To specifically address each research question, preservice teacher understanding of equitable assessment was measured through a series of four critical reflections spread across the semester, mid-term paper, and a pre- and post-survey. Additionally, each class session was audio recorded and

transcribed to analyze whole group and small group discussions. Each data source is described in detail below.

**Preservice teacher reflections.** A four-part series of reflective prompts were embedded as course assignments in the semester. Each prompt cumulatively built off of course content and allowed for participants to connect personal experience with readings and discussions in a private and reflective space. The first three reflections were completed at the end of class and uploaded to the course website before participants left for the night. Students completed the fourth reflection as the final question on the attitudes' posttest survey at the end of the last class. Refer to Figure 2 for a detailed description of each prompt.

Figure 2. Equitable Assessment Reflection Prompts

Reflection Prompt	Timepoint in Course	Participant Directions
1	Week 3	Write a 2-3 paragraph reflection describing the role of assessment in special education eligibility. Include: (a) Historical and current contexts, (b) Impact of legislation and policy, and (c) Implications of your decisions as a special educator.
2	Week 6	Write a 2-3 paragraph reflection describing what nondiscriminatory assessment should look like for all students, including culturally and linguistically diverse learners. Include: (a) Foundational concepts of assessment administration and use, (b) Disproportionality concerns, (c) Historical and current contexts, (d) The impact of legislation and policy, (e) The implications of educators' data interpretations and decision-making, and (f) The relationship to culturally and linguistically relevant instruction.
3	Week 10	Write a 2-3 paragraph reflection describing the various impact of high-stakes assessments for P-12 students. Relate this impact to what you have learned about nondiscriminatory assessment and disproportionality. Consider specifically the stakes for: (a) Culturally and linguistically diverse students, (b) Students with a range of disabilities, (c) Students attending school in historically marginalized communities, (d) School/district decision-making, and (e) State/federal policy development.
4	Week 14; End of the last class in the semester	Write a 2-3 paragraph updated assessment philosophy. This final reflection should demonstrate the breadth and depth of topics we've covered, and specifically address equitable practice in assessment. Consider what you have learned from your first assessment philosophy draft. What understandings have been reinforced or have shifted? How has (or will) this course impact your practice as a teacher?

In addition to the four reflections, students were prompted to formally reflect and integrate literature to support their ideas on the midterm. For the midterm, students submitted a comprehensive paper synthesizing the ideas they had learned

during the first half of the semester related to nondiscriminatory assessment for SWD. The midterm papers were coded for emergent themes within the CHAT framework.

**Attitudes survey.** Participants took a pre- and post-survey to assess their understanding of critical issues related to equity in education. Participants responded to 45 statements adapted from several sources (e.g., Alvarez McHatton & McCray, 2007; Sokolowski, 1998; St. Mary College Disposition Survey; Thompson, 2013) on a 4-point Likert scale. Survey items included understanding perceptions of inclusion, understanding of roles and relationships in collaborative settings, and perception of communication skills. Sample questions include, "I am able to design appropriate assessments to evaluate progress and inform instruction for students with disabilities", "I am able to design instruction that meets the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students", "I understand what it means to counteract both over and institutional discrimination (e.g., tracking) and subtler biases (e.g., gender biases in teacher-student interactions)", and "I acknowledge my own positions of power and privilege in society". The pre- and post-survey also included two open ended questions, "Why do educators use assessment? How should assessment be used?" and "What does equitable and nondiscriminatory assessment mean?". These open-ended responses were also coded for analysis.

**Session recordings.** Each in-person class session was audio recorded for later analysis. Two audio recorders were brought to each class to account for the numerous small-group and breakout sessions that occurred throughout the semester. Each class session was approximately two hours and forty-five minutes and occurred once a week. Each audio recording was transferred

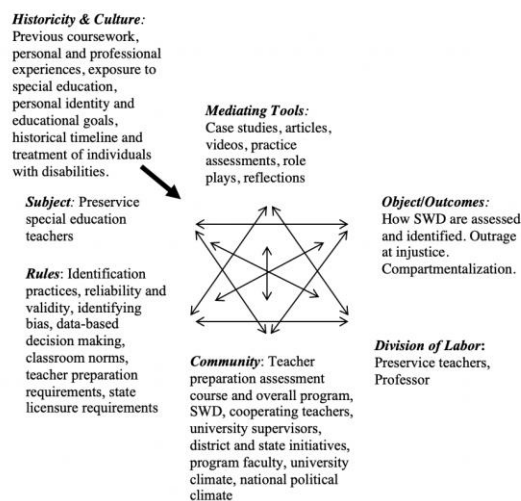
to a secure computer databased and transcribed for analysis.

**Data analysis.** Data was analyzed throughout the collection process using the CHAT framework. Using the CHAT framework, the *subject* of analysis was the unit of study (i.e., the cohort of preservice teachers) and the *object* concerned how SWD are assessed and identified. Data collection centered on how the subjects made meaning of the course content and experiences related to equitable treatment of SWD. As course sessions occurred in real time and during the transcription process, notes were made on instances of the larger *community*, setting, and environment influenced participant discussions and reflections. Personal *history* and *culture* emerged as participants became more comfortable in the class community and delved deeper into content connections, and these connections influenced future instructional decisions by the instructor. The classroom *rules* and *division of labor* between participants as collaborating peers and the student-teacher relationship were kept in mind throughout the analysis and inference-making process. *Mediating tools* (i.e., case studies, articles, videos, etc.) were carefully selected to elicit participant discussion and reflection and were considered in analysis for the role each played in prompting and facilitating the observed *outcomes*. See Figure 3 for a visual representation of the classroom context of study through a CHAT lens.

Throughout data collection, the researcher examined descriptions, inferences, and assumptions in order to understand what actually happened. This reflexive process allowed for the development of subsequent reflection prompts and instructional activities while still in the data collection phase. Inferences were attached to descriptive analysis to generate themes to make meaning from the data. Course

assignments and audio recording transcriptions were systematically coded to assign symbolic meaning to both descriptive and inferential data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Codes emerged through reflective analysis of course session transcripts and document analyses. Data was electronically stored, coded, and recoded to confirm emergent themes through a CHAT lens.

Figure 3. Equitable Assessment Course Analyzed within a Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) Framework.



Trustworthiness is evaluated by the importance of the topic, plausibility, credibility, and relevance of the account within a specific context (Brantlinger, et al., 2005; Erickson, 1986). Rich and detailed description of participant interaction during class sessions were recorded and transcribed for analysis, and this data was triangulated with their reflections and understandings of equitable assessment as evidence by course assignments.

**Researcher as Instrument.** As a former special education teacher in historically marginalized communities, the majority of my teaching experience involved culturally and linguistically diverse students identified with a disability or considered “at risk” for special education identification. During my time in the classroom, as well as my

experience mentoring novice teachers, I witnessed how the inequity students experienced fell along stark lines of race, socio-economic status, and disability, and how these experiences contrasted with my own educational up-bringing as a Caucasian, middle-class female. Thus, I bring in my own biases and beliefs of instructional, assessment, and identification practices into this research study. Specifically, I believe students can be misdiagnosed as having a disability when other cultural and linguistic factors are at play. I also believe that educators' understanding of how both equitable educational practices and historical inequities can impact their decision-making and thus their students' future trajectories. To protect against my personal bias, I constantly checked my own assumptions and attempted to not project my own biased interpretations as the interpretations of my participants. I sought to carefully describe my participants' interactions and attempted to capture the meaning they ascribe to their actions. As the course instructor, I also recognize my position of power in the study. Participants were informed that their involvement in the study would have no bearing on their grade. However, I recognize that participants may have filtered their thoughts and/or tried to speak to what they hoped I would want to hear as the instructor.

### Findings

To address each research question, data was collected and analyzed using a CHAT framework. In this assessment course, the *subject* of analysis was the six special education preservice teachers. The *community* in which the data for this study is contextualized includes the teacher preparation course and initial certification program, P-12 students preservice teachers worked with in field placements and during their employment, cooperating teachers,

university supervisors, district and state initiatives, additional program faculty in other courses, and the controversial university and national political climate at the time of the study. Each preservice teacher brought their own personal *history* and *culture* into the community, in addition to learning about the historical timeline and treatment of individuals with disabilities.

Within this community, several rules guided meaning-making within the course. These *rules* include identification practices, reliability and validity of assessments, identifying both personal bias and bias inherent in assessment, using data-based decision making, the teacher preparation course classroom norms, teacher preparation requirements, and state licensure requirements. The *division of labor* in the study was primarily between the preservice teachers in the course, along with the interactions and relationship with the professor. *Mediating tools* consisted primarily of the instructional and pedagogical tools selected by the professor to drive learning. These tools included case studies, articles, videos, practice assessments, role plays, and reflections. The *object* of the study was how SWD are assessed and identified. *Outcomes* from the course included outrage at injustice and inequity when prompted, yet a compartmentalized approach to planning for instruction. Through this analysis, five themes emerged as contributing influencers to the *outcomes* of preservice teacher understanding of equitable assessment: the importance of historical context, impact of technicalities, the role of larger system influence, significance of labels, and personal connections.

## The Importance of Historical Context

For all of the preservice teachers, this course was the first time they had truly grappled with the complex and often dark history of the treatment of individuals with disabilities. The first few class sessions involved practical discussion regarding current law and practice. The depth of analysis deepened immensely after an in-class activity of reading a brief news report and watching a short video clip on Carrie Buck and the American eugenics movement. Carrie Buck and her infant daughter were at the center of the 1927 *Buck v. Bell* case in which the Supreme Court upheld the state of Virginia's sterilization law, thus setting the precedent that compulsory sterilization for individuals held in public institutions did not violate their constitutional rights (Gould, 1985). Carrie Buck was admitted to a state colony for "feeble-minded" and officially diagnosed as an "imbecile", qualifying her to be the first in the state's new social sterilization program. The story of Carrie Buck, including the social and political influences at play, underscore the impact disability classifications can have at an extreme but real level. The unrefined measures used to diagnose Carrie and her mother, and the lack of scientific process used to classify her six- to seven-month old daughter as an "imbecile" for the sake of the larger social Eugenics movement, outraged the preservice teachers in the course. Participants were taken aback that they had been unaware of this aspect of history in their country and in their particular fields of study. The following is an excerpt from the audio recording of this class session:

"They talked about sterilization. In 1913. Like that's insane. And that the district attorney even included sterilization in plea deals. I mean that's crazy to me... When you're reading this you think

it's a science fiction. The test they were doing the levels of imbecile and calling the moron. It makes me think of disproportionality."

When pressed on these comments, students related the experiences of Carrie Buck to students who may be inappropriately diagnosed with a disability because of sociocultural factors and/or larger systematic structures. The impact of this pedagogical decision lasted beyond the class session and was discussed in the majority of midterms. For example, Candace wrote:

"Historically individuals with special needs faced a tremendous amount of disservice over the years before the legislation passed laws and policies to protect the best interest of these exceptional individuals... Individuals concerned with improving human species through selective breeding believed that sterilization of these lesser individuals would ultimately remove the potential genetic threat of feeble-mindedness."

The process of unearthing aspects of history relevant to the topic of study appeared to be a powerful mechanism in turning on students' critical lens. Learning experiences that presented participants with historical inequities appeared to be an effective tool for eliciting preservice teacher reflections on equitable assessment. Historical cases also served as an effective entry point for participants to then consider modern day equivalencies of such inequities. In the case of Carrie Buck, a key moment occurred when the question was asked, "how did they know she was an 'imbecile'? what was the criteria?". This shifted the conversation to deep conversation of why measurement criteria truly matter and the life altering impact assessment can have on an individual. It also brought new meaning to the technical terms such as reliability and validity.

## The Impact of Technicalities

When first presented with the constructs of central tendency, reliability, validity, and fidelity, preservice teachers might have been tempted to classify these as vocabulary terms for memorization. As the semester progressed, each case study, instructional activity, and discussion prompt attempted to tie these constructs into meaningful contexts in tangible ways. Conversations on collaboration between an interventionist and general education teacher in the RTI framework evolved to discussions of how these educators would establish fidelity. What would they establish fidelity on? Why would it matter? What would be the impact of skipping this step on the student? This continued thread of conversation throughout the semester appeared to make an impact on preservice teacher perception. Focusing on the “why” and context behind these technical terms appeared to deepen participant understanding of the various pieces necessary to ensure equitable education. For example, Rachel’s first reflection included:

“It is essential for me to fully understand how to give assessments that are reliable and valid...It is important for me to discern when an assessment is invalid or unreliable and ensure that a student is not negatively impacted as a result.”

Considering bias was also a central tenant throughout the semester, both in terms of personal bias, assessment bias, and testing administration and scoring bias. Veronica reflected on the role of bias in her midterm:

“The decisions made by the teacher can greatly affect a student’s learning outcome. It is important to understand and recognize bias whether it is personal or unknown bias shown in an assessment... A lot of times, children can be diagnosed with a learning disability

due to behavioral issues...Understanding the link between behavior and academic performance can help educators assess students both on their academic readiness and behavior separately.”

Concern with the actualization of the identification process was often discussed in class sessions. Analysis of class transcripts revealed questions and concern with what they were seeing in the field. The general consensus was that decision-making could easily be subjective, and that discussion of these technical constructs were not occurring at their school sites.

## The Role of Larger System Influence

As preservice teachers reconciled the intent of the procedures they were learning about with the actual practices commonly occurring in the field, rich conversations emerged in the class community related to larger institutional structures. The class acknowledged the ways in which policy has a large impact on what educators are able to teach or even assess, as well as what assessments are mandatory. Students also reflected on how laws and policies intended to support student outcomes can have unintended consequences (i.e., statewide accountability testing to ensure students are learning appropriately leading to student tracking, teaching to tests, and a culture of anxiety for students and educators).

In addition to policy and law, preservice teachers also considered the larger systems at play within their school sites. The importance of effective collaboration was brought into course discussions and reflections numerous times throughout the course. For example, on Karen’s midterm she wrote:

“Should the educational team make the determination that the student requires further testing to determine special education eligibility, the selection of

assessments is crucial... The impact of this kind of collaboration and accountability are resulting schools and teachers that are empowered rather than hindered by initial results... Educators today must first and foremost know and respect each individual student and use that knowledge to inform all decisions regarding instruction, intervention, and assessment.”

Kierra had similar reflections on her midterm paper, stating:

“Teachers should take the time to make sure that there is collaboration between educators to make sure that all considerations have been taken to make decisions. This collaboration should include talking with one another, administration, and the students’ families to make decisions for placement and services rather than just going off just one opinion or assumption about a student.”

Comparing experiences between their own school sites and increasing their awareness of the vast discrepancies in policy actualization appeared to broaden their perspective and influence their understanding of the scope of inequities SWD might face. One class session with visible unrest focused on the role of high stakes-assessment and accountability impacting grade level retention, diploma eligibility, and curriculum tracks. This class session was very vocal on the wide array of outcomes holding various effects for SWD. Again, preservice teachers were upset when faced with clear injustice of decisions being made with significant life implications based on one assessment point. It is important to note that teacher effectiveness came into play in these conversations, and this personal connection likely deepened the feelings of injustice.

## Significance of Labels

Another meaningful learning experience that elicited reflection and response was the case study of ‘Edith’ based from Harry, Klingner, Cramer, Sturges, & Moore’s (2007) book on minoritized student placement in special education. Preservice teachers were outraged at the blatant mishandling of the student’s experience. Transcript excerpt from this class session included the following reflections on Edith’s case:

“It was just full of personal opinion and not based on any kind of data. And the personal opinions didn’t take into account, they weren’t accurate, they didn’t take into account her situation at all. It’s like he, the teachers, just wrote her off because she was different. Like how there was no observational data done, for placement, or none found in the records...it’s a hasty decision.”

The idea of labeling and the associated stigma that a special education label can carry was reflected across multiple time points and data sources in the semester. Students considered both the negative implications of being inappropriately labeled, of parents wanting to avoid a diagnosis to avoid a label, and the impact of this social stigma on students even if they are appropriately diagnosed. In one of Kevin’s reflections he wrote:

“We as educators must stop ourselves from allowing labels to determine the paths of our students. We must also encourage parents, administration, colleagues and even our kids to not allow the labels that are assigned to them to determine their path. Just because a child is diagnosed with “EBD” does not mean they cannot behave. Similarly, a student who is label brilliant or “gifted” may also require support with some concepts – that does not lessen their ability as student,



but simply means that they are human just like the rest of us.”

Candace reflected on a personal experience she had growing up as it related to labels and special education:

“Educators should exhaust all options before recommending students for special education services, and recommendations based on data and not opinion. I recall one day in middle school where I experienced what I know now as a factor of disproportionality. I struggled academically with deficits in reading and writing after a couple of weeks at a new middle school; suddenly placed in an ESOL class without proper testing or discussion with my parents (mom is an ESOL teacher.) The teacher assumed with the last name Gomez, and poor reading scores were sufficient evidence that English was my second language when in fact English is my only language.”

Several of the preservice teachers had a family member, either a child or sibling, with a disability and had personally witnessed some form of injustice related to identification. The class content and learning experiences facilitated a deeper understanding of the role of assessment in their personal context. For some, this was an empowering experience, particularly for the parents of young SWDs. For others, it was frustrating to consider the ways in which things should have gone differently.

### Personal Connections

When first learning about RTI as an identification, Karen shared what she was currently experiencing with her son being a student at the school she taught at. She reflected on the complexity of receiving somewhat limited information in the form of a parent letter, while knowing what the benchmark percentages were behind her

child’s new label. Her example was filled with emotion and illustrated for her peers why the handling and communication of student data was so important:

“We talked about this being a safe space to the beginning of the class and I have a personally relevant example of the RTI process and what we're talking about with the assessment and it's also interesting because I work at the school my kids go to. My son is in the gifted program. And we got a letter for my son about a reading program. So it was like from the parent perspective I'm always beating myself up and thinking am I doing enough with my kids? Then when you get that notification you're like oh my goodness where is this coming from? What do you do as a parent when you get that information? And the letter didn't say anything about your child being in the bottom 25% of the grade level but I knew. And I knew which of my students got the letter and then you try not to overreact.”

Kierra also shared a deeply personal experience, her sister’s progression through special education. When discussing the alternate assessment for SWD and the significant implication of taking a student off track for a traditional high school diploma Kierra mentioned that her sister had a disability. This conversation occurred in the final few weeks of the semester. Until this point, Kierra had never mentioned this personal connection:

Kierra: How long have they been doing this [alternate assessment]?

Karen: No it’s not new. I mean it's not like it's old, old . . .

Kierra: I think I want to go back to my school system and like complain because I knew none of this and my sister has been in special ed her entire life.

Kierra: My mom didn't even know the alternate assessment existed. I just asked her about like a week ago and she was

like "What is that?" I think she was in like ninth or tenth grade or something like that when they changed her to getting a special ed diploma, only they didn't really talk to my mom about like that, so then once she got a chance to think about it and was like, "No. That's not what I want to do." They were like, "Well, you can't change it now." I was like, "But that doesn't make any sense."

The ability to process through difficult and sometimes painful experiences provided for a deeper connection with the class content and learning goals. This was beneficial not just for the preservice teacher personally affected, but also for the rest of the class as it elicited first-hand compassion and empathy for their peer. The clear illustration of the impact inequitable educational practices related to assessment and identification can have produced productive outrage and a sense of responsibility as future educators. Recognizing that a personal experience, was in fact, unjust and reflecting on the unintended consequences was a powerful process in the evolution of candidate attitudes and beliefs.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study is not to argue against assessment for SWD, but rather to underscore the importance of training preservice teachers to think holistically about the quality, reliability, and validity of the assessments they administer and use to make educational decisions. While problematic, shifts in federal policy towards accountability have also benefited SWD by holding teachers and leaders to higher standards in terms of instructional quality. The landscape is complicated. Assessment policies and procedures can have unintended consequences that can further marginalize and limit the educational outcomes of SWD.

Further research is needed to develop a more comprehensive understanding of effective learning experiences in teacher preparation methods coursework.

In this study, preservice teachers engaged in critical analysis of equitable assessment practices through planned course activities and assignments. Students reflected on the issues of equity presented: ability, race, ethnicity, culture, and language, and socio-economic status. Prior research suggests disability as an effective starting point to facilitate critical discussions around issues of race, gender, sexuality, etc. (Bullock & Freedman, 2006), and this was true for conversations related to race, ethnicity, culture, and language, and socio-economic status in the present study. However, reflections were not generalized to other historically marginalized populations that were not directly addressed (i.e., gender, religion, sexuality) in any of the data collected. The instructor had to prompt critical analysis at all timepoints to elicit critical reflection from the class.

Preservice teachers went deeper when specific inequities were presented. The two pedagogical decisions that elicited the richest discussion were the reading and video of *Buck v. Bell* and the case study of Edith's misidentification (Harry et al., 2007). The series of reflection prompts and mid-term also were effective in prompting preservice teachers to make connections between the broader issues presented, serve as a debriefing reflection point after sometimes intense class discussions, and focus on specific actions they might take as future educators. The preservice teachers stayed very technical with topics such as writing IEPs and progress monitoring using curriculum-based measures and the same level of analysis did not necessarily translate to their program-mandated end of course projects unless there was a tangible language consideration, excluding ability level. The

findings of this study can be used to inform future research focused on equitable teacher preparation coursework. The learning experiences highlighted are generalizable for a range of course topics. Likewise, the focus on assessment, and particularly ensuring equitable assessment, should be considered across all teacher and leader preparation programs (i.e., special, general, teacher leader, educational leadership, etc.).

### Limitations and Future Considerations

One aspect that might strengthen future studies would be to include interviews with participants. This was a purposeful methodological decision to leave out given the time constraints and issues of power with the research also serving as the course professor, but could provide rich data to further triangulate findings. Future research should include general education preservice assessment methods coursework, with an emphasis on SWD, as they are often the first line of intervention and identification through MTSS/RTI (Bradley et al., 2007). Studies might also consider how these pedagogical methods might translate to an online environment. It would be interesting to also follow a cohort of teachers as they transition from methods coursework to student teaching and ultimately to induction to study their assessment practices.

### Conclusion

How teachers design, administer, analyze, and use assessment matters. Every decision, even seemingly insignificant ones, add up to the composite picture of the child for whether or not the child needs intervention or advancement. Whether an IEP is warranted. The types of classes the child is eligible for, and therefore the types of guidance for college and career they will likely receive. Assessment coursework in

teacher preparation not only varies, but is often scarce. This study investigated the learning experiences in a teacher preparation assessment course that influenced preservice special education teachers attitudes and beliefs regarding equitable practices for SWD and elicited reflections on the importance of equitable assessment. Understanding how to incorporate issues of equity in teacher preparation coursework is paramount for future educators to learn to accurately and appropriately identify and support SWD. Such efforts are key to reducing disproportionality in special education for historically marginalized populations, and to moving closer to an equitable education landscape for all students.

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