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Exploring Ableism through Teacher Identity and Empowerment: Teaching About Disability Through a Campus Common Reader

Literature Review

Ableism refers to the systemic discrimination and exclusion of individuals with disabilities from many aspects of society. Rauscher and McClintock (1996) defined ableism as “a pervasive system of discrimination and exclusion that oppresses people who have mental, emotional, and physical disabilities (p. 198). Ableist beliefs and practices draw on a medical model of disability that asserts disability is a deficit within the individual (Mackelprang & Salsgiver, 2016). In a broader societal context, this results in systems, procedures, expectations, and structures that are designed without acknowledgment that disability is a common part of the human condition. Instead, individuals with disabilities are expected to find solutions so that they can fit into the social and structural norms established by a largely able-bodied society (Goodley, 2011). Everyday examples of ableism that must be navigated by individuals with disabilities include having to find alternative options to inaccessible transportation options, clearing hurdles to employment opportunities and receiving appropriate workplace accommodations, and navigating barriers to verbal and written communication without alternative options such as interpreters, text-to-speech devices, or alternative text formats being readily available (Bialka et al., 2023; Lindsay et al, 2022).

Within the context of K-12 public education, ableist beliefs position curriculum, instruction, and learning in such a way that any deviation from the preferred methods for learning is labeled as undesirable and abnormal (Linton, 2006). In their analysis of the Common Core State Standards, Blackwell et al. (2017) defined ableism in K-12 education as “explicit and implied statements, suggestions, and messages that a) value and promote socially-normed methods for children and youth to learn and engage in curriculum and society, and b) are positioned so that any deviation from those preferred statements, suggestions, and messages is considered inferior and undesirable” (p. 39). As an example, the authors noted both an explicit and implied emphasis in the standards on the application of reading and writing skills through traditional methods that were exclusionary for many children and adolescents with disabilities. Instead of integrating the rapidly evolving technologies that are available to enhance the processes of reading and writing for individuals with motor, sensory, and cognitive disabilities (e.g., digital text with font and sizing options, speech-to-text technology as a tool in the writing process, one-click active reading technologies such as digital highlighting and note-taking supports), the standards either completely ignored these options or positioned them as add-on accommodations that should only be used when necessary. In doing so, the Common Core State Standards adopted an ableist framework that established certain methods of accessing and engaging with print text as decidedly preferred to other methods. This positions children with disabilities as outsiders who must conform or adapt to the norms established by the school curriculum.

Multiple authors (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2017; Dermin-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Garland-Thomson, 1996; Sapon-Shevin, 2017) have noted the central role that teachers play in disrupting

ableist beliefs and practices in the classroom. Similarly, teacher preparation programs are positioned to provide pre-service teachers with the attitudes, beliefs, and skills needed to provide classroom learning environments that are fully inclusive and move beyond long-held ableist assumptions in K-12 education. Studies by Bialka et al. (2023) and Blackwell et al. (2018) engaged pre-service teachers in learning opportunities designed to explore disability and ableism in children's literature. In both studies, pre-service teacher candidates learned to recognize ableist assumptions in children's literature and develop strategies for disrupting prejudicial practices in the classroom. In so doing, the teacher candidates were able to express a sense of empowerment regarding their ability to break down ableist practices in their future classrooms.

This sense of empowerment is an essential component for eliminating bias in the classroom (Pasternak et al., 2023). According to Short (1994), empowerment indicates that teachers have the knowledge and skills needed to address situations that arise in their classroom. Teachers who view themselves as empowered demonstrate self-efficacy, can act autonomously, and can make a direct beneficial impact on behalf of their students and the learning environment (Short, 1994). To become empowered within their school context, teachers need to have opportunities to critically examine important issues within their school and be provided with the tools needed to address these issues (Pasternak et al., 2023).

Within the context of teacher preparation, empowerment is closely connected with a pre-service teacher's evolving sense of identity and agency (Blackwell et al., 2023). These constructs refer to an individual's sense of professional selfhood and ability to act on important issues within the work environment (Buchanan, 2015). Furthermore, because "good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher," (Palmer & Scribner, 2017, p.10), we acknowledge the essential component that developing teacher identity brings to our candidates. Teacher preparation programs help pre-service teachers develop their identity and agency as future teachers through learning opportunities such as those described previously regarding ableism (Bialka et al., 2023; Blackwell et al., 2018). In these instances, pre-service teachers were able to gain a sense of identity as social justice advocates who had the agency to potentially identify and address ableist practices embedded within classroom curricula. These are attributes that are essential to becoming empowered teachers within their future school environments (Blackwell et al., 2023; Pasternak et al., 2023).

The question of how to "engage students' historical ideas, attachments, and identities" (Levesque, & Croteau, 2022, p. 120) is a necessary one that brings us to our medium of instruction for this task: the campus common reader. After all, stories have traditionally been seen as a valid form of instruction (Howard, 1991), and "books make us think. When you think, you ask questions," (Davis, 2023, p. 13) and we want our students to be asking questions about who they are as people and who they will become as teachers. Moreover, numerous recent inquiries have found evidence that reading can develop new ways of thinking, even helping readers to develop empathy (Stansfield, & Bunce, 2014). Because the "text world" of books (Gavins, 2007; Gavins, & Steen, 2003) can teach new ways of thinking and offer new experiences by offering mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors (Sims-Bishop, 1990) to readers, a growing body of research is starting to examine the impact of prescribed reading lists like campus common readers (Godwin & Gross, 2023). The intersection of teacher candidate identity building and powerful, perspective-based reading experiences through an assigned common reader is where our study is situated.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study draws on a deliberative curriculum as a means in which to use reading experiences to step our teacher candidates through moral, practical, and social activities that are considered in curriculum and pedagogy (Schwab, 1969). We acknowledge that through activating a shared common reader reading and response we are,

...dealing with things that are both real and constructed, that are fuzzy realities with complex properties, that have a holistic element whilst being constituted by complex configurations, that are intersected with their environment with boundaries being not the things that cut off but rather the domain of intercommunication (Byrne & Callaghan, 2014, p. 155).

The intercommunication that is our focus here is the shared reading experience of engaging with the campus common reader while existing in thought processes that are within the context of our coursework. Our goal is that through these reading experiences, our teacher candidates will be able to “translate intellectual knowledge into practical action” (Null, 2017, p. 163). We hope to achieve this in our curriculum by reinforcing the idea that Schwab proposed (1969) by making our instructional practice, which here included a reading experience, into a practical experience where teacher candidates are learning in a multi-dimensional way information that can be applied in a real sense with real students.

Method

This study used a soft system methodology (Checkland, 1999), and qualitative phenomenological research design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to explore the experiences of the participants in our study in order to understand their perspectives (Mertens, 2020) and find common ground in their shared experiences (Patton, 2015). This encompassing angle of entry to our data collection and analysis provided the opportunity to support the inclusion of multiple narratives. As teacher educators, this type of methodology best captures our goals and outcomes for our own future teachers to use in their future classrooms, valuing all and accepting without stratification.

The authors also used both inductive and deductive coding to determine what those shared experiences were. In order to capture this, a multidimensional engagement conceptual framework was used in this study (Saldana, 2016). First, responses from teacher candidates were read by the authors looking for general patterns. Then, the authors discussed and calibrated what those findings were. Next, the findings were coded based on those initial impressions. The authors were intentional in deciding to make sense of the data gathered in a contextualized setting (Schram, 2006; Toulmin, 2001) in a useful way (Forrester, 1996) in order to create findings that provided not only information about a subject, ableism, and empowerment but also a skill that teachers and teacher educators could consider using in their own classrooms, using texts to support both content and pedagogical outcomes.

Sample

A population of education majors at a southwestern United States state regional university were a part of the study. The sample was deliberate, with anonymous data collected from an assignment in class to gain a better understanding of teacher candidate perceptions of ableism and

empowerment in an effort to improve our program in that content area. These teacher candidates were not part of a cohort, nor were they at the same point in their degree plans. One group was EC-6 education majors learning English as a second language methodology while the other group consisted of secondary education majors in a human growth and learning course. However, the same assignment was given in two completely distinct courses so although they were responding to the same prompts, they were perhaps viewing from different lenses based on the instructional content of the course they were enrolled in.

Instrument

The instrument was a professor-developed reading response assignment for teacher candidates to complete as a part of their coursework. This assignment delegated them to choose a single prompt to respond to their campus common reader, *Sitting Pretty: The View from My Ordinary Resilient Disabled Body* (Taussig, 2020). Both assignments began with teacher candidates reading the text, and then they could answer either of the following prompts to respond to:

- 1) Find examples of Taussig's definition of ableism and examples of her own empowerment. Record these and then, explore different portrayals of visible or not-visible disability in film or other forms of art/literature. Write a narrative comparing the experiences of ableism and empowerment seen in the portrayals you saw expressed in media versus what Taussig expresses in her work. Conclude your work by describing how knowledge of ableism and empowerment will impact your career as a teacher.
- 2) Find examples of Taussig experiencing social and emotional supports that helped her develop in her various identities. Consider these questions: How was Taussig supported socially or emotionally in her development as a woman? How was Taussig supported socially or emotionally in her development as a disabled person? What other components of her identity did you see impacted by various support systems or structures? Next, research ways in which teachers can provide social and emotional learning supports for students with visible and not visible disabilities. Conclude your work by describing how knowledge of social and emotional learning supports will impact your career as a teacher.

Data Analysis

This assignment was completed after reading the campus common reader as part of either introduction to education, a human growth and learning course, or an English as a second language methodology course. The authors of this study decided to adopt the common reader as it was about Rebekah's experience living with a disability and how ableism was a great obstacle in her life, but she was able to overcome many hurdles which demonstrated empowerment through the choices and actions taken in her life. Student responses were collected on a single data table, then coded separately and later calibrated by two of the authors who identified meaningful themes (Krippendorff, 2018) and using an inductive method (Thomas, 2006).

Findings

In this study, three themes emerged from the data. The themes included (1) how teacher candidates understood or reflected on the definition of ableism, (2) how teacher candidates were able to identify ways the author showed empowerment, and (3) how as future teachers they could

apply what they have learned from this book in their future classrooms to empower and advocate for their future students.

Reviewing the data, the researchers found the first theme in how teacher candidates understood or reflected on the definition of ableism. Some teacher candidates were clear on how the author of the common reader, Rebekah Taussig defined it versus the Oxford English dictionary. According to the Oxford English Dictionary ableism is defined as “Discrimination in favor of able-bodied people” and Taussig (2020) adds to that definition with the following, “ableism is the process of favoring, fetishizing and building the world around a mostly imagined, idealized body while discriminating against those bodies perceived to move, see, hear, process, operate, look or need differently from that vision.” (p.10).

Teacher candidates demonstrated they understood the difference in the Oxford English dictionary and how Taussig defined the definition of ableism as they stated comments such as the following in their written assignment. All student responses were shared with pseudonyms to protect their identity and there was no editing in their quotes. A student named Delilah stated “In her book *Sitting Pretty*, Author Rebekah Taussig conveys her dissatisfaction of the definition of ableism given by the Oxford English Dictionary which describes ableism as ‘Discrimination in favor of able-bodied people’. Taussig is frustrated by this definition and describes it as one dimensional seeing as how it fails to recognize the ever-changing state of disability.” Another student, Faith, wrote their own perspective on the definition of ableism, “Ableism is the undertaking of advocating nondisabled bodies while being shrewd against those that move, see, hear, process or look differently.” Faith demonstrated she understood what ableism means as she put the definition in her own words. Another student, Hannah, said the following,

One of the examples of ableism that I noticed wasn’t even like not being able to get an entrance but when one of her students was being ableist. In chapter 3, she talks about her teaching journey and how one of her students didn’t really see a point of learning about disabilities and having discussions because he will never go through that. This was a big example I saw because it wasn’t something physical like a door that people didn’t think about but a person thinking they don’t need to learn about disabilities just because they’re able-bodied.

Some teacher candidates demonstrated an understanding of ableism by making sense of the term in their own words or using examples. Yet, others were still not fully clear on what ableism meant but were able to reflect and thought they had a better understanding of what it meant.

Yadira said, “In all honesty, I was not very educated in ableism, or recognizing the many different ways that people can be ableist. After reading this book, I cannot say that I understand it first-hand, but what I can say is that I understand it through someone’s full perspective of it and what they experienced all throughout their life.” Yadira is honest in saying she was not completely clear on what ableism was or how it would look like if it happened to her, but Yadira was curious to learn more on her own on how people take part in an ableist society. Yadira conducted research on her own when she read in the common reader that a celebrity used a wheelchair as a prop for a magazine. Yadira wrote, “I did some research and found out that she and her team went out of their way to try and take down the evidence of it after she received backlash for it.” This demonstrates that Yadira has become more aware of the problem of ableism and by becoming more knowledgeable on how this happens in society, she can take part in advocating for those with disabilities. Another student, Chris, said “Ableism is a sensitive

topic. I'm not really informed about the topic, but it's important to discuss it." Chris admitted he didn't understand the definition of ableism fully, but he knows it is important to be kind to all and to further explore this topic.

As teacher candidates described the meaning of ableism, they also identified ways the author of the common reader demonstrated empowerment through her actions or words. One student wrote about the situation of the author choosing to be alone after getting a divorce from her first husband, "One example of her own empowerment is when she felt ok with being alone." Another student wrote about the same situation of the author, "She does not need to marry someone for the reason of fear that nobody else would love her disabled body. She was proud and determined that she could be independent on her own." Teacher candidates were drawn to the braveness of the author to live a life without relying on anyone else despite people believing she needed someone to take care of her due to her disability. This act of independence demonstrated she was willing to take risks being on her own and not afraid of the unknown. The author demonstrated empowerment through her actions and our teacher candidates took notice.

Another way teacher candidates noticed empowerment from the author was by the academic and professional success she attained. Rosa wrote, "She has empowered herself by being able to maintain a job, home and independence." Rosa was impressed on how the author was able to keep a teaching job, have her own home and independence without relying on anyone else for support. Another student, Isaac, wrote, "She completed her bachelor's and master's degree and completed her Ph.D. program in her apartment." Isaac admired the dedication of the author completing not just one degree, but multiple degrees in her own place. Another student, Yadira stated, "As for moments of her feeling empowered...she talks about how she passed all her exams that were needed for her Ph.D. program...Another example was...where she got a job teaching at a high school, she shared how she felt prideful, worthwhile, and respectable." Yadira addressed how the author not only succeeded academically but was also able to have a teaching career. These teacher candidates noticed how the author demonstrated empowerment by being successful in achieving multiple higher education degrees but also in being able to have a job of her own that provided independence and stability in her life.

The third finding in the study was how teacher candidates were able to apply their knowledge of ableism and empowerment in their future classroom with students who are emergent bilinguals (EBs) and/or with students with disabilities (SWDs). Irma said, "We must always have accessibility for everyone in the classroom. Get everyone involved with every lesson and activity regardless of the student being able-bodied, disabled, or bilingual." Irma used the term "we" as in herself and others being involved in making a change to have an accessible and inclusive classroom for all her future students. Another student, Faith (the same student from the first theme) wrote, "I feel as though I have gotten a deeper understanding of what ableism is and how it affects others. This new knowledge coupled with the experience gained at work, I feel confident that I will be able to push for an even more positive and equal learning environment for my children." Faith used the pronoun "I" in her statement which demonstrates she is willing to take personal action and advocate for equity in her classroom for all her future students.

Another student, Abby, mentioned the following, "Knowledge about ableism and empowerment will allow teachers to have a safe and successful learning environment. These two things will impact my career as a teacher by providing insight and knowledge on what I need to

do to ensure that my future class has the ability to respect one another and create a learning environment that is safe and inclusive.” Abby was able to gain more knowledge about the concept of ableism and how this affects classroom dynamics. With her newly learned knowledge, she is more aware of how to advocate and establish a safe learning environment for all her future students.

Future implications/Concluding thoughts

Teacher candidates in this study were able to use their reading experience with their campus common reader to plan for an inclusive classroom by gaining a better understanding of what ableism and empowerment meant. Through the shared reading, teacher candidates were also able to identify ways they could apply this knowledge to become advocates for their future inclusive classrooms with emergent bilinguals and students with disabilities which in turn helped them shape their teacher identity. Because the campus common reader provides an avenue for engagement that exists outside the confines of a curriculum, professors were able to activate a different kind of learning experience than they would have otherwise considered. The campus common reader also provided a chance for student community engagement with their peers across academic silos since the content of the book could be focused on through different lenses and in different ways in different colleges and departments. This kind of flexibility in instruction through shared reading certainly deserves further reflection and consideration in that the enrichment provided to teacher candidates not only synthesized learning in our courses but provided a way to connect our content to theoretical exploration with low/no risk. The authors hope that other university professors consider using a campus common reader to help all educators explore new and important topics that will positively impact their future classrooms by helping them form their own teacher identity.

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