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Pre-service Teachers with Disabilities: Challenges and Opportunities for Directors of Student Teaching in Western Canada

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Pre-service Teachers with Disabilities: Challenges and Opportunities for Directors of Student Teaching in Western Canada

Abstract

In response to the lack of Canadian research about the practicum experiences of pre-service teachers with disabilities, a survey of ten Directors of Student Teaching in Western Canadian universities was conducted and revealed both strengths and challenges in current practices. Recommendations for teacher education are explored, and several future research directions are highlighted.

En réponse à l'absence de recherche sur les expériences de stage des enseignants en formation souffrant d'invalidité, un sondage a été effectué auprès de dix directeurs de stagiaires dans des universités de l'Ouest du Canada. Le sondage a révélé à la fois les points forts et les défis présentés par les pratiques actuelles. Des recommandations pour la formation des enseignants sont explorées et plusieurs futurs axes de recherche sont présentés.

Keywords

teacher education, disabilities, practicum

The Salamanca Statement evolved from the shared vision of 94 countries that championed education as a right of all children (UNESCO, 1994). The shared philosophy of those gathered included the belief that schools “should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other conditions” (p. 6). Since the 1990s, countries around the world have endeavored to become more inclusive in their schooling practices. Since teachers are recognized as leaders of change within our school systems (Englebrecht, 2013), a plethora of professional development opportunities about inclusive education has been offered to both in-service and pre-service teachers globally (Darling-Hammond, Ruth, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009; Guskey, 2003; Male, 2011). A simple database search revealed hundreds of thousands of publications on preparing teachers to teach in inclusive classrooms, suggesting that this skill set has become an essential teacher competency in many educational settings. However, a database search of research on teachers who themselves have disabilities resulted in almost no output, creating a strange paradox. If teachers are required to demonstrate competency in teaching diverse students, it is ironic that so little research exists on teachers with disabilities and, more specifically, how to prepare them to be competent in the classroom. The authors decided to explore the barriers and supports during practica by students with disabilities, as there is virtually no literature on this complex and demanding student teacher experience.

This research was provoked by reoccurring themes that underpinned many of the dilemmas we encountered as teacher educators supervising students with disabilities during practicum. We therefore sought the expert experiences of Western Canadian Directors of Student Teaching in relation to preparing pre-service teachers with disabilities during the practicum experience. Their insights on the barriers and supports associated with successful practica for pre-service teachers with disabilities are discussed.

Theoretical Underpinnings

This study is grounded in the constructionist model of disability and social dominance theory. Whereas the medical views of disability conceptualize disability as a static state of defectiveness within the individual (Gilson & DePoy, 2002), the constructionist model challenges this understanding of disability. The constructionist model views disability as a system constructed and maintained in response to the environment’s inability or unwillingness to adapt to differences within the human condition (Creswell, 2007; Hahn, 1994). Social dominance theory (Sidanius, Pratto, Laar, & Levin, 2004; Walls, 2005) posits that all societies construct social hierarchies based on social in-group and out-group identities. In the context of disabilities, able-bodied people hold un-earned dominance over people with disabilities (Kattari, 2015).

The constructionist model underpins the movement toward inclusion in Canadian schools, in that systems are demonstrating a willingness to adapt by constructing physically, socially, and academically accessible schools in order to respond to diversity. Likewise, Canadian law (Canadian Human Right Act, 1985) and provincial human rights legislation protects Canadians with disabilities by challenging infrastructure and practices that privilege ableist perceptions of humanity. While this conceptualization is broadly applied to students within elementary and secondary schools across Canada, less is known about how well schools respond to diversity in ability within the teaching staff who work in these same schools. Furthermore, even less is known about the teacher education and practica experiences of these pre-service and in-service teachers in the Canadian context.

Existing Literature on Educators with Disabilities

Teachers with Disabilities

The small body of research that has examined the experiences of teachers with disabilities and their preparation during teacher education programs has demonstrated that the medical model of “disability as deficit” frames much of the discourse. Ferri, Keefe, & Gregg (2001) and Valle, Solis, Volpitta, & Connor (2004) examined the experiences of teachers with disabilities who chose not to disclose their disability status to the parents of their students or to their administrators for fear of negative consequences based in the stigma associated with disability. In doing so, these teachers chose not to challenge the dominant discourse around disability. Some of the participants viewed disclosure as a risk and feared they would not be viewed as intelligent or as “good professionals” were they to disclose their disabilities to others (Valle et al., 2004, p. 7). Furthermore, the respondents discussed their professors’ negative attitudes and treatment toward pre-service teachers with disabilities in their past teacher education programs. Valle et al. found that while some teachers used disclosure of their disabilities as a means to motivate and educate their own students and their students’ parents, these teachers formed the minority viewpoint in the teachers with disabilities. Thus, the stigma around disability was viewed as a barrier by teachers with disabilities and resulted in non-disclosure by this group.

Student Teachers with Disabilities

While the aforementioned studies spoke to the issue of disclosure and discrimination, none of them specifically examined the experiences of pre-service teachers with disabilities during their practicum experiences. Although most North American universities and colleges have established Student Accessibility offices that assist students and professors with course-based accommodations, little is known about accommodations during teaching practica experiences. In fact, a review of the literature failed to reveal any Canadian publications on this topic since 2000. During the 1990s, a number of researchers addressed this issue, as an artifact of the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which expanded the protection of people with disabilities in private and public institutions in the United States (Williams, 1998). During this period Harrison and Lemke (2000) gave conference presentations of case studies about practica experiences of American teacher candidates with learning disabilities, physical disabilities, and those who were Deaf and hard of hearing. Likewise, Martin and Lytle (2000) examined the preparation of Deaf teacher candidates to teach both Deaf and hearing children in their American program. One study from this time period occurred in a Canadian context. Smith (2000) presented a case study about the practicum that prepared a student with visual impairment for a career in teaching; this one study was based in a Canadian university. Collectively, the students from these studies found supports in their teacher practica that included being given the opportunity to have a voice in designing effective accommodations, having clear and honest communications with supervisors, and having instructors who were able and willing to make modifications to the instructional methods used to work with these student teachers. While providing a useful starting point, each study is dated, all employed student-based case study methodology based on small samples, and almost all are based in American law regarding disabilities.

What is missing in the literature are recent studies of teacher practica of students with disabilities framed within a Canadian context and current Canadian law. Moreover, while students’

individual experiences are most certainly important and worthy of research attention, moving beyond case study methodology based on the experiences of individual students allows a broader understanding of the trends in these collective experiences—trends to which program designers and policy makers can respond.

Additionally, it should be noted that existing studies of course-based accommodations of students with disabilities during their university programs do not necessarily direct our understanding of practica placements, as practica have the unique and additional requirements of meeting the standards of the profession. Ryan (2011) found that practicum courses hold a special position in the preparation of professionals, in that these courses must ensure that the professional standards stipulated by the professional body are met in order for the students to be granted credit. The complexity of this situation is exacerbated by the challenge of clearly articulating the standards for teaching, in that soft skills are sometimes hard to describe and measure, but without a clear list of standards, discrimination is more likely to occur (Williams, 1998). According to Ryan, practica are therefore the more likely settings for issues with professional suitability to occur (as compared with university-based classes), as it is there where the tensions between accommodation requirements and professional standards are more likely to occur. In order to more clearly understand the trends in barriers and supports related to successful teaching practicum experiences in Canada, it is therefore reasonable and necessary to gain the perspectives of those professionals most often involved in balancing reasonable accommodation with professional standards for students with a variety of special needs at practica: The Directors of Students Teaching (DSTs) at teacher preparation program in various provinces of Canada.

Duty to Accommodate and Professional Standards

To understand the current context within which DSTs make decisions for students with disabilities, it is necessary to also understand the parameters of both disability law and professional standards.

Duty to accommodate. The provision of accommodations is required under law in both Canada (Canadian Human Rights Act, 1985) and the United States (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990). In addition to these federal acts, provincial laws in Canada in the form of human rights legislation guide accommodation practices in business and schools, including post-secondary institutions. In effect, schools have the duty to accommodate and must do so up to the level of undue hardship, a standard that is difficult to satisfy. Although undue hardship is a case-by-case and individual ruling, in general, where safety of clients or children is proposed as a hardship to the employer or school, the standard has more likely been met than when the hardship proposed relates to financial costs (Watkinson & Chalmers, 2008). For example, if a Deaf student teacher were to need an American sign language interpreter for each university class in order to equally access the learning environment, it could be argued that the cost of this service is a hardship to the university in that it would be prohibitive to a university if *all* students were to require this type of accommodation. This is not, however, a legitimate hardship in that *all* students in that university are not Deaf and do not legitimately need the same level of service. Therefore, although the cost is high to meet the accommodation needs of this particular student, the university does not satisfy the standard of undue hardship in this situation. In contrast, a flight school could argue that a student with no motor control could not reasonably fly a plane and would put passenger safety at risk. In this case, it is more likely that the undue hardship test (on the basis of passenger safety) would be satisfied. In this latter case, no accommodations could reasonably be made that would

allow the student with no motor control to be licensed as a pilot, and because of the threat to passenger safety is severe, the test of undue hardship has likely been met.

Professional standards. While the law is clear about the responsibility of Canadian universities to accommodate students with disabilities, the issue is confounded when professional programs are also required to uphold professional suitability requirements. In Canada, the provinces of Ontario and British Columbia have published a list of professional standards which their teachers must demonstrate. They include, for example, that teachers in Ontario will “treat students equitably and with respect and are sensitive to factors that influence individual student learning” and further, that those teachers must “promote and participate in the creation of collaborative, safe and supportive learning communities” (Ontario College of Teachers, 2016). Likewise, the British Columbia Ministry of Education Standards of Professional Practice (2012) include requirements for teachers to be “responsible for the emotional and physical safety of students” and “responsible for their conduct while on duty, as well as off duty”.

Together with the duty to accommodate, these expectations may introduce tensions for Directors of Student Teaching, in that the line between making accommodations and diluting teaching competency is sometimes unclear. On one hand, assumed homogeneity within disability labels may be inappropriately used to prevent capable pre-service teachers with disabilities from graduating from their teacher preparation programs. That is, when stereotypes of various disability categories are used to determine whether or not a person can teach (rather than examining the match or mismatch between a particular candidate with disabilities and the standards to be met), discrimination is occurring. This situation represents a socially constructed view of disability as deficit and is evidence of processes and beliefs that perpetuate ableist worldviews while ensuring continued privilege to the dominant group—those pre-service teachers without disabilities. On the other hand, students with disabilities sometimes exhibit behaviours during their practicum experiences that call into question whether their disability is incompatible with meeting the standards for teachers’ professional practice, even when accommodations are provided. An example of these tensions occurs when we compare students without disabilities with students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). Pre-service teachers who have disabilities such as high functioning ASD *may* have difficulties interpreting the social cues from their students and forming close relationships with them, as a condition of their disorder. As a result, questions could be raised about whether these pre-service teachers can meet the standards of the profession such as being “sensitive to factors that influence individual student learning” and creating “collaborative, safe and supportive learning communities” (Ontario College of Teachers, 2016). A student without a disability who could not demonstrate these behaviours would be unlikely to pass the practicum. It is important to note that not *all* students with ASD will experience this disorder to the degree that it would make teaching impossible even with accommodations, however some students with ASD will fall into this designation. Directors of Student Teaching at universities across Canada are charged with investigating these situations when pre-service teachers with disabilities are involved and supporting the students in question, yet they ultimately must make the decision about whether a specific teaching practicum has resulted in the required evidence of competence. These decisions are framed within ethical and legal complexities that make them extremely challenging for these professionals to navigate, yet the literature base supporting these professionals in their decision-making is limited at best.

Using the Meiorin test to balance laws and standards. Watkinson and Chalmers (2008) produced a Canadian study based on the social work context that is helpful in understanding and negotiating the balance between reasonable accommodation and professional standards during

practicum, in that it highlights both the relevant Canadian law and the need for clear standards. Similar to teaching practica, in social work practica it is expected that “one’s suitability or “fit” with the profession will crystalize during the course of the practicum experience” (Watkinson & Chalmers, p. 505). Watkinson and Chalmers’ research was based on a case study where a social work student with disabilities made a poor judgement during his practicum that resulted in a violation of the professional standards. The student in question had been diagnosed with a mental disability that encompassed poor judgement and impulsivity, hence the reason for his failure in the practicum could be related to his disability. These authors considered Canadian law in exploring the appropriate response to the case study, specifically the *Meiorin* test. The *Meiorin* test addresses the issue of *bona fide occupational requirements*. That is, when the required competencies of a professional role can be clearly outlined and when a disability prevents an individual from meeting those competencies even with accommodations, it is not considered discrimination to prevent that particular person from serving in that role. The Supreme Court of Canada ruled three conditions must be in place for an employer or a faculty to deem a competency as a bona fide occupational requirement:

- (1) “That the employer or faculty adopted the standard for the purpose rationally connected to the performance of the job;
- (2) That the employer or faculty adopted the particular standard in an honest and good faith belief that it is necessary to the fulfillment of the legitimated work-related purpose;
- (3) That the standard is reasonable [and] necessary to the accomplishment of that legitimate work-related purpose. To show that the standard is reasonable [and] necessary, it must be demonstrated that it is impossible to accommodate individual employees sharing the characteristics of the claimant without imposing undue hardship on the employer” (British Columbia v. BCGSEU, 1999, p. 54).

It is reasonable that this ruling would also apply to decisions related to teaching practica, given that Supreme Court of Canada rulings apply in all provinces of the country.

Research Questions

Given the limitations of the small body of research about student teachers with disabilities during teaching practicum, as well as the as-yet-untapped experiences of DSTs who must balance accommodation requirements with professional standards, we surveyed all DSTs in Western Canada to determine trends in their perceptions regarding the following research questions:

- (1) What are the barriers to successful practicum for student teachers with disabilities, as perceived by DSTs?
- (2) What supports lead to successful practicum for student teachers with disabilities, as perceived by DSTs?

Method

Survey Procedures

A survey methodology was chosen to gain initial understanding of the main barriers and supports to inclusive teaching practica as perceived by DSTs with the goal of using these data for framing later, in-depth questions. Given the small number of informants in this population, we wanted to ensure that we used an instrument that was sensitive to our requests for the DST's time, in the hope that they would participate in future interviews and focus groups. According to Driscoll (2011), survey methodology is appropriate when investigating "a general trend in people's opinions, experiences, and behaviours," (p. 2) whereas interview data is appropriate to learning more detailed information from a smaller group of people. Given the nascent nature of our understanding, a survey was the best way to establish the directions of themes that would need further probing in later studies.

The initial survey questions were constructed by the primary author based on a literature review, discussions with DSTs, as well as her own experiences with student teachers with disabilities during practica. We sought to explore both factors specific to the individuals (e.g., gender, years of experience, having disabilities or having experience with people with disabilities) as well as factors related to the broader environment (e.g., university-based supports, knowledge of provincial laws) shown in past research to be relevant to interactions with people with disabilities in educational settings (Barr and Bracchitta, 2012; Sokal & Sharma, 2014; Vaz, Wilson, Falkmer, Sim, Scott, & Cordier, 2015). In addition, we asked specific questions about barriers and supports for successful practica for students with disabilities on the current educational context. Finally, we asked about the DSTs' confidence level in their decision-making. We based these questions on factors specific to individuals on prior research that showed that educators with higher confidence levels about their inclusive practices also have more positive attitudes toward inclusion (Burke & Sutherland, 2004; Sokal & Sharma, 2014). Furthermore, experiences in working with students with disabilities have been associated with greater confidence and more positive attitudes toward people with disabilities (Burke & Sutherland, 2004; Coates, 1989). Inversely, Mittler (2003) showed that the negative attitudes toward inclusion held by teachers, parents, and administrators were the most significant barriers to successful inclusion, suggesting that these variables were important inclusions in the survey.

Before piloting the survey, the first draft was shown to a human rights lawyer and researcher. She advised that we differentiate between confidence in ethical decisions and confidence in legal decisions, as well as differentiating between physical, mental, and learning disabilities. These suggestions were based on her own research showing that these factors may elicit different responses, as well as on previous research about disability types (Deal, 2003). The second draft of the survey was then piloted on the second author (a DST herself, who was not included in the DST focus group participants), and revisions for clarity were made. Once the survey was finalized, ethics vetting based on Canadian research ethics policies and approval was attained. Directors of Student Teaching ($N=43$) at all teacher education programs in Western Canada were then contacted by email and invited to participate in an anonymous, online survey housed on Survey Monkey. By clicking on the link in the email, participants accessed a page that contained the letter of consent. By clicking on the link to continue the survey, participants indicated that they agreed to the contents of the letter of consent and continued on to the 26-item survey (see the Appendix).

Participants

Ten Directors of Student Teaching (23% of those who were invited to participate) participated in the survey. There were participants from all five Western Canadian provinces: Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia. Two of the DSTs had disabilities themselves, five had a family member with a disability, and nine had a friend with a disability. One of the ten DSTs had taken courses on inclusive education as part of his/her teacher education program. Most of the DSTs had no specific training or coursework in addressing human rights issues in teacher training, although many had earned their credentials as school principals and additionally cited years of experience as their training for making suitability decisions regarding pre-service teachers with disabilities. In terms of experience in their DST role, years of experience ranged from one year to sixteen years, with a mean of ten years of experience.

Results and Discussion

The survey data yielded several interesting findings. In terms of the DST's perceptions of recent trends, many of the participants noted increases in the incidence of students with anxiety, learning disabilities, and ASD within their practicum programs. All of the participants believed that ensuring that all graduates meet the standards of professional practice was "very important," replicating the earlier findings with of a study involving directors of social work practicum programs (Reeser, 1992). Together these findings validate the need for and legitimacy of gaining a better understanding of how to support students with disabilities during practicum.

What are the barriers to successful practicum for student teachers with disabilities?

Lack of disclosure. Similar to past research by Ferri et al. (2001) and Valle et al. (2004), students' fear of stigma precipitated by disclosure was evident in the DST's interactions with their students with disabilities. Although their students were often registered with disability services for accommodations in their academic courses, not all students with disabilities chose to disclose this to the student teaching office or their practicum placement, nor were they required to do so. One participant said, "Many choose not to declare. In some cases, this fear stems from concern that school divisions would get this information and it may impede job opportunities." Likewise, another participant found, "I often learn [about a student's disability] after difficulties arise in practicum." This finding suggests that students hold a belief in social dominance theory in that the able-bodied people hold un-earned dominance over people with disabilities (Kattari, 2015) and that disclosure of out-group membership will somehow work to their disadvantage. Given that initiation of accommodations hinge on disclosure as a requisite first step in current practicum processes, non-disclosure was seen by the DSTs as pre-empting the effective and appropriate learning environments and supports needed by the PSTs with disabilities.

Tensions between accommodation and standards. Several participants expressed a frustration with the tensions between accommodations for students who disclosed disabilities and meeting standards. One participant clearly expressed this frustration,

Autism spectrum disorder is the biggest issue I see in current practice—under-diagnosed, under-recognized, and under-accepted. Pre-service teachers [who are] on the spectrum are not receiving good counselling because of legal issues. The law says they have rights. Too

much of the time, this means they have the right to spend their money and time on tuition, only to fail out at the practicum stage. Disservice to all.

This statement speaks to the differences between university courses and practicum, in that accommodations that are suitable in supporting students in their classwork are not always adequate or appropriate in the practicum setting, which often falls at the end of teacher education programs. Furthermore, it emphasizes the need for clear standards and the communication of these standards to students at the programs' onset.

The importance of an awareness of standards was also noted by a different participant who noted, "Students have a greater degree of success when they enter the program with an understanding of the teaching standards. Clear targets are essential." This comment reflects the Meiorin test and the need to address the issue of bona fide occupational requirements. In some provinces, the bona fide occupational requirements are clearly outlined, but in other provinces they are vague or non-existent. Without clearly defined requirements for teachers in all provinces and territories, DSTs are left to make decisions without clear criteria by which to do so. In her study of social work practica for students with disabilities, Reeser (1992) likewise found that "there is a fine line between adjustments made for disabilities and lowering educational standards" (p. 100) and in situations without clear standards, discrimination is more likely to occur (Williams, 1998).

So, how then did DSTs balance the student teachers' rights to accommodation with the professional standards? Several participants cited safety and needs of students in schools as their main criteria for determining a pre-service teacher's suitability to teach. A participant believed,

Some physical disabilities such as vision, mobility, hearing could have an impact on what the school deems 'safe' for students, and as such the school has the ability to halt practicums for safety concerns as related to the safety of the students in the school's care.

Likewise, another participant said,

I believe that students with disabilities need to be given every opportunity to succeed. However, the teaching standards need to still be met. Accommodations can occur without modifying standards and expectations. The first priority must remain the needs of students in schools.

In both these cases, the safety of the students in the practicum classroom was cited as the undue hardship that accommodation might cause. Another participant further outlined the importance of clear criteria in ensuring that the processes by which these decisions are made are fair,

Students should be given standards of performance expectations prior to coming into Education so that they can make a more informed decision as to their capabilities. I think we need a different policy for declaration of disability for students with practicum-required degrees. Ontario Human Rights has a supportive document for helping employers and supervisors understand accommodation. A [similar] policy [in my province] with practicum examples would be very helpful.

Considered together, the DSTs disclosed two main barriers to facilitating successful practicum placements for students. First, they viewed non-disclosure as problematic, and

suggested a specific disclosure form be developed for practicum. Second, they suggested unfairness to students could be addressed with clear standards of bona fide employment requirements that are defined and shared with students and supervisors early in the program.

What supports lead to successful practicum for student teachers with disabilities?

It was refreshing to find that the list of supports outnumbered the list of barriers perceived by the DSTs.

Care in placement selection. One of the effective supports cited by DSTs was the care taken in placing students with disabilities in specific schools. DSTs followed the same placement procedures as they did for students without disabilities, although most took extra caution with ensuring the ‘fit’ between the practicum placement and the student’s needs. A participant said, “I consider placement with teachers that may be more understanding or considerate of students with a disability.” A different participant described the processes for placement and how they worked as preventative measures for potential problems:

For the most part issues are prevented, as there is a lot of planning that goes into ensuring that things go smoothly. Meetings take place at the University and the Practicum Manager meets with the Host Teacher to discuss accommodations that may be required.

Teamwork. The teamwork required between the selected practicum schools and the university was also viewed as essential support mechanisms *within* the university setting. Most programs worked closely with Student Accessibility Services at their university, or with faculty members or administrative members who had expertise in disabilities studies. When issues arose for students with disabilities during their practica, DSTs cited cooperation with colleagues such as the field experience coordinators, faculty chairs, associate deans, and deans, and very few indicated they made decisions in isolation. This comment was representative: Decisions are not solitary in nature, but a team effort that involves all stakeholders, so my perspective and training is one component to a decision.

Communication. The DSTs emphasized open communication about needs and openness to facing difficult situations as positive supports to student success. One participant said, “We [need to] start having frank conversations about what it looks like to be an employed educator with their disability.” This finding echoes that of Smith (2000) who found that students with disabilities also valued this open and clear communication, even when it was difficult.

Disclosure and planning. Just as lack of disclosure was cited as a barrier, likewise disclosure was named as an essential aspect of successful practica. Most participants believed that disclosure and planning were important factors in student success. One DST said, “Students also benefit when they are open and forthright about their disabilities prior to their practicums.” Another participant implored, “One big thing: figure out a way to legally get pre-service teachers to disclose, to a third party if necessary.” Yet another concurred,

Those who disclose a need for accommodation prior to a placement are most likely to find success. When accommodation plans occur after a significant event has happened, it is two-sided. [This experience] can be helpful, as the student may need to live the experience in the classroom in order to really understand what they are required to be able to do as a

teacher. On the other hand, the stress caused by the negative experience may make recovery and success difficult.

In each case, the DSTs viewed disclosure as the catalyst to ensuring accommodation was put in place, without which these students with disabilities were unlikely to be successful.

Knowledge of disability laws. Knowledge of the laws about disability rights not only guided DST's decisions and actions, but also served as a platform that provided confidence when advocating for students on practicum, thus supporting past research about the relationship between individual's knowledge of disability laws and their confidence in interactions with people with disabilities (Forlin & Chambers, 2011). In terms of knowing the laws that were available to guide their decision-making, DSTs were well versed in existing laws, and most DSTs could name them. DSTs from some provinces, for examples Ontario and British Columbia, made specific references to practice standards put forward by their teaching associations, such as the British Columbia (BC) Ministry of Education Standards of Practice, the BC Teachers' Federation Code of Ethics, and the Ontario College of Teachers Standards of Practice. Many cited their province's human rights legislation, their university's internal teacher suitability policies, and one DST cited a section of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. When asked explicitly to name the laws, legislation, and policies that guided their decision-making, only one DST failed to name any documents. Several DSTs also indicated that they had access to legal counselling within their universities, although a few commented that these resources were very limited.

Collectively, these DSTs suggested five supports were important to facilitating successful practicum for students with disabilities: (a) care in placement selection, (b) teamwork, (c) communication, (d) disclosure and planning, and (e) knowledge of disability laws.

Unresolved Issues

Two unresolved issues were provoked by the research findings.

The Catch-22 of disclosure. First, the essential nature of disclosure is so central to the current accommodation processes that it was cited by DSTs in their answers to many of the survey questions and precipitated some of the most passionate responses from them. It is interesting that DSTs demonstrated a strong trend toward viewing disclosure as essential to planning and success while they concurrently lamented that students chose not to disclose due to their fear of discrimination during future hiring. That the students may be correct and that their fears of discrimination both in hiring and within their practica were legitimate, as shown in past research for over 15 years (Ferri et al., 2001; Ryan, 2011; Valle et al., 2004), was a possibility that was not unpacked. However, in giving attention to selecting specific practicum placement schools, DST's actions suggested that not all school settings are equally open to student teachers with disabilities. If this is the case, it is just as likely that not all schools are equally willing to hire teachers with disabilities. In effect, this observation puts students with disabilities in a "catch-22" situation, in that while disclosure is necessary to get them the supports they are entitled to in order to be successful on practicum, this same disclosure may prevent them from being hired into the field in which they have trained. Furthermore, Reeser (1992) noted that being cautious about where students with disabilities are placed could constitute a discriminatory process on the part of the DSTs, in that the array of placement settings is more limited for students with disabilities than for those without. It seems that the DSTs are aware of discrimination in schools, as evidenced by their careful placement of students, yet they ignore it when advocating for disclosure by students with

disabilities, therefore reifying the “deficit model of disability” that perpetuates the social dominance of teachers without disabilities (Creswell, 2007; Hahn, 1994).

Self-confidence in DST decisions. Interesting trends arose when DSTs were asked about their confidence levels in their decision-making about students with various categories of disabilities. Using a Likert scale ranging from one to five, where a rating of five indicated very confident and a rating of one indicated very under-confident, DSTs demonstrated more confidence in some decisions than in others (see Table 1).

Findings indicated that DSTs were least confident about both their legal and ethical decisions about students with mental disabilities as compared to those about students with physical or learning disabilities. DSTs in the current study also indicated higher confidence levels with ethical decisions as compared with legal decisions for students with physical disabilities, however in the case of learning and mental disabilities, they were more confident in their legal decisions than in their ethical decisions. These findings could be interpreted within the “hierarchy of impairment” proposed by Deal (2003) who found that the more “hidden” the disability, the less likely people are to be sure the person with the disability deserves accommodation. Reeser (1992) found similar tensions around decision-making by social work practicum directors. It is interesting to note that three participants were very confident of their legal and ethical decisions across all disability categories. We investigated whether years of experience predicted confidence levels and found that it did not, which failed to support past research that showed that greater experiences with students with disabilities were predictive of higher confidence levels in those working in this context (Burke & Sutherland, 2004; Coates, 1989). We subsequently investigated whether DSTs working in provinces with clear bona fide occupational requirements felt more confident than those working within other provinces. This also proved to be inconclusive, as one of the three most confident DSTs worked in BC or Ontario, one worked in a province without clearly articulated provincial teaching standards, and one did not disclose his/her province of employment. We are therefore unable to conclusively state the factors that predicted higher confidence in DST decision-making around inclusive practica, although the additional comments provide by the participants suggested that clear standards facilitated great confidence in decision-making.

Table 1
Ratings and Means of Confidence Levels with Disabilities Categories on a 1-5 Scale

Participant	Disabilities Category						Mean
	Legal/Physical	Legal/Learning	Legal/Mental	Ethical/Physical	Ethical/Learning	Ethical/Mental	
1	4	4	4	5	3	3	3.83
2	3	4	3	3	3	3	3.17
3	4	4	3	5	4	3	3.83
4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5.00
5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5.00
6	4	4	4	4	4	4	4.00
7	3	3	2	5	2	2	2.83
8	5	5	4	5	4	2	4.17
9	5	5	5	5	5	5	5.00
10	5	5	4	5	5	5	4.83
Mean	4.3	4.4	3.9	4.7	4.0	3.7	

Note. Higher scores indicate greater confidence on a 1-5 scale.

Limitations and Future Research

All research designs present limitations, and ours is no exception. The first limitation is the small sample size. This limitation could be attributed to the very small number of DSTs in the Western Canadian population. However, a larger response rate would have promoted greater confidence in our findings. We suggest that future studies with larger samples use statistics to explore relationships between DST confidence, years of employment in the role, and the existence of bona fide occupational requirements for teachers in a particular DST's province of employment. Furthermore, other research bases such as the student teachers with disabilities themselves, withdrawal statistics and case studies of successful and unsuccessful teacher candidates with disabilities, and broader statistics such as incidence of alleged human rights violations by practica programs could assist in attaining broader understanding of preparing teachings with disabilities and how it relates to bona fide occupational requirements and clear standards. Second, the themes generated in the current research may be affected by the sample of DSTs who chose to participate and those who did not. Triangulation through a subsequent focus group methodology would add to our confidence in the findings. Given that many of the DSTs in Western Canada meet annually at the WestCAST conference, we plan to present the findings to DSTs attending the next conference and to solicit their viewpoints about them through a focus group method. In this way, we will not only understand the "what" of the survey data, but also the "why," facilitating deeper understanding. Finally, we encourage future researchers to pursue mixed methods studies in order to enhance our understanding of the best ways to support and promote a diverse teaching force of highly qualified teachers. Specific questions that need further examination are whether the fears of discrimination that underpin student teachers' fear of disclosure are actually reasonable and legitimate, and whether the presence of bona fide occupational requirements ensure not only greater confidence in DST decision-making but also facilitate consistently fairer decisions across practicum sites.

Final Thoughts

William Pink called schools "incubators for social change," and wondered "What would schools look like and what would be the role of the teacher in a school that was committed to maximizing equity?" (2017, n.p.). By examining how the role of "teacher" is re-envisioned or reified in teacher education practica, we have the capacity to challenge the deficit model of disability and to create a teaching force that truly represents the diversity of the human condition. In finding ways to balance the rights to access for teacher candidates with disabilities with the professional standards for teachers, perhaps we can contribute to answering Pink's question.

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Appendix

Survey Questions

1. Has there been an increase in pre-service teachers with disabilities participating in practicum at your university in the past 10 years? Evidence of increases in number? Severity? Specific types?
2. Are pre-service teachers with disabilities required to disclose/report disability before practicum placement at your university? If so, how does this happen? If not, how and when are you informed?
3. Are there specific processes for placing pre-service teachers with disabilities on practicum?
4. Is it legal to prohibit students with disabilities who clearly cannot meet the provincial teaching standards for professional practice from entering your Bachelor of Education program?
5. What resources are available to you to help you accommodate pre-service teachers with disabilities on practicum, and are they effective?
6. Are there processes, guidelines, and resources for monitoring and resolving issues with pre-service teachers with disabilities when problems arise? If so, please describe them.
7. Do you have a professional suitability policy in your teacher education program? If so, please copy and paste it here.
8. Have pre-service teachers with disabilities been asked to leave your program or required to repeat practica due to conditions related to their disabilities? Examples? Please do not use names or descriptions that would reveal the student's identity.
9. How important is it in for a student to meet the provincial teaching standards in determining whether a student with disabilities meets the practicum expectations? Please circle one.
Very unimportant Unimportant Neutral Important Very important
Please explain.
10. What laws, legislation, and policies guide your decision-making about responding to the needs of students with disabilities? Please list.
11. What resources are available to you to help you manage **legal** concerns about pre-service teachers with mental disabilities on practicum. Please list. Are they effective? Yes ___ No ___ N/A___

13. How confident are you in the **legal** ramifications of your decisions about the professional suitability of pre-service teachers with **physical disabilities** in your program? Please circle one.
Very under-confident under-confident Neutral Confident Very confident
14. How confident are you in the **legal** ramifications of your decisions about the professional suitability of pre-service teachers with **mental disabilities** in your program? Please circle one.
Very under-confident under-confident Neutral Confident Very confident
15. How confident are you in the **legal** ramifications of your decisions about the professional suitability of pre-service teachers with **learning disabilities** in your program? Please circle one.
Very under-confident under-confident Neutral Confident Very confident
16. How confident are you in the **ethical** ramifications of your decisions about the professional suitability of pre-service teachers with **learning disabilities** in your program? Please circle one.
Very under-confident under-confident Neutral Confident Very confident
17. How confident are you in the **ethical** ramifications of your decisions about the professional suitability of pre-service teachers with **mental disabilities** in your program?
Very under-confident under-confident Neutral Confident Very confident
18. How confident are you in the **ethical** ramifications of your decisions about the professional suitability of pre-service teachers with **physical disabilities** in your program? Please circle one.
Very under-confident under-confident Neutral Confident Very confident
19. Please describe the training or education you have taken that assists you in making decisions about these issues.
20. What is working in terms of pre-service teachers with disabilities and their practicum experiences?
21. How could the system be improved? What supports would help you in your work?
22. Is there anything you would like to add?

Demographic Information

1. Gender_____
2. Role in your practicum office_____
3. Number of years experience in a role in a practicum office_____
4. Province of your university _____
5. Do you have a disability? Yes___ No _____
6. Do you have a close friend __ or family member__ with a disability? (please check all that apply)