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Building Inclusive Educational Competencies

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Abstract:

Special Education services throughout the United States have changed and evolved over the past fifty years. The passing of landmark statue, Public Law 94–142 was enacted in 1975 and was later amended and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990. With this law, schools are mandated to provide students with identified disabilities with a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in their least restrictive environment (LRE). This paper begins by framing special education inclusive policies and procedures in the United States before proceeding with the benefits, challenges and barriers that educators and schools often report occurring within schools and districts with regards to inclusion. Next, the paper will proceed with highlighting how inclusion looks in rural schools. With this framework, the paper will then focus on how inclusive educational competencies are introduced and embedded within an undergraduate introductory course for preservice teachers to prepare future teachers to meet the needs of their students.

Keywords:

inclusion, preservice teachers, effective teaching practices

Introduction

In the United States, prior to the 1970's it was common for students with identified disabilities to be segregated and placed in separate classrooms or even separate schools, away from their typically developing peers in the general education classroom. That all changed when in 1975 Congress enacted Public Law 94–142. This statue was later renamed and updated to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA as it is commonly referred to. This landmark legislation mandated that all fifty states provide students with identified disabilities with a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in their least restrictive environment (LRE).

Students with disabilities in the United Stated today receive a range of special education and related services to assist them in receiving educational benefits and are based solely on the individual student's needs. Per the 2020-

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2021 school year, 66.17% of school aged children received special education services inside a general education classroom for at least 80% of the school day (US Department of Education, 2022). Conversely, 2.64% of all school aged children received services in a separate school (US Department of Education, 2022). That means that for many students their LRE is in the general education classroom for most if not all of the school day.

Given the number of students with identified disabilities that are now spending much of the school day in the general education classroom it is imperative that teachers design inclusive classroom environments that meet the varied needs of their students. For this paper, the definition of inclusion that is used is taken from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (2025) and notes that inclusion is intentionally designing and implementing practices that provide all students, including those with identified disabilities with equitable access to learning opportunities, environments, and experiences that foster feelings of belonging, participation, and achievement.

Additionally, teachers need to be proficient with inclusive teaching practices to promote the inclusivity of students with identified disabilities who each have their own individualized education program (IEP) which is a plan that is developed collaboratively by a team of different stakeholders including parents, teachers, specialists, and administrators to best support the students' individual needs in the classroom. This paper highlights the benefits, challenges and barriers that teachers and schools report occurring within schools with regards to inclusion. Next, the paper proceeds with highlighting how inclusion looks particularly in smaller rural schools. With this framework, the paper then focuses on how inclusive practices are introduced and embedded within an undergraduate introductory college course for preservice teachers.

Statement of Problem: What Research Tells Us About Inclusive Educational Practices

As of the 2023–2024 school year, 7.9 million students in the United States were being served under IDEA, which is the equivalent of over 15 percent of all public-school students (U.S. Department of Education, 2023–2024). For a teacher this means that roughly one out of every six students in their classroom will have an identified disability. The IDEA requires that every FAPE-eligible student with a disability receive an IEP that includes information on how the student's disability affects their involvement and progress in the general education curriculum and includes goals that meet the student's needs to enable the child to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum (IDEA section 614(d)(1)(A)(i), 34 C.F.R.300.320(a)(1)(i) and (2)(i)).

Benefits of Inclusion

A large body of research has focused on the positive effects that inclusion has on students with identified disabilities. Two large longitudinal studies of students with disabilities provide evidence that participating in inclusive education can yield positive impacts on students' academic outcomes. The Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS) followed 512 students with disabilities from elementary to middle school and from middle to high school from 2000 to 2006 (Wagner et al., 2005). It found that students with disabilities who took more classes in the general education classroom had better reading comprehension and higher performance on mathematical skills when compared to students who were in separate settings. The National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) followed 11,270 13- to 16-year-old students over ten years and found that students with disabilities that took more academic classes in the general education classroom experienced greater growth on measures of academic skills when compared to students who were in separate settings. Furthermore, a study that focused on high school students found that within inclusive classrooms students had higher grades and were better prepared for secondary education and future jobs (Cole et al., 2022). Inclusive classrooms have benefits that go beyond just academic outcomes for students with disabilities. They may help foster students' self-confidence skills, promote social and emotional development and improve their social interactions with peers (Marder et al., 2003; Newman, Davies & Mercier, 2005). Many inclusive classrooms acknowledge the diversity of the students as an asset and provide an atmosphere of acceptance of differences. Creating a culture of acceptance and understanding ultimately fosters a learning community of belonging where students can share ideas and thoughts.

Inclusive classrooms clearly benefit students with identified disabilities, but what about their typically developing peers? A recent review of the literature indicated that there are mostly positive or neutral effects on the academic outcomes of typically developing students in the lower grades (Kart & Kart, 2021). Furthermore, students without disabilities also have social benefits which include a reduction of fear, hostility, prejudice, and discrimination as well as an increase in tolerance, acceptance and understanding when in an inclusive classroom. Years of evidence indicates that inclusive education has the potential to be effective for both students with and without identified disabilities, however a recent literature review by Fuchs, Gilmour, and Wanzek (2025) concluded that its not about *where we teach*, but *how we teach,* when it comes to effective inclusion. This supports the need for teachers to build inclusive educational competencies.

Barriers and Challenges to Inclusion

Given the positive effects that have been shown for all students in an inclusive classroom, one may wonder why some schools and teachers maybe

resistant or reluctant to implementation. One of the reasons that has been reported is a lack of teacher support or training in implementing effective inclusionary practices in classrooms. A large study indicated that around one-fifth of general education teachers who taught students with disabilities reported that they did not have adequate support, and one-third felt that they were not adequately trained to support students with disabilities in their classrooms (Blackorby et al., 2004). Teachers require high-quality preparation and ongoing professional development to ensure that they have the skills and knowledge necessary to support the academic and functional skills of all students that are in their classes. This includes the use of utilizing evidenced-based strategies, co-teaching models, and collaborative planning time. One could argue that when teachers receive appropriate training both during their preservice education as well as during their in-service years of teaching it positively influences their attitudes, beliefs, and confidence towards inclusion (Dignath et al., 2022).

Administrators have been called the "gatekeepers" of inclusive education (Danforth, 2017), which means that they play a pivotal role in shaping the culture, policies, and practices of their schools. When school principals establish inclusive values and expectations within their schools it directly influences how teachers and other staff perceive and implement inclusive practices in their own classrooms (DeMatthews et al., 2023). Additionally, school principals are often the ones making key decisions regarding staffing, professional development, scheduling, and resource distribution. These decisions can either support or hinder inclusive education. Furthermore, teachers benefit from ongoing support to effectively implement inclusive practices. Principals who support and empower teachers to help foster inclusive environments often do so through mentoring, providing time for collaboration, and professional development support. It is imperative that school principals lead the school and its teachers with a strong inclusive stance that values diversity, equity and a sense of belonging for all students regardless of ability.

Rural Inclusive Education

Rural schools within the United Stated are often characterized by a diversity of community, economic, and cultural contexts (Schafft & Biddle, 2014). The National Rural Education Association (NREA) pushes back on defining rural education by geography or demographics but rather notes the unique needs and challenges that rural schools often experience which includes but is not limited to limited resources, geographic isolation, and smaller school size. There are close to 9.3 million students currently enrolled in a rural public school (Showalter et al., 2019) with changing demographics in recent years having schools experience an increase in racially and linguistically diverse students (Johnson et al., 2018). In rural schools today, about one out of seven

students qualify for special education services (Showalter et al., 2019). Evidence suggests that rural students are less likely to receive special education or early intervention services when compared to their urban counterparts, so this number is likely higher than noted (Zablotsky & Black, 2020). Additionally, students with disabilities in rural schools are more likely to be educated in the general education classroom than their urban and suburban counterparts (Brock & Schaefer, 2015; Jung & Bradley, 2006). This is largely because rural schools often have limited placement options, meaning there may not be a more restrictive self-contained special education classroom or specialized school in the district which can lead to more inclusive educational placements. Rural schools often promote inclusive education practices by focusing on forming positive relationships within the local community, integrating equitable teaching practices and advocating for more equitable school policies (Tieken, 2014).

Despite these aspects of inclusive education in rural schools, they face some unique challenges to inclusive education. Rural schools face difficulties with complying with federal special education policies that do not always consider the varying contexts of rural communities to include limited access to resources, and personnel shortages (Rude & Miller, 2018). There is a national shortage of special education teachers (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Tomas, 2016) across the United States, but it impacts rural districts especially hard. Researchers have concluded that rural districts face more barriers in hiring and retaining special education teachers than their counterparts. These barriers include providing lower teacher salaries and reduced benefits which ultimately leads to fewer applicants for the vacant positions (Burton et al., 2013). Furthermore, teacher preparation programs are typically not focused on training future teachers to teach in rural schools (Azano et al., 2019) and often lack a place-based pedagogical emphasis (Reagan et al., 2019). Limited access to resources that special education teachers in rural districts face include larger caseload sizes (Berry & Gravelle, 2013), limited opportunities to collaborate and discuss challenges with other special education teachers as for many they are the only one in their school or district (Weiss et al., 2014), and a lack of access to ongoing professional development that is centered around special education (Collins, 2008). Given these identified challenges, it is imperative that preservice teachers receive appropriate training to work with diverse populations of students within rural schools.

Research Design

Multiple sources of data were collected and analyzed to be included within the inclusive educational competencies that are discussed in the results section. These sources of data collection included anonymous student surveys collected at the beginning of the semester to better understand preservice

teachers' prior knowledge related to course objectives. Individual written responses to book/media club discussion prompts which highlighted students evolving conceptions of disability and inclusion. Mid-semester anonymous course evaluations provided insight into things that were working and not working within the course as well as opportunities to make suggestions for changes. Finally, data collected within students final, "What I've Learned" projects provided me with an opportunity to see what students themselves noted as key pieces in building their inclusive competencies. Across these data sources, patterns and trends were highlighted and helped to identify the inclusive educational competencies that are discussed below.

Results
(Building Preservice Teachers Inclusive Educational Competencies)

At the University of Wisconsin Platteville, the School of Education faculty and academic staff prepare future Kindergarten–9th grade teachers to be equitable and inclusive practitioners. Many of the college students come into their college classes from rural communities within the region, with desires to return to their rural communities to teach. Preservice teachers within our program are required by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction to take one 3 credit special education emphasized course (15-week semester) which is called Introduction to Inclusion during their bachelor's degree program. They receive additional course work to address community-based learning, equitable education, and social justice in rural spaces as well as the required methods courses to receive their state teaching license.

Within my Introduction to Inclusion course, students take an anonymous survey early in the semester in order for me to gain a better sense of their background knowledge entering the course. A large portion of the students respond that within their own prior K–12 schooling experience, students with disabilities were often segregated from their typically developing peers during periods of the day or even all day in some instances. For many, they respond that they don't know anyone who has a disability and for others know fewer than three people in their lives with one. When preservice teachers have limited exposure to individuals with disabilities and haven't experienced or witnessed inclusive practices within their own schooling experience, it can be challenging to fully understand their crucial role as an inclusive educator in their future teaching jobs.

I am currently an Assistant Professor within the School of Education and teach two sections of the Introduction to Inclusion course both in the fall and spring semester. I have a doctorate degree in the field of Special Education and have over a decade of experience teaching in inclusive settings in a variety of different communities throughout the United States. The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services published a guide in January of 2025 on building and sustaining in-

clusive educational practices. It clearly defines inclusive educational practices with many of these practices being incorporated within my Introduction to Inclusion course. Throughout this section these practices will be expanded upon and include how they are introduced in the course, and the types of learning experiences preservice teachers partake in as they further develop their inclusive competencies.

Service-Learning Component

Given that so many of the college students enrolled in the course have little to no personal connections or experiences with disabled individuals, the course has a service-learning component within it. Service-learning refers to experiences where preservice teachers engage in a community-based service activity that directly connects to their coursework and professional development. Often these experiences aim to enrich their understanding of topics such as equity and inclusion and can lead to further development of empathy, cultural competence, and a strong commitment to inclusive practices (Coffey & Lavery, 2015).

To provide meaningful experiential learning opportunities, a partnership was established with a local chapter of the Special Olympics – a global organization that offers year-round sports training and athletic competitions for individuals with identified disabilities. Through this collaboration, preservice teachers are invited to support athletes in bowling and basketball in the fall semester, while in the spring, they assist with basketball and track events. Beyond their roles in facilitating athletic participation, preservice teachers often develop authentic relationships with athletes, contributing to the promotion of social and communication skills. These interactions have been consistently described by students as a valuable component of their teacher preparation coursework, offering firsthand insight into the diverse needs and strengths of individuals with disabilities. Engaging in these service-learning experiences enables preservice teachers to identify potential barriers to participation, explore strategies for promoting accessibility, and critically reflect on prior assumptions and societal biases regarding disability. Such immersive experiences have been shown to significantly enhance preservice teachers' knowledge, empathy, and comfort levels when working with individuals with disabilities (Reeves, Johnson, & Giles, 2019).

First Person Perspectives

In the course efforts to promote students understanding of both disability and inclusion, there are multiple opportunities to learn about disability and the disabled experience from experts, those individuals who have firsthand experience. Including first person perspectives within this course provides preservice teachers with insider perspectives and helps them recognize the

capabilities and individual experiences of people with disabilities which could lead to a more inclusive understanding about teaching (Hughes, 2023).

Preservice teachers engage in a variety of structured experiences designed to deepen their understanding of disability and inclusive education. One approach involves participation in a semester-long book or media club. As part of this, I have curated a selection of four books and two podcasts (see Table 1), each offering authentic narratives from individuals with lived experiences of disability. Students choose a text or podcast that aligns with their interests and form small discussion groups of four to five members. Each group collaboratively determines a reading or listening schedule and completes two weekly tasks. First, students respond individually to instructor-generated discussion prompts, which serve to elicit critical reflection and personal engagement with the material. Second, during weekly class sessions, groups are provided time to discuss elements of the content that surprised them, resonated with their own experiences, or provoked new questions. These discussions often yield rich insights and foster a deeper understanding of the diverse ways disability is experienced and represented.

The individual written responses offer me valuable data on the students' evolving conceptions of disability and inclusion, while the group discussions provide a collaborative space for meaning-making and perspective-sharing. Students frequently report that these conversations enhance their learning, particularly by allowing them to explore the complexity and variability of disabled experiences. For instance, one student with dyslexia reflected on how their personal experience differed from that of a character in the selected book, illustrating the heterogeneity within disability categories. Such reflective and dialogic practices not only challenge prevailing assumptions and biases but also encourage preservice teachers to critically examine their own beliefs and positionalities. Moreover, these engagements provide concrete examples of inclusive pedagogical strategies, including differentiated instruction, targeted interventions, and adaptive learning environments (Valente & Danforth, 2016).

Table 1

Book/Media Club Options

Books/Media	Author/Podcast Host	Pages/Episodes
Fish in a Tree	Lynda Mullaly Hunt	320 pages
El Deafo	Cece Bell	233 pages
Haben	Haben Girma	288 pages
Cursed	Karol Ruth Silverstein	336 pages
The Heumann Perspective	Judith Heumann	58 episodes
Disability Visibility podcast	Alice Wong	104 episodes

Inclusive Community Building

Facilitating opportunities for students to engage in both academic and social activities is widely recognized as a foundational practice in inclusive education (Stanford Teaching Commons, 2020). Such experiences foster a sense of belonging and contribute to the development of a supportive learning community. In my course, preservice teachers are assigned to small "homegroups" of five students at the beginning of the semester. These groups serve as consistent collaborative units, allowing students to build relationships and engage in peer-supported learning over time.

To further cultivate community, the course incorporates weekly community-building exercises. During the initial weeks, I model these activities to help establish expectations and demonstrate potential formats. Subsequently, each homegroup is responsible for designing and facilitating one community-building activity for the entire class (see Table 2). These activities are intentionally low-stakes and enjoyable, encouraging students to connect with one another in meaningful ways. Importantly, many of these exercises are adaptable for use in future Kindergarten-12th grade classroom settings, providing pre-service teachers with practical tools for fostering inclusive environments. During observations of these activities, I have witnessed enhanced student engagement, active participation, and believe it contributes to the development of our inclusive classroom climate. By creating space for interpersonal connection and collaborative reflection, the course supports preservice teachers in understanding the relational dimensions of inclusive education and the importance of cultivating community within diverse learning contexts.

Table 2

Community Building Exercises

Name	Resource
Icebreaker Activities	https://museumhack.com/list-icebreakers-questions/
Community and Belonging	https://teaching.cornell.edu/teaching-resources/building-inclusive-classrooms/fostering-community-and-belonging
Games	Rock, Paper, Scissors- https://www.wikihow.com/Play-Rock,-Paper,-Scissors Headbanz- https://officialgamerules.org/game-rules/hedbanz/ This or That- https://gamerules.com/rules/this-or-that/ Charades- https://www.wikihow.com/Play-Charades

An additional strategy for fostering an inclusive classroom community involves the co-development of classroom norms between instructors and students (Stanford Teaching Commons, 2020). Rather than imposing expectations unilaterally, this approach invites students to collaboratively define the values and behaviors that will guide their shared learning environment.

At the beginning of the semester, students in their homegroups engage in structured discussions about their prior experiences in college courses, identifying practices that have been effective, those that have been challenging, and articulating expectations for both peers and the instructor. The resulting norms are compiled into a collective agreement and made visible both in the physical classroom (e.g., posted on chart paper) and digitally via the course's Learning Management System (LMS). Importantly, these norms are not static; they are revisited regularly throughout the semester to assess their relevance and effectiveness. I facilitate these check-ins, typically three times over a 15-week term, and incorporate student feedback to revise and refine the norms as needed (See Table 3 for examples of class norms).

Table 3

Course Norms Example

Spring 2025 Course Norms
• Limit side conversations when instructor and/or other students are speaking. • Be open minded and willing to listen to others' views. • Participate during small group discussions. • Respect other thoughts and opinions even if you don't agree. • Come to class sessions prepared (complete readings/submit assignments). • Food/Drink are welcome in space. • The instructor will provide a learning environment in which students feel safe and comfortable. • The instructor will provide both positive and constructive feedback in a timely manner. • The instructor will respond to students emails promptly (within a 24-hour timeframe during the weekdays). • Students can excuse themselves to use restroom/get water when they see fit.

This iterative and participatory process reinforces mutual accountability and enhances student buy-in, particularly when instructors model adherence to the agreed-upon expectations. For example, if timely feedback is identified as a shared norm, it is essential that the instructor consistently meets this expectation. Such practices contribute to a flexible and inclusive learning environment where all members feel valued and supported. Co-constructing classroom norms in this way promotes equity, transparency, and a sense of belonging—key components of inclusive pedagogy (Stanford Teaching Commons, 2020) and students are encouraged to utilize these same practices within their own future classrooms.

Evidenced-Based Instructional Practices

Two very important components that are included within the course are evidenced-based instructional practices. For this course, High Leverage Practices (HLPs) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) are the focus. I selected HLPs as they are research-informed instructional, assessment and classroom management strategies that are fundamental to support-

ing student learning and engagement (Council for Exceptional Children & CEEDAR Center, 2024). They occur in high frequency in teaching and are designed to be universally applicable, feasible for implementation, and especially critical for supporting students with identified disabilities in inclusive classrooms (McLeskey et al., 2022). I additionally selected UDL as it is a scientifically valid framework for guiding educational practices that provide students with flexibility, reduce barriers, and maintain high expectations for all students (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2020). Further discussion on how these two are embedded within my course are outlined below.

The 22 HLPs serve as a foundational framework for effective instruction, particularly in supporting students with disabilities (McLeskey et al., 2022). Although originally developed with special education teachers in mind, these practices are equally critical for general education teachers, especially in rural contexts where inclusive practices may be less consistently implemented. Importantly, while HLPs are framed as strategies that benefit students with disabilities, research has demonstrated their positive impact on all learners (McLeskey et al., 2022). Developed by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) in collaboration with the CEEDAR Center, the HLPs are organized into four domains: collaboration, assessment, instruction, and social/emotional/behavioral supports. Within my course, particular emphasis is placed on the domains of collaboration and instruction.

A central focus of the collaboration domain is co-teaching, which involves a general education and a special education teacher working together in the same classroom to deliver grade-level content while meeting the individualized needs of students with disabilities. For many preservice teachers, co-teaching is a novel concept, as they have not encountered it during their own K–12 schooling. To address this gap, the course includes instructional videos that demonstrate each of the six co-teaching models (See Table 4) in authentic K–12 settings. After reviewing brief descriptions of each model, students work in their homegroups to identify potential advantages and challenges associated with each approach. These analyses are then shared in a whole-class discussion, reinforcing the importance of intentional and effective collaboration in implementing co-teaching practices.

Table 4

Co-Teaching Models

Model Name	Definition
One Teach, One Observe	One teacher leads instruction while the other observes students to gather data on behavior, engagement, or academic performance.
One Teach, One Assist	One teacher delivers the lesson while the other circulates to provide individual support to students who need help.

Station Teaching	The class is divided into small groups that rotate through stations. Each teacher is responsible for a station, and a third station may involve independent work.
Parallel Teaching	The class is split into two groups, and each teacher teaches the same content simultaneously to their group.
Alternative Teaching	One teacher works with a larger group while the other provides specialized instruction to a smaller group.
Team Teaching	Both teachers share responsibility for planning and delivering instruction together. This model reflects the highest level of collaboration.

The instructional domain of HLPs includes twelve evidence-based strategies that are foundational to effective teaching, particularly in inclusive classrooms (see Table 5). To support preservice teachers in developing a deeper understanding of these practices, the course incorporates a project-based assignment that allows for both individual and collaborative engagement. Students select one instructional HLP that aligns with their interests and create a visual representation – either in a physical format or using a digital tool – that includes the following components: a description of the selected HLP, practical strategies for implementation, a summary of supporting research, and a reflection on how they envision applying the practice in their future teaching contexts.

Upon completion of the project, students are placed into small groups composed of classmates who explored different HLPs. Within these groups, students share their visual representations and discuss their interpretations and applications of the practices. This opportunity to share fosters a broader understanding of the instructional HLPs and highlights how their implementation may vary across content areas and grade levels. Preservice teachers frequently report that this activity enhances their confidence and positions them as emerging experts in inclusive instructional strategies. These instructional HLPs are distinguished by their demonstrated impact on student learning outcomes and are considered essential competencies for all educators, particularly those preparing to work in inclusive settings (McLeskey et al., 2022).

Table 5

Instructional HLPs

Instructional HLPs
Identify and prioritize long-and short-term learning goals.
Systematically design instruction toward a specific learning goal.
Adapt a curriculum tasks and materials for specific learning goals.
Teach cognitive and metacognitive strategies to support learning and independence.
Provide scaffolded supports.

Use explicit instruction.
Use flexible grouping.
Use strategies to promote active student engagement.
Use assistive and instructional technologies.
Provide intensive instruction.
Teach students to maintain and generalize new learning across time and settings.
Provide positive and constructive feedback to guide students' learning and behavior.

UDL is a research-based framework for designing inclusive classrooms, curricula, and instructional practices that are accessible to all learners. Grounded in decades of neuroscience research, UDL is organized around three core principles: multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation, and multiple means of action and expression (CAST UDL Guidelines, 2018). These principles guide educators in proactively removing barriers to learning by offering flexible pathways that accommodate diverse student needs. Many preservice teachers enter teacher preparation programs having experienced predominantly "one-size-fits-all" classroom environments, where uniformity in instruction often leads to exclusionary practices. To address this, UDL principles are embedded throughout the course to model inclusive design and support pre-service teachers in reimagining their future classrooms.

The first principle, *multiple means of engagement*, addresses the *why* of learning by emphasizing student motivation and interest. In practice, this is supported through strategies such as sharing daily learning objectives at the beginning and end of each class session, helping students understand the relevance of course content to their future roles as educators. Additionally, students are given choices in how they engage with course materials and assignments. For example, they may select from a choice board of project formats aligned with their interests and prior knowledge, and they are encouraged to decide whether to work independently or collaboratively with a peer. These opportunities for choice and autonomy foster a sense of ownership and engagement, while modeling inclusive instructional design.

The second principle of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), *multiple means of representation*, addresses the *what* of learning by ensuring that students have access to content in formats that best support their perception and comprehension (CAST UDL Guidelines, 2018). To model this principle, the course is intentionally designed with accessibility at its core. All instructional materials provided through the LMS are formatted to allow students to adjust settings based on individual needs and preferences. In-class presentations incorporate both text and visuals, with images accompanied by detailed alt-text descriptions, while I simultaneously deliver content through auditory explanation. This multimodal approach supports diverse learning preferences and promotes equitable access to information. The course also integrates multiple perspectives and concrete examples to enhance conceptual understanding.

Students are given the option to engage with the course textbook in print or digital formats, further supporting flexible access. Additionally, I intentionally connect new content to students' prior knowledge, reinforcing key concepts and aligning instruction with clearly articulated learning objectives.

The third principle of UDL, *multiple means of action and expression*, focuses on the *how* of learning by providing students with varied opportunities to demonstrate their understanding (CAST UDL Guidelines, 2018). In my course, students are offered flexible options for completing assignments. For example, discussion posts on the LMS may be submitted in written, audio, or video formats, allowing students to select the modality that best aligns with their strengths and preferences. Other assignments offer choices such as creating a podcast, composing a creative paper, developing a digital project, or completing a traditional written exam.

To support skill development and scaffold learning, the course employs the "I Do, We Do, You Do" instructional model. This approach begins with the instructor modeling a task or concept ("I Do"), followed by guided practice with peer and instructor support ("We Do"), and culminates in independent student application ("You Do"). This structure not only supports mastery of course content but also provides a replicable framework for preservice teachers to use in their own future classrooms to promote inclusive and differentiated instruction.

The principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) are explicitly modeled by myself, with deliberate efforts made to highlight their integration within course activities and assignments throughout the semester. By drawing students' attention to the application of these principles, the instructional approach fosters a deeper understanding of how UDL can be implemented in their future teaching practices. This intentional emphasis supports the generalization of UDL strategies beyond the immediate learning context. Engaging preservice teachers with UDL principles equips them to move beyond traditional "one-size-fits-all" pedagogies and begin designing learning environments that are both accessible and inclusive for diverse student populations.

Discussion

Preservice teachers benefit from experiencing inclusive educational practices themselves to help build their own understanding of how they might implement it in their own future classrooms. Given the number of students with identified disabilities in our public schools it is imperative that we build teachers inclusive educational competence so that they have the skills and knowledge necessary to improve the academic and functional skills of students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). Teacher preparation programs play a crucial role in ensuring teachers are equipped to teach students with diverse needs (Blanton et al., 2011). The successful implementation of inclusive practices by teachers is influenced by their attitudes (Savolainen et

al., 2012), comfort level (Forlin et al., 2011), and experiences (Leyser, Zeiger, & Romi, 2011) with supporting students with disabilities. By incorporating activities/learning opportunities within a teacher preparation program that addresses all these components we are helping ensure that our future teachers are prepared to support their future students with disabilities.

Limitations

Though the inclusive educational competencies that are discussed in this paper are based on research, the application and ties to the course content are developed and facilitated by one university instructor who teaches preservice teachers in a rural Midwest university campus in the United States. Some of the applications of competencies may need to be modified to fit teacher preparation programs in different parts of the United States. Additionally, the feedback from the preservice teachers that is included within this article is collected anonymously via qualitative surveys and does not necessarily represent the views/opinions of all the preservice teachers. It's important to note that building teachers' inclusive educational competencies is an ongoing process and must continue well beyond this course with additional coursework and ongoing professional development (Donath et al., 2023). In the future, it would be helpful to complete a more in-depth research project to collect data on how preservice teachers utilize these inclusive competencies within the first few years of their professional careers.

Conclusion

This article examines how a teacher preparation course initiates the development of preservice teachers' competencies in inclusive education. Central to this process is a service-learning component that enables students to engage directly with individuals with disabilities, thereby enriching their experiential knowledge while challenging potential misconceptions and biases related to disability. The course design emphasizes first-person perspectives, which are integrated into both content and classroom discussions to deepen students' understanding of human diversity and to enhance their knowledge of differentiation, instructional adaptations, and accessibility. Community-building activities are also embedded within the course to underscore the importance of fostering inclusive learning environments where all students, regardless of ability, experience a sense of belonging. Furthermore, the course introduces evidence-based practices such as High-Leverage Practices (HLPs) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL), providing preservice teachers with a foundational framework for addressing the diverse needs of learners in future classrooms. These inclusive competencies are essential for all educators but are particularly critical for those preparing to teach in rural settings, where unique challenges often necessitate adaptable and inclusive pedagogical approaches.

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