Special Education Teacher Preparation and Inclusive Postsecondary Education: Effects of a Peer Mentorship Field Experience

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Abstract

Students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) often require academic, employment, and social support to be successful in inclusive postsecondary education programs. One way to provide support in these areas is via peer mentorship. In a peer mentor relationship, students with IDD obtain the support they need, but the peer mentors themselves also benefit. This qualitative case study examined the impacts of a peer mentorship experience associated with an inclusive postsecondary education program on special education teacher candidates. The peer mentorship experience existed as an optional component of a course focused on secondary special education for special education teacher candidates. Key findings included: 1) teacher candidates developed a better sense of disability; 2) teacher candidates learned to see students with IDD as peers; and 3) teacher candidates made connections to the importance of transition planning for students even while in elementary school. Based on the findings of this study, those who prepare special education teachers should consider providing teacher candidates with opportunities to work with students with IDD in inclusive postsecondary education settings.

Keywords: inclusion, postsecondary education, teacher education, intellectual disability, developmental disability

Plain Language Summary

- Students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) often need support in school, employment, and community settings in college. One way to provide this support is through peer mentorship.
- We wanted to explore what college students preparing to be special education teachers learned about being peer mentors for students with IDD in college.
- **What we did in this study:** We asked college students preparing to be special education teachers if they wanted to be a peer mentor or

complete a different assignment for a class. This class was about supporting students with disabilities transition from high school.

- **Findings:** We found the college students preparing to be special education teachers had important takeaways from being a peer mentor.
  - First, they told us they understood disability better.
  - Second, they saw their relationship with the students with IDD as being similar to the friendships they developed with other college students in class.
  - Third, they learned how important it is to help students with IDD plan for life after high school early, even in elementary school.
- **Conclusion:** This study shows one way college students preparing to be special education teachers can learn more about supporting students with IDD and the possibilities they have for their future, like going to college.

Legislative mandates in the United States involving education for students with disabilities in public school classrooms have supported inclusive practices (e.g., Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 2004). Although these initially may be viewed as efforts to impact the lives of children with disabilities, advocates will also acknowledge additional benefits to inclusive educational practice and policy. When schools provide opportunities for students with disabilities to learn in inclusive classrooms, their same-age peers also benefit (Ryndak et al., 2013). Although these inclusive education mandates do not extend to higher education, the benefits of inclusion may still be present for both students with disabilities and those without (Grigal et al., 2012).

Inclusive postsecondary education programs are designed to offer opportunities for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), who may not be able to meet traditional entrance requirements or have barriers preventing them from attending in the traditional way, to learn alongside same-age peers at an institution of higher education (Grigal et al., 2022; Grigal & Papay, 2018). Institutions of higher education that offer inclusive postsecondary education programs may be able to make mutually beneficial arrangements between students with and without IDD. This may be particularly true for pre-service teachers, who typically engage in field experiences as part of their professional training.

Field experiences are recognized as a hallmark of pre-service teacher training across the globe (e.g., Biermann et al., 2015; Dunst et al., 2020; Hollins, 2011; Zhao & Zhang, 2017). Through these opportunities, teacher candidates receive firsthand experiences in using the skills they have developed in their teacher training programs. In terms of special education teacher training, through field experiences, special education teacher candidates (hereafter: teacher candidates) have the opportunity to apply theories and strategies from their coursework, problem-solve in real time, and gain confidence in working with students in special education (Nagro & deBettencourt, 2017). Field experiences may be particularly valuable for teacher candidates interested in better

understanding post-school transition planning and person-centered planning (May et al., 2018).

Field experiences for teacher candidates may involve a variety of activities, including lesson planning, data collection, opportunities for personal reflection, observation, and coaching (O'Brien et al., 2024. Although most special education field experience placements take place in K-12 settings, teacher candidates could also engage in high-quality field experiences without leaving campus if their university offered an inclusive postsecondary education program. With this in mind, the purpose of this study was to explore the perceived impact of peer mentoring in an inclusive postsecondary education program on teacher candidates.

Peer Mentorship

Terrion and Leonard (2007) described peer mentorship as a formal or informal relationship between two people similar in age and/or experience who support each other in career and/or socioemotional pursuits. Although this definition emphasizes equal power dynamics and levels of experience, peer mentoring can also be used with "vulnerable students to enable them to navigate through their education" (Terrion & Leonard, 2007, p. 149). While students with IDD are not inherently vulnerable, such students are vulnerable for less-than-ideal outcomes in postsecondary education settings without proper support. Moreover, peer mentoring has been found to be successful in supporting students with IDD in postsecondary education (e.g., Hart et al., 2010) and is a key aspect of successful inclusive postsecondary education programs (Grigal et al., 2012).

Peer mentors may serve in a variety of roles to support inclusive postsecondary education offerings. Peer mentors assist students with IDD by accompanying them to their courses, socializing with them, or supporting them as job coaches (Jones & Goble, 2012). Workman and Green (2019) described three potential roles for peer mentors, including educational coach (providing in-class support for a student enrolled in a traditional university course), tutor (supporting students with academic endeavors outside of the traditional university course), and social coach (facilitating experiences to increase opportunities for integration into the campus community). Effective strategies to consider when developing peer mentor programs include (a) recruiting mentors early in their degree program to set the stage for more lengthy involvement, (b) recruiting peers from existing campus networks, and (c) training peers to truly understand inclusivity as a means to move beyond the deficit model (Wilt & Morningstar, 2020).

Despite potential power differentials in peer mentoring relationships between teacher candidates and students with IDD, researchers assert that these relationships should be mutually beneficial, with the suggestion that fun and socialization can be the "equalizer" (Kleinert et al., 2012). Indeed, Hafner et al. (2011) articulate the importance of graduate and undergraduate peer mentors, as they can support participating students by: (a) improving academic skills, (b) fostering social skill development, (c) increasing access and opportunities to extracurricular activities, (d) helping with schedule-related issues, and (e) increasing the general inclusiveness of the program. The spirit of these relationships is reciprocal; both parties play equal roles, and opportunities are provided

for students with IDD to build a relationship other than the usual roles of the helper and the one being helped (Santos et al., 2012). In this way, the collaboration of teacher candidates and students with IDD in the current study could be viewed as peer or near-peer support (Anderson et al., 2015). However, we will use the term "mentorship," as teacher candidates were focused on supporting students with IDD in postsecondary and employment settings as role models.

Rise of Postsecondary Education for Students with IDD

Though efforts to support students with IDD in postsecondary education settings have existed since the 1970s (Neubert et al., 2001), the passage of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (2008) in the U.S. resulted in greater access to higher education as programs became more readily available. In 2009, 149 inclusive postsecondary education programs existed in the U.S. (Grigal et al., 2012); a decade later, nearly 7,000 students with IDD were enrolled in 274 inclusive postsecondary education programs in the U.S. (Grigal et al., 2022). Currently, there are 334 inclusive postsecondary education programs in the United States (Think College, 2024). Collaborations with peer mentors are essential components of successful inclusive postsecondary education programs (Grigal et al., 2012). Multiple models exist for mentor programs, including volunteer/friendship models, service-learning models, and paid models (Krech-Bowles & Becht, 2022).

Benefits of Working with Students with IDD

There are a number of studies noting the benefits of an inclusive postsecondary education program for students with IDD and for students without disabilities, including professional, personal, and academic benefits (Carter & McCabe, 2021). Documented benefits for peers include (a) learning more about the postsecondary education transition for students with IDD, (b) opportunities to practice pedagogical strategies, (c) increased confidence and self-efficacy related to working with students with IDD, (d) improved attitudes regarding inclusion, and (e) a better understanding of disabilities in general (Jones et al., 2011; Novak et al., 2009; Santos et al., 2012; Scheef et al., 2020). These benefits could be especially valuable for pre-service teachers. Additional benefits for students in teacher education programs relate to the opportunity for authentic and direct experiences involving inclusive education (Carroll et al., 2009). Plotner et al. (2023) found that field experiences with students in inclusive postsecondary education programs had a positive impact on the extent to which teacher candidates believe individuals with disabilities can live independently. The current study builds on this research to learn more about these mutually beneficial partnerships, as Carter et al. (2019) noted that research is still needed in the area of peers' (in this case, teacher candidates') perspectives on the relationship.

Research Questions

Special education teacher educators should consider field experiences that allow teacher candidates to learn more about the postsecondary education possibilities for students with IDD. The purpose of this research was to explore the impacts of a peer mentorship field experience on teacher candidates as they worked with postsecondary

students with IDD enrolled in an inclusive postsecondary education program, the Postsecondary Partner Program (hereafter: Partners; pseudonym). Specifically, we explored:

1. What realizations did these teacher candidates have about students with IDD due to their peer mentorship experience with Partners?
2. How did these teacher candidates' thinking about their responsibilities as future teachers change due to their peer mentorship experience with Partners?

Findings from this study have potential to inform university-based special education programs and teacher educators working to develop broader field experiences for teacher candidates.

Method

This was a qualitative case study (Yin, 2018), with the "case" defined as the teacher candidates engaged in peer mentorship activities with students with IDD enrolled in Partners in this single semester. Below, we describe Partners, the data sources utilized to learn more about the participants' experiences with peer mentorship, and our data analysis methods.

Program

Partners is a two-year program that results in students earning an undergraduate certificate, which is approved by the University and the State Board of Education. Partners is also recognized by the United States Department of Education as a Comprehensive Transition Program. Enrolled students complete program-specific coursework, which includes college and career readiness, three employment practica, and a culminating portfolio course. Program-specific courses are taken pass/fail for credit. Students enrolled in Partners also complete five elective classes from across the University (e.g., in Criminal Justice, Film, History), and have the opportunity to take at least one elective for credit. In addition, students in Partners are also required to take a "foundations" class required by all first-year students at the University for credit. While not the focus of the study, there were five students from Partners who participated in the peer mentor experience with teacher candidates. Students in Partners were all White and between the ages of 19-24 during the study. Two of the students were in their second year of the program (both male), and four of the students were in their first year of the program (one female). (Note that the first author is the director of Partners and instructor of the course for the teacher candidates).

Teacher candidates who chose to participate in the peer mentorship experience were required to meet with students in Partners for a minimum of 18 hours throughout a single semester, providing the students with academic and job coaching as well as supporting students in social situations (e.g., attending University athletic events, club meetings, or informal gatherings, like coffee or watching movies). Students who did not choose to participate in the peer mentorship experience engaged in a research project

based on evidence-based transition practices from the website of the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (2024). All students learned about postschool options for students with IDD in the Secondary Education class they were enrolled in for the semester.

With regard to job coaching, teacher candidates supported students as they worked on campus by prompting students to stay on task, modeling the task, or motivating students. With regard to academic coaching, teacher candidates provided assistance with time management, completing assignments, and organizing course materials. Some teacher candidates also attended program classes where they engaged in course activities alongside their supported students. Teacher candidates were able to choose the environments they participated in based on their interests and schedules. Peer mentors were provided with support by a graduate assistant working with students in Partners who had experience as a Transition Teacher. The Transition Teacher met individually with teacher candidates to explain expectations for students with IDD as well as the teacher candidates. The Transition Teacher also modeled behaviors as necessary (e.g., how to use prompts on the work site to go to the next task). After each partnering instance, teacher candidates were required to complete a journal entry to reflect on their activities (see Data Collection below).

Setting and Participants

This study took place at a university in the western U.S. that has an enrollment of approximately 22,000 students. Ten teacher candidates who identified as women chose to participate in the peer mentorship experience from August through December of 2021. All were working to earn both special education and primary (K-5) education undergraduate degrees, identified as White, were in the third year of their degree, and ages 21-22. Teacher candidates were enrolled in a Secondary Special Education course focused on transition at the time of the study. Prior to implementing optional field experience with Partners, no field experience was included in the course. Prior to data collection, the study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the institution at which it was being conducted. All participants provided informed consent.

Positionality of the Authors

Prior to explaining the data collection and analysis, it is important to describe the positions of each of the authors. The first author was the instructor for the Secondary Special Education course as well as the Partners program director. Because of these positions, the second and third authors were invited to join the research study to provide more distanced input and analysis. The second author is a teacher educator and educational researcher who did not instruct any courses with the participants, nor interact with Partners students. The second author previously was at the same institution as the course and Partners program and had worked with another program at the institution supporting postsecondary transition for students with disabilities. The third author is a special education teacher educator who specializes in postsecondary transition for students with IDD. The third author is at a different institution from where the research took place, but has significant knowledge of the Partners program. Together, this research

team had intimate knowledge of the study site and program while still allowing for objectivity in the research.

Data Collection

As part of their course, teacher candidates were asked to complete three journal entries throughout the semester using the Describe-Examine-Articulate Learning (DEAL) model (Ash & Clayton, 2009). The purpose of the DEAL model is to facilitate critical reflection of theory and practice. The prompt for the teacher candidates' journal entries can be found in Figure 1. Due to absences and non-completion, 23 DEAL journal entries were collected. Note that it was emphasized to teacher candidates that they would receive full credit for the DEAL journals if they answered the prompts completely; they were not graded on the content of those responses in order to reduce response bias.

Figure 1

DEAL Journal Prompt

Describe

Students describe their service-learning experience since beginning or the last time they completed their journal.

Examine

Goal #1: Students will examine how peer mentorship programs facilitate meaningful, inclusive postsecondary education for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

- While you were participating in activities with R-PEP students, what was trying to be accomplished?

- What went well with regard to what was trying to be accomplished?

Goal #2: Students will learn about the need for high academic expectations for ALL students.

- What assumptions/expectations did you bring to the situation? How did they

  affect what you did/didn't think, feel, decide, do? To what extent did they prove

  true? If not true, why was there a discrepancy?

- How did this situation challenge or reinforce your values, beliefs, convictions

  (e.g., my sense of right and wrong, my priorities, my judgements)?

Goal #3: Students will appreciate the need to begin the transition process early with

their future students while using data to make decisions about students' needs.

- When you think about what was trying to be accomplished, what types of things

  do you think could have been done differently to help create a better outcome?

- When you think about what was trying to be accomplished, what types of things

  do you think could have been done differently before students enrolled in R-

  PEP to help create a better outcome?

- When you think about what was trying to be accomplished, what other

  information would you like to know to help inform your hypotheses on what

  might help create a better outcome?

Articulate Learning

- What did I learn?

- How did I learn it?

- Why does it matter?

- What will I do in light of it?

Teacher candidates also participated in one 40-minute focus group facilitated by the second author at the end of the semester; the first author was not present so as to reduce response bias. Teacher candidates were asked about their experiences with students in Partners, what they had gained from the experience, and how the experience may have influenced their future teaching practice. Six of the teacher candidates participated (four teacher candidates did not respond to the invitation to participate in the focus group); the focus group was recorded and transcribed verbatim.

A final data collection method was through a Google form. Each teacher candidate was asked to complete a Google form each time they met with a student in Partners. The form asked for information about the date/time of the meeting, the activity undertaken, and to recount a memorable moment from the experience. One hundred and sixteen entries were made into the Google form. Table 1 reports on the participants, their partnering instances, and their related data sources.

Table 1

Participants and Data Collection Details

Participant	Partnering Instances	DEAL Journal Completions (DEAL)	Google Form Completions (GF)	Focus Group Participation (FG)
Addie	Job Coaching Partners Course	1, 2, 3	9	N
Beth	Partners Course Study Table	2	8	N
Christy	Job Coaching Lunch Partners Course Social Event* Study Table	1, 2, 3	10	Y
Delia	Partners Course Study Table	1, 2, 3	21	Y
Eve	Job Coaching	2	6	Y

	Partners Course			
Finley	Job Coaching Lunch Social Event* Study Table	1, 2, 3	12	Y
Gena	Job Coaching Partners Social Event* Study Table	1, 2, 3	19	Y
Hailey	Partners Course	1, 2	17	N
Izzy	Job Coaching Lunch Partners Course Study Table	1, 2, 3	10	N
Jade	Job Coaching Study Table	2	4	Y
TOTALS		23	116	Y = 6

* The social event was organized by the Teacher Candidates and Partners students rather than by the instructor.

Data Analysis

DEAL journal entries, focus group transcripts, and "memorable moment" responses from the Google form were analyzed in a constant comparative manner (Glaser, 1965) by the second author using the Dedoose (SocioCultural Research Consultants, LLC, 2023) data analysis software. To begin, data were de-identified and all participants were given pseudonyms. Then, the data were broadly coded for "realizations" and "responsibilities"; "realizations" were defined as ideas that teacher candidates seemed to become aware of through their interactions with students in Partners, while "responsibilities" were defined as duties or opportunities that teacher candidates described as being something they will enact as teachers. Sub-codes grounded in the data were created as needed and the data were reviewed several times to capture all sub-codes. This process yielded seven sub-codes for "realizations" and 10 sub-codes for "responsibilities." At this point, the first and second authors met to discuss codes and excerpts to consider issues of interpretation and discuss the application of codes. Thereafter, all codes were compared by the first and second authors and grouped into two "realizations" categories (Capabilities of students with IDD; Friendships) and two "responsibilities" categories (Socioemotional responsibilities; Curricular/informational responsibilities). Finally, the data were themed categorically (Saldaña, 2021) by the first author and titled using the teacher candidates' own words (see Table 2 for more details on the coding process).

Trustworthiness

To support the trustworthiness of the findings, we considered recommendations from Miles et al. (2020). First, we tried to be clear and detailed in terms of our research questions, participants and setting, the Partners program, how the data were collected, and how the data were analyzed, so that these may be examined by other researchers and stakeholders. An "outsider" (the second author) collected the focus group data so as to reduce response bias. The second author also de-identified the data and took the first pass at data analysis so as to reduce any bias the first author (as Partner director and teacher candidate instructor) may have had. However, after initial data analysis, the second author was brought in to discuss assumptions and interpretations, as well as to have another set of eyes on the process. While this is a small study, we do have ten participants and three different data sources, which allows for data triangulation. Finally, providing the findings in the next section, we have shared numerous exact quotes for a "thick description" of the data.

Table 2

Data Analysis Collection Details

Broad Codes	Sub Codes	Collapsed Sub-Codes	Categorical Themes
Realizations (ideas teacher candidates seemed to become aware of through their interactions with students in Partners)	Seeing students' strengths	Capabilities of students with IDDs	'Individuals with Disabilities are Capable and Valuable'
	Students' self-awareness of abilities		
	Students are capable with the right supports		
	Education does not stop after high school	Postsecondary education for students with IDDs	
	Career education in high school is valuable		
	Value of college programs for students with IDDs		
	These students are my friends	Friendships	'We Were Just People Hanging Out'

Responsibilities (duties or opportunities teacher candidates described as being something they will enact as teachers)	Provide job options/training/career information for students with IDDs	Informational responsibilities	'Give Them the Best Shot at Being Successful at Whatever They Want to Be'
	Know what programs are available for students with IDDs		
	Purposeful and appropriate feedback to students with IDDs	Instructional responsibilities	
	Use the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) when teaching		
	Make personal connections with your students	Seeing and believing in your student	
	Be an advocate for students		'It Is Important to Advocate for Your Students and Have Them Advocate for Themselves'
	Appreciate individuality		
	Recognize students' strengths		
	Help create more inclusive (social) spaces	Providing supports	
	Teach self-help skills to students with IDDs		

Findings

The findings are organized by theme, with the first two themes related to the realizations that the teacher candidates had (RQ #1), and the latter two themes related to responsibilities that teacher candidates described (RQ #2) after participating in the peer mentorship experience. Note that quotations from the teacher candidates are followed by a listing of the data source (DEAL_1-3 = DEAL journal #1, #2, or #3; FG = focus group; GF = Google form). To reiterate, participants were enrolled in a Secondary Special Education course focused on transition while they were also acting as peer mentors, so it is possible that some of the ideas from the course informed the participants' actions and responses. Nonetheless, the findings described here stem from participants' reports of what they took away from the peer mentorship experiences specifically.

I Assumed Wrong

The quote representing this theme and other similar sentiments, were seen repeatedly in the data. For many teacher candidates, participating in Partners reminded them just how capable students with IDD are/can be. For example, Beth stated, "I thought the students in Partners would need a fair amount of assistance and I am sorry that I underestimated them…This experience has reinforced my belief that people are more capable than we might think" (DEAL_2).

Relatedly, this experience reminded teacher candidates that students with disabilities are unique in their strengths and struggles, just like everyone else. When Gena discussed a student in Partners not needing her during study tables, she shared, "[it] was slightly unexpected for me…[but] every single student is different. Some students excel in certain subject matters and need fewer supports but don't do too well in other subjects and need additional supports. All students are different!" (DEAL_1). Finally, connected to seeing students with IDD as quite capable, five teacher candidates noted the importance of a postsecondary education program such as Partners. Both Christy (DEAL_1) and Izzy asserted that students with IDD need not stop their education at high school graduation (DEAL_2). However, Izzy pointed out that having programs specifically tailored in their support for students with IDD is important (DEAL_2). Collectively, the data indicate that peer mentorship interactions reinforced the asset-based philosophy of the program and reminded teacher candidates not to fall prey to a deficit mindset when working with students with IDD.

We Were Just People Hanging Out

A second realization that six of the ten teacher candidates had as a result of peer mentorship participation was that although part of their task was to "hang out" with students in social situations, teacher candidates felt as though they had formed authentic friendships with the Partners students. Throughout the data, there were references to conversations about football games, Taylor Swift, podcasts, family vacations, pets, favorite movies, and homework. These conversations were described as reciprocal and genuine, and extended beyond in-person interactions to Snapchat and Instagram exchanges (FG). Izzy shared,

> I really thought this was just going to be a program where I meet a couple of students for a couple weeks and then I am on my way. I was proven wrong when I started making connections and friendships with some of the students. I know for a fact that these friendships will last too because I have already made plans with some outside of this program and after it should end. This means it is not just a seasonal, school requirement, it is actual long-term friendships. (DEAL_3)

Delia commented insightfully, "this isn't a teaching experience for me but it is instead a friendship experience" (DEAL_1), while Gena shared, "I genuinely enjoy being a part of this [Partners] group…I've truly gotten to become good friends with each of them" (DEAL_3). Perhaps the best illustration of such a friendship was a gathering of three teacher candidates and three students in Partners to watch a movie in one of the dormitories. They played foosball, "had lots of candy and pizza," and were simply college students "hanging out." Christy enthusiastically shared, "Our [Partners] peers kept saying how much of a great time they had, and…I did as well! We definitely have to get together and do it again!" (GF). She went on to say that she moved from being simply friendly with her Partners students to being "actual friends," "getting to know them on a personal basis, and truly sharing our honest thoughts with each other" (DEAL_3).

It Is Important to Advocate for Your Students and Have Them Advocate for Themselves

Reflecting on their peer mentorship experience, teacher candidates noted that they had a responsibility as future teachers to consider how to advocate for what is best for their students while also supporting their students in making their own way in the world. Many teacher candidates discussed how important it was for students with IDD to interact academically and socially with students without disabilities. Some, like Delia (DEAL_2), thought that K-12 schools (and teachers) should be more intentional in this respect, creating purposeful programs for interactions between students with IDD and students without disabilities. Not only would this benefit students with IDD, but it might also reduce discomfort and ignorance in interactions with students with disabilities. Others, like Gena (DEAL_2), focused more on her own classroom and creating a safe space for all students to learn and work together. Along with this, the teacher candidates were committed to seeing students with IDD for who they are and honoring what they want to do in their lives. Representing this sentiment, Jade said,

> I think that [Partners student] has shown me that everyone can be a good student, the only thing that may differ is the support that is needed to help the student. It has reinforced my belief that every student should have access to secondary education. I also think that this has reinforced my beliefs that every student should be as independent as possible.

Give Them the Best Shot at Being Successful at Whatever They Want to Be

The second responsibility teacher candidates felt as a result of their peer mentorship experience was the importance of providing explicit and structured support to students with IDD so that they may be successful in whatever they want to do after high

school. For example, Delia, who plans to teach primary-aged students, noted that some skills "such as…self-advocacy skills, self-management, self-regulation skills…that lead to self-determination skills" should start early so that later, teachers can build on these in tailored ways (FG). Teacher candidates also felt that there should be more explicit teaching and exploration of careers and postsecondary options at the secondary level and lamented that the students could potentially be further ahead had these types of supports been provided more in high school. Izzy shared that she noticed students to be "stressed out" about their workloads and schedules and commented, "Their high schools could have done a better job preparing them for college homework/assignments" (DEAL_2). Christy agreed, stating that some students "could have benefitted from more vocational/transition classes" (DEAL_2). These sentiments led some teacher candidates (e.g., Gena, Hailey, Izzy) to commit to learning about programs and opportunities available to their secondary students with IDD so they might be well-prepared for what life holds for them after high school.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of peer mentoring in an inclusive postsecondary education program on teacher candidates. Our findings align with much of the previous literature. For example, the finding by Scheef and colleagues (2020) that mentorship programs can foster a better understanding of disability is echoed in comments from teacher candidates about their changing perceptions of the varying levels of support that students with IDD required for different assignments. In addition, Kleinert et al.'s (2012) findings that peer mentorship programs can result in mentors viewing themselves more as equals to students with IDD can be seen in comments made by teacher candidates regarding all students being people "hanging out." Echoing findings from Plotner et al. (2023), one participant in this study also discussed the importance of individuals with disabilities having the option to live as independently as possible.

In addition, it is worth noting that six out of 10 teacher candidates in the study described the mentoring relationship as a friendship. On the one hand, in the spirit of capturing the experience of the teacher candidates in their own words, we do not wish to question whether or not this is true. On the other hand, in the American Psychological Association Dictionary, VandenBos (2007) defines friendship as "A voluntary relationship between two or more people that is relatively long-lasting and in which those involved tend to be concerned with meeting the others' needs and interests as well as satisfying their own desires." While teacher candidates had a choice to participate in the mentoring relationship or not, given that they were participating in a class assignment, the nature of the relationship was not completely voluntary. While some researchers have used the term "friend" broadly to include coworkers and classmates (Dunbar, 2010), research has also shown that the number of hours needed to develop close relationships is considerably more (Hall, 2019) than the amount of time that teacher candidates spent with students with IDD in this study. Perhaps teacher candidates saw their relationships in the study as similar to those they had experienced with other students. That is, experiences where a semester-long relationship in a class (e.g., working as partners to study or on a project) is seen as a friendship even if the relationship is temporary. Again,

the description of the mentoring relationship being a friendship was consistently included by teacher candidates, and, as such, is worth noting.

These findings expand on previous research by showing how teacher candidates began giving more consideration to the fact that transition-related concerns are important to consider when teaching younger students. Given that many of the teacher candidates voiced plans for teaching in elementary school settings, it is encouraging to observe their thinking about incorporating transition-related activities into elementary classrooms. Such an integration is considered best practice in supporting students with disabilities as they transition to life after high school (Papay et al., 2015).

Further, mentorship opportunities with students with IDD in an inclusive postsecondary program may help pre-service teachers shift perspectives about disability from a traditional ableist perspective to the social model of disability. Phillips et al. (2018) found that these kinds of interactions may result in the traditionally-enrolled students feeling lower levels of pity for individuals with IDD. This change in perspective may be particularly valuable for pre-service teachers who will be leading inclusive classrooms and facilitating interaction between students with and without IDD. Aligned with the findings of this study, these engagement opportunities allow mentors in an inclusive postsecondary education program to better understand personal bias, which may lead to more authentic and more frequent interactions with students with IDD (Jones et al., 2016; Phillips et al., 2018).

Implications for Practice and Directions for Future Research

Peer support is an essential component of inclusive postsecondary education programs (Grigal et al., 2012). One of the primary rationales for the development of such offerings is the opportunity for students with IDD to follow the same path as classmates and have opportunities to engage with same-age peers (Uditsky & Hughson, 2012). When seeking to develop or promote inclusive postsecondary education offerings, advocates should not only mention the benefits to students with IDD but also describe benefits for traditionally-enrolled students. These might be particularly important to teacher candidates, who have career goals that involve supporting individuals with disabilities. When recruiting peer mentors for inclusive postsecondary education programs, personnel should consider targeted recruitment of teacher candidates. These efforts should include an explanation of the mentorship experience that may benefit them professionally. In addition, instructors could explore the possibility of adding the mentorship experience as a course-connected practicum experience. Providing structured opportunities may also increase the extent to which peers are interested in serving as a mentor. For example, practitioners can follow the example described by Carroll et al. (2009), where peers without IDD collaborated with students in an inclusive postsecondary education program on academic projects aligned with mutual interests.

Further, as the existence of inclusive postsecondary education programs continues to grow, calls have been made for teacher preparation programs to prepare teacher candidates to support students with IDD successfully transitioning to postsecondary education (Grigal et al., 2023). Embedding mentorship experiences into

secondary special education courses, as was done in this study, is one way this could be accomplished. Moreover, as inclusive postsecondary education is still relatively new to the state and region where Partners is offered, it is likely the case that schools need to learn how to prepare students with IDD for this pursuit. Future research should examine the best ways to provide professional development to in-service teachers, administrators, and other related professionals for supporting students with IDD in gaining the skills necessary for successfully participating in inclusive postsecondary education. This may be especially important in other regions where inclusive postsecondary education programs are less established.

To expand on the findings of this study, future researchers may also consider studying the features of in-service teachers who served as mentors in an inclusive postsecondary education program. Once in the field, teacher candidates may have a better understanding of how their experience impacted them personally and professionally. Another avenue for future research would be to investigate whether particular mentorship activities are more impactful than others for the mentors, as the mentors in this study did not refer to certain activities in these ways. For example, is it more impactful to work with individuals with disabilities while they are enrolled in a course, or do informal activities such as study tables or social outings yield more meaningful outcomes for mentors?

Finally, while the focus of this study was on teacher candidates, future research should also examine the perceptions of the students with IDD who participate in mentorship programs. Such research could focus on identifying what roles students with IDD find most supportive for mentors to engage in, as well as what strategies were most and least effective for helping students with IDD feel included.

Limitations

When considering the generalizability of findings from this study, readers should consider certain limitations. First, all participants were involved in a single inclusive postsecondary education program. Although other programs likely have similarities, each offering is unique, and other structures may lead to different findings. Second, readers should consider that all 10 participants were White females studying elementary and special education. More diversity of demographic characteristics would have perhaps increased the generalizability of the study. Third, the DEAL model was selected to facilitate investigation of the perceptions of participating teacher candidates. However, use of this specific tool may not have captured all the thoughts and insights that participants experienced. Additional reflections from participants may have been missed in the current study that could also be important to examine further. Future research should explore different modes for obtaining participants' perceptions as well as different prompts about their experiences. Fourth, while teacher candidates had an option to not participate in the mentorship experience by completing an alternate assignment, it is possible that the class aspect of participating as a mentor may have affected their willingness to communicate about their experiences. Fifth, no data was collected on the perceptions of the students with IDD that the teacher candidates supported. The involvement of individuals with disabilities in research they participate in should be highly

valued. Sixth, no evaluation of the quality of the mentorship was included in the current study. Future research should include such evaluation to ensure that the support provided to students with IDD is aligned with best practices.

Conclusion

This study sought to learn more about teacher candidates' realizations about and feelings of responsibility stemming from their experience supporting students with IDD in postsecondary education. Given the benefits of postsecondary education for students with IDD (e.g., Grigal et al., 2022), it is vital that teacher candidates fully understand what these options may entail and how they might support their K-12 students in exploring and preparing for these options. Similar to Nagro and deBettencourt's (2017) findings, several teacher candidates in this study had not interacted with secondary/postsecondary-aged students with IDD in their training, and if they had, it was more in life skills rather than academic capacity. Consequently, the experience and knowledge gained through their peer mentorship experience with students in Partners allowed these teacher candidates to become familiar with what postsecondary education for students with IDD can look like and consider how they might support students in attending such programs. As the number of inclusive postsecondary education programs for students with IDD continues to rise (Grigal et al., 2022), so will the opportunities to create field peer mentorship experiences like the ones described here. Special education teacher educators would do well to consider how they might strategically craft field experiences with inclusive postsecondary education programs to better support teacher candidates as well as students with IDD in K-12 and beyond.

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