

# CIDDL Research and Practice Brief 10: Preparing Preservice Teachers to Address Ableism Through Social Media



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## PUBLISHED

January 19, 2022



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### Suggested Citation:

Patterson, M. S. & the CIDDL Team. (2022). Preparing pre-service teachers to address ableism through social media. The Center for Innovation, Design, and Digital Learning. <https://ciddl.org/preparing-preservice-teachers-to-address-ableism-through-social-media/>

# OUR COLLECTIVE WHY 99

Dear stakeholder,

Thank you for engaging with the Center for Innovation, Design, and Digital Learning ([CIDDL](#)). The work that you are about to access is supported with funding from the Office of Special Education Programs at the U.S. Department of Education.

The CIDDL Center is striving to impact the use of educational technologies into preparation programs, including special education, early intervention, and related services personnel preparation and leadership personnel preparation programs that prepare professionals serving students with disabilities.

## CIDDL Research and Practice Briefs

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# Topic: Preparing Pre-service Teachers to Address Ableism Through Social Media

## The problem highlighted in this brief

Many pre-service teachers enter teacher preparation programs either lacking knowledge about what it means to have a disability or having misconceptions about education from their own experiences in non-inclusive programs. Traditional teacher preparation programs may frame disability from a medical or deficit model in which a disability exists as a problem within the student requiring remediation (Ashby, 2012). Furthermore, teachers may ultimately find themselves in school environments that perpetuate ableism resulting in inequities for students.

## Why does this matter to teacher preparation?

Teacher preparation programs have a responsibility to prepare preservice teachers to recognize and address ableism and inequities so that every student can have a full range of opportunities. Using social media provides an innovative way for those in teacher preparation to share the voices of people with disabilities in their programs. In this brief, CIDDL invites Dr. Jen Newton to share insights and experiences with instructional practices leveraging social media in her teacher preparation programs.

## Guest Expert: Dr. Jen Newton

[Dr. Jen Newton](#) is an assistant professor in Special Education at [Ohio University](#). Dr. Newton's research interests include strength-based approaches to families, early childhood, inclusion, inclusive teacher

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preparation, and socially just and equitable educational practices. In collaboration with Dr. Mira Williams, she hosts the website and Instagram account, Teaching is Intellectual, which focuses on relevant topics and practices in special education and teacher preparation such as inclusion, pandemic teaching, and ableism.

## What Will You Learn from This Brief?

In this Brief and the accompanying conversation, CIDDL shares insights from Dr. Jen Newton on the role social media, specifically a subset of Instagram known as “Teacher-gram”, plays in her teacher preparation program. Dr. Newton offers suggestions on how to integrate social media into assigned coursework and provides resources for teacher educators who wish to bring the voices of persons with disabilities into their own classrooms.

This Brief provides context in the theory and research surrounding ableism within education and how introducing pre-service teachers to the experiences of disabled persons can support a shift to more inclusive education. Dr. Newton suggests how teacher preparation programs can utilize social media platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, to bring the voices of persons with disabilities into the classroom. Additionally, Dr. Newton provides insight as to the experiential nature of directly interacting with and reflecting on persons with disabilities’ content and the impact this has on preservice teachers’ perspectives and actions compared to more traditional instructional methods.

## Policy and Research Context

The Civil Rights movement of the 1960s led the way for the Disability Rights movement, which saw the passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The principle, “Nothing about us without us,” led to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, requiring the active participation of people with disabilities both in its creation and its implementation (Callus & Ferrugia, 2016).

Disability is only one of many variations in the human experience; learner variability, according to Pape (2018) is the rule, not the exception. Yet, many educational programs and policies are grounded in an ableist medical model of disability (Broderick & Lalvani, 2017), which is based on deficits rather than strengths. The resulting power imbalance can most often be seen in schools through value-based language, such as referring to students who receive special education services as “the SPED kids” (Ashby, 2012).

Teacher preparation programs must unpack this ableism and move towards a strengths- or asset-based model, as emphasized in the social construct of disability (Annamma, 2018). Through the social construct lens, disability is not inherently negative, but exists contingent on environmental barriers (Ashby, 2012). Lalvani and Broderick (2013) researched the impact of a teacher preparation course focused on the sociocultural impact of disability. In this course, students addressed disability perspectives and inclusive practices, with the goal of students seeing inclusion as a part of socially just education. By the end of the course students recognized ableist practices within programs such as disability simulations and awareness days.

Using social media to connect pre-service teachers with voices of people with disabilities has the potential to address this gap. Social media has previously been shown to support teacher preparation for access to virtual mentors, provide social presence, and serve as a platform for professional development and collegial collaboration. (Curran & Chattel, 2013; Munoz et al., 2014; Newton & Williams, 2021; Carpenter et al., 2020).

Incorporating social media as a platform for persons with disabilities' voices provides a way for preservice teachers to push back against inequity and ableism, and to ensure students receive a full range of opportunities. The following are key insights gleaned from the interview with Dr. Newton. The interview focused on five questions around her work around how to use social media to empower student voice as well as implications for teacher education.

## Key Insights

Q1: *What is an issue that you were trying to address with your work?*

Dr. Newton: "...the lack of knowledge about disability for future special educators, so I think a lot about ***the ways in which we prepare students for disabled student experiences*** and begin to unpack... the ableism, the preconceived notions, the limitations that teacher candidates come to their prep programs with from their own experiences in K12 school."

Ableism, rooted in deficit-based values, occurs when the group or individual in power discriminates or judges based on ability; ableism and racism often occur concurrently (Hancock et al., 2021). Ableism negatively impacts students with disabilities by limiting access to

educational opportunities and placements (Ashby, 2012). Broderick and Lalvani (2017) state teacher preparation programs wishing to address ableism must design coursework that supplies both an intellectual and a transformative experience. In teacher preparation, disability experiences are often presented through a third-person professional viewpoint, whether a lecture from a professor or chapter in a textbook. However, only those who have a disability can be considered a primary source on the disability experience (Ashby, 2012).

Q2: *Can you tell us more about what that looks like in your teacher prep program?*

Dr. Newton: "I'm also really interested in the voices of disabled people themselves. And so, ***I've been using social media, Instagram specifically, to bring those own voices into my classes...***"

Dr. Newton: "I end up seeing so many things that they deep dove into as a result of someone that they engaged with on social media. And so, it's providing an opportunity, I think, for the students to see more broadly ***the impact of the work*** that they're embarking on."

Dr. Newton: "So, it's provided a really great opportunity for students to think about disability from a more strengths-based, more asset-based, but also just a more holistic approach to the fact that ***we're talking about humans*** who want access to an education. And that is ***the same thing that everyone wants, and is worthy of, and has a right to.***"

Newton's course introduces pre-service teachers to IDEA. Each week, the text focuses on one of the 13 eligibility categories and related laws. Dr. Newton supplements the text with five to seven social media accounts for each of the categories, providing pre-service teachers an opportunity to connect IDEA with the people it was designed to serve. Students reflect on their experiences and discuss challenging topics based on their learning. At the end of the semester, students complete a passion project in which they dive into a topic, using the social media accounts as part of their sources.

Q3: *What type of feedback do you get from the students about these types of activities?*

*Dr. Newton: "What's really been cool about it is that I start them off...and then **they'll come back to me** and say, "Oh, I found this person who is talking about how they use their accessibility on their iPhone with their visual impairment, to you know, read Instagram. Did you know you need to be putting alt-text and image descriptions into your Instagram posts?"*

*Dr. Newton: "...there's a gap between what researchers in special education are researching and what teachers are asking for and in need of, and what the disabled community is asking for and in need of from us as a field. **There's a disconnect.**"*

*Dr. Newton: "And so, when I'm in the social media space, I'm listening to teachers and disabled people and **I'm not seeing the same problems reflected in our research.** I see my students also becoming aware of that."*

By giving pre-service teachers the opportunity to dive into the content, Dr. Newton serves as what King (1993) referred to as the “guide-on-the-side.” As a result, students have a more authentic learning experience than had they only experienced lectures or readings. Consistent with Mezirow’s (1997) theory of transformative learning, students can shift their perspectives following their experiences with the social media accounts, making connections between past experiences, misconceptions, and current practice. Having the opportunity to reflect silently as well as with others prepares preservice teachers to recognize and turn away from inequitable practices (Hancock et al., 2021).

Q4: *What implications do you see for future research, and what are some questions that we might be asking?*

Dr. Newton: “So, listening to students, when we talk about including students in their IEP meetings,... some of my students have found kids who have posted TikToks about their experiences in their IEP meetings, and what they bring to their IEP meetings and how they put their stories together and they thought that was really cool *and it was kind of the first time they thought, "Oh, we should have student-driven meetings. Students should lead their meetings."* And I think **-they're coming to that, from a more authentic way than me saying,** "Oh, sometimes students can lead their own meetings."

In a systematic review, Bailey et al. (2014) found children and young people with disabilities were less likely to be involved as research partners than their non-disabled peers. However, when involved as partners, children and young people with disabilities had positive outcomes including self-esteem and independence.

Q5: *What resources do you recommend to start doing this?*

Dr. Newton: “So if you are pretty heavily invested in Facebook, but you haven't really dabbled in Instagram or TikTok, I invite you to come into those spaces, because ***there's so much teaching going on*** in the spaces, that we should be tapping into.”

## Resources

Dr. Newton provided suggestions of readings, videos, social media hashtags, and social media accounts of people with disabilities.

### Teaching is Intellectual

Instagram: @TeachingIsIntellectual

Website: [www.TeachingIsIntellectual.com](http://www.TeachingIsIntellectual.com)

### Video Recommendations

Newnham, N., Lebrecht, J., & Bolder, S. (Producers) Newnham, N. & Lebrecht, J. (Directors). (2020). *Crip Camp* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.netflix.com>

Niemeijer, M. , (Producers) (Directors). (2021). *This is Not About Me* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://thisisnotaboutme.film/>

### Suggested Hashtags to Follow

#Disability #ActuallyAutistic #Neurodivergent

### Instagram Accounts

@HabenGirma

@theHeumannPerspective  
@disability\_visibility  
@spencer2thewest  
@CharlieKramerVision  
@neurodivergentactivist  
@thecatchpoles  
@neurodifferent  
@downwithableism  
@diversability  
@emilyladau  
@cripcampfilml  
@disabilitytogether  
@keah\_maria

## Link to Video

This Research and Practice Brief can be viewed on video online at <https://tinyurl.com/ResearchPracticeBrief10>

## Companion Article

Newton, J. R., & Williams, M. C. (2021). Instagram as a special educator professional development tool: A guide to teachergram. *Journal of Special Education Technology*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/01626434211033596>

## Suggested Readings

Baglieri, S., & Lalvani, P. (2020). *Undoing ableism: Teaching about disability in K-12 Classrooms*. Routledge.  
Connor, D. J. (2019). Why is special education so afraid of disability

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studies? Analyzing attacks of disdain and distortion from leaders in the field. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 34(1).

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Hancock, C. L., Morgan, C. W., & Holly, J. (2021). Counteracting dysconscious racism and ableism through fieldwork: Applying DisCrit classroom ecology in early childhood personnel preparation. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 41(1), 45–56. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0271121421989797>

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King, A. (1993). From sage on the stage to guide on the side. *College Teaching*, 41(1), 3035.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.1993.9926781>

Lalvani, P. & Broderick, A.A. (2013) Institutionalized ableism and the misguided “Disability Awareness Day”: Transformative pedagogies for teacher education, equity & excellence in education, 46:4, 468-

483, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2013.838484>

Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformative learning: Theory to practice. *New directions for adult and continuing education*, 1997(74), 5-12.

Munoz, L. R., Pellegrini-Lafont, C., & Cramer, E. (2014). Using social media in teacher preparation programs: Twitter as a means to create social presence. *Penn GSE Perspectives on Urban Education*, 11(2), 57-69.

Pape, B. (2018). *Learner variability is the rule, not the exception*. Digital Promise.

## Transcription of Interview

Transcription of the interview can be found at <https://tinyurl.com/ResearchBrief10Transcript>



## For More Information

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