



CIDDL Research and Practice Brief 10 Interview Transcript

Michelle Patterson (she/her): Hello, and welcome to the CIDDL Research and Practice Brief series. The purpose of the series is to have conversations around the innovative use of technology in special education, early childhood, related services, and leadership personnel preparation programs. Today we have Dr. Jen Newton, 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 preparation and socially just and equitable educational practices. In collaboration with Dr. Mira Williams, she hosts the website and social media, Teaching is Intellectual. Welcome Dr Newton.

Jen Newton (she/her): Hi, thanks so much for having me.

Michelle Patterson (she/her): So, with our Research and Practice Briefs we hope to address a barrier or a problem of practice in the field of education for students with disabilities. What is an issue that you were trying to address with your work?

Jen Newton (she/her): I think, broadly speaking, I am trying to address 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 main- the ableism, the preconceived notions, the limitations that teacher candidates come to their prep programs with from their own experiences in K12 school and talking about those things. So, we address language, obviously. We started off with person-first and identity-first and we talked a lot about language. But, 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, into my- my research, into presentations. A lot of the work that I've been doing has been happening as a result of engagement on social media.

Michelle Patterson (she/her): So, can you tell us more about what that looks like in your teacher prep Program?

Jen Newton (she/her): Yeah, absolutely. So, for instance, right now, I'm teaching- so I'll start by saying, I am a presence on Instagram and what is kind of colloquially known as "teacher-gram" and it is a piece of the world of Instagram that populates amongst teachers. It is a place that teachers and teacher candidates and related service providers, OTs, SLPs, parents of kids with disabilities, disabled people are using hashtags to develop affinity



groups and to be in community and space together so I'm there as under the handle, "Teaching is Intellectual" and in that space, I have gained opportunities to learn from lots and lots of disabled people. So, for instance, right now, I'm teaching an Introduction to our 101 class, that survey of IDEA. It is not a survey of disability, it's really the 13 eligibility categories and the components of the laws- so, that introductory class. I have populated TikTok accounts, Instagram accounts, and social media presences for each of those 13 categories. We often refer to it as, like, the "disability of the week model", right- using the traditional text. I supplement all of that, with the social media platforms and spaces for disabled people who fit into or were served under those identity- or those eligibility criteria when they were in school or are currently in school and serving- being served -in those categories. It provides the students- so, in addition, in addition to reading their chapters, they're also exploring and reflecting on those experiences. And so it really has provided us with lots of opportunities to think about really challenging things, like is it appropriate to have autism only classrooms? Is it appropriate to say person with autism, or should we be using identity- first language, because many of the autistic folks we've followed really identify with identity-first language. We've been learning from a lot about the difference between a parent's perspective and the perspective of a disabled student themselves or a disabled person themselves. And so really looking at- Whose voices are being represented? Who is being centered? Who are we hearing? And then, are we listening -as a field, as educators, individually, right? Am I the one deciding what a student needs? 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. So, it has provided a really cool first-person experience, and then what happens is, at the end of the semester, I usually do something called- I call it an un-essay, or a passion project and they get to select their topic and do a deep dive in a visual and presentation on that, that topic and 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.

Michelle Patterson (she/her): That is- that is so exciting. I'm really loving the idea of having the students doing the work because they're the ones actually accessing their own technology, you know to learn about the lives of disabled people. What type of feedback do you get from the students about these type of activities?

Jen Newton (she/her): What's really been cool about it is that I start them off, right? So, I give them five to seven different accounts each week and I asked them, you know, look around in this 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?" "Look, you should watch this" or you know, I'll wake up in the morning and have a bunch of TikToks that someone sent me the night before. Because they saw someone that they thought, "Oh Jen will be really interested in knowing who this person is and what they're talking about." So it's not just coming for me, right? It is definitely a two way street and they're bringing lots of resources into my life as well and providing me with opportunity to find other creators, other storytellers, who are helping us to see. So, I think that that part has been really interesting. I'm interested in my course about- this is the first semester, that I really was intentional about building it in weekly. We have used it in the past for specific learning opportunities. But this semester, I built it in every single week as a piece, and my students, for the first time this semester were more aware of my presence on Instagram. So because I was leading them to specific places, they found my presence relatively quickly, too. So that sort of became an issue where we had to talk about it. Because I was like, I will not post your pictures, I will not be posting anything about- I talk about teaching but I'm not talking about you as students, even though they're adults and they can consent to that. We had our gallery walk yesterday and I did -they took some pictures of things that are happening in gallery walk and said, "Will you put this on your Instagram?" and so I did end up posting one picture of our our gallery walk, so I think that it's a little bit of a nice balance between the text readings, we watch documentaries, we- you know- we, we watched Crip Camp. We really do try to bring in a lot of voices, as well as the law itself and the language from the field. So I think that it's important to have that balance, because I also understand that as special educators they're going to go into systems that don't listen to the voices of disabled people or prioritize the experiences of disabled students. So, we do definitely talk about that balance. But, I noticed this semester, for the first time, not the first time, but there was more students this semester, who were picking up on some of those discrepancies, so they would say, "Um, you know, in my field this past week, I heard a teacher talking about this thing and I thought- Oh, you should listen to this podcast about autistic people". So I see them also sort of feeling more empowered to teach and to use their knowledge, rather than to just default to - because the bigger issue is that 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. 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. So I see my students also kind of becoming aware of that.

Michelle Patterson (she/her): So, with that in mind, what -what implications do you see for future research? What are some questions that we might be asking?

Jen Newton (she/her): There are people asking really awesome questions in the Disability Studies and Education field. And in Disability Studies- and really thinking about the way disability studies as well as Dis/Crit, right? The work that Connor and Subini (Annamma) are doing. That is super important. I think for what all of us need to be thinking about- the inequity that is persistent in our field. But I think some of the questions we could be thinking about is the ways in which-we teach disability pride, we teach about and really do value disabled students, and their experiences, and their goals. We talk a lot about parent goals, right- and we talk a lot about academic goals, but those academic goals are driven by standards that may or may not align with personal goals. I never sort of felt particularly driven by my state educational standards as like a personal goal. So listening to students in that way, when we talk about including students in their IEP meetings, from 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 that they're coming to that, from a more authentic way than me saying, "Oh, sometimes students can lead their own meetings" because it's always with an asterisk- great it's always, "if appropriate". Well, who decides what's appropriate? Not the student, right? The family or the school and what's its based on. And so, if a student is saying I know what I want and need out of this meeting, it shouldn't matter if it's deemed appropriate externally, right? Students should be able to represent themselves, so I think those are some cool things that we're seeing shift. And those are some things that I would like to see, and I wish I saw special education being more open and receptive to as a research field.

Michelle Patterson (she/her): I think what I- what I hear you saying that's really exciting to me, too, is that you could tell students in teacher preparation programs to have student-led meetings but they're coming to these epiphanies on their own. These activities that you've structured for them are opening their eyes so they're coming to these recognitions and I think that's going to be really powerful when they transition into the classroom. So what resources if I'm doing teacher preparation -what resources do you recommend for me or for those who would like to learn more and want to start doing this themselves?

Jen Newton (she/her): So we have a recent article in JSET that I think you'll link to that will get you started on Instagram if you want to check it out. You can obviously also just reach out to me and I'm happy to point you in the -in those directions. I have created some resources around disabled people to follow to unlearn ableism, and to rethink some of our traditional practices. In special education- some documentaries, my good friend Jordan Zimmermann has a brand new documentary out called, "It's Not About Me", and it's about a non-speaking autistic adult woman navigating her life as a college student using



her communication and confronting ableism at every turn. There's some, there's some resources like that that I think are really important. I think, the more we can put for the voices of disabled people, not in a inspiration porn kind of way, where we're saying you know we're objectifying the narrative of disability, for the purposes of saviorism and "see these babies that need us to help them" and to, you know, make these decisions for them. But to really elevate agency, and to do the work of self determination that we say as a field we're into and to really put that into practice, which requires us to really change the way we think about and talk about disability in our prep programs. So, I think that the more we read widely some research that's coming from the disabled community and disability studies, but I also think, using social media, we talk a lot about the downfalls and pitfalls of it, I will say there's a difference between Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook. 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. So,

Michelle Patterson (she/her): This is, this is really just such exciting work that you're doing and again the innovation, you know, incorporating social media in the classroom in a way that's really making a difference for our students. I really want to thank you for taking the time to share with us today. We appreciate your time and your work. We're looking forward to ongoing conversations in our CIDDL community about how this can impact teacher preparation. And so, for more information about CIDDL Research and Practice Briefs and other resources for teacher education and related services personal preparation, please go to www.CIDDL.org. Don't forget to follow us on social media, subscribe to our channel, leave us a message. Thank you all for joining us.

Jen Newton (she/her): Thank you so much, Michelle.