

“Inclusion is definitely a possibility for all”: Promoting inclusive education through a critical professional development schools model

Promoting
inclusive
education

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Latifa Sebti

*College of Education, Rowan University, Glassboro, New Jersey, USA and
Special Education, Professional Counseling, and Disability Studies Department,
College of Education, William Paterson University, Wayne, New Jersey, USA, and*

Brent C. Elder

*Wellness and Inclusive Services in Education Department, Rowan University,
Glassboro, New Jersey, USA*

Abstract

Purpose – In this article, we highlight ways in which disability critical race theory (DisCrit) (Annamma *et al.*, 2013), inclusive education and community-based participatory research (CBPR) can be used within professional development schools (PDS) to provide students with disabilities with more access to inclusive classrooms. At a grade 4–6 elementary school, we developed a model of a critical PDS to promote inclusive education and facilitate the transition of students of color with disabilities from self-contained to inclusive classrooms. We conducted semi-structured interviews and used action plan meetings with school administrators, teachers, professionals and students with disabilities and their parents to assess the impact of our critical PDS model. Findings suggest this model had a positive impact on administrators’ and teachers’ critical consciousness, ideological and instructional practices, students of color with disabilities’ social, academic and personal outcomes, as well as a schoolwide culture of inclusion and social justice. This study can inform tailored professional development efforts to improve educators’ inclusive practices.

Design/methodology/approach – We conducted semi-structured interviews and used action plan meetings with school administrators, teachers, professionals and students with disabilities and their parents to assess the impact of our critical PDS model.

Findings – The findings of this study suggest this model had a positive impact on administrators’ and teachers’ critical consciousness, ideological and instructional practices, students of color with disabilities’ social, academic and personal outcomes, as well as a schoolwide culture of inclusion and social justice.

Practical implications – This study can inform tailored professional development efforts aiming to improve educators’ inclusive practices.

Originality/value – We developed a model of a critical PDS to promote inclusive education and facilitate the transition of students of color with disabilities from self-contained to inclusive classrooms.

Keywords Social justice, Inclusive education, DisCrit, Action plan meetings, Critical PDS

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

Inclusive education means all students regardless of their disability should have access to regular classroom environments while receiving the appropriate support to be full members of their class (SWIFT Schools, 2023). Sustainably developing inclusive education practices requires increasing the capacity of teachers to include and support students with disabilities in general education classrooms while considering the school context (Waitoller & Artiles, 2013). Professional development school (PDS) partnerships are one way to enact systemic change in schools for a meaningful implementation of inclusive education in collaboration with local stakeholders (Elder, 2019, 2020; Elder *et al.*, 2021).

Existing literature emphasizes that PDS has focused on teacher education, professional development and research (Castle *et al.*, 2006), but has rarely been used as a social justice tool to desegregate schools and promote inclusive education (Elder *et al.*, 2021). Through this research, we use our PDS work to promote the National Association for Professional Development Schools' (NAPDS) mission of "advanc[ing] the education profession by providing leadership, advocacy and support to sustain professional development schools as learning communities that improve student learning, prepare educators through clinical practice, provide reciprocal professional development, and conduct shared inquiry" (NAPDS, 2021, para 1). Our PDS work responds to the call from Damiani and Elder (2023) for infusing a critical social justice lens into PDS work and research and builds on the work and recommended school desegregation practices outlined by Elder and Borrelle (2022).

In this paper, we present ways that we have leveraged our PDS partnership in a suburban grade 4–6 elementary school to promote inclusive education and facilitate the transition of students of color with disabilities from self-contained special education classrooms to inclusive general education classrooms. In this article, we present data that suggests this program has had a positive impact on teachers, students of color with disabilities and their families, as well as the inclusive school culture. By "stakeholders" we mean students with disabilities, their parents, school administrators, general education teachers, special education teachers and professional service providers.

Background and purpose

Inclusive education is hindered by deficit-based assumptions that have long framed the field of special education where students with disabilities have been educated in segregated classrooms and schools. To push back against these assumptions, educators need to be prepared to implement inclusive education strategies that value difference leading to equitable educational opportunities for all students (Waitoller & Kozleski, 2010). However, many teacher preparation programs are in need of more robust content that prepares teachers to apply their inclusive philosophies and pedagogies (Elder & Borrelle, 2022; Kurth & Foley, 2014). These traditional teacher preparation programs reflect views of disability categories and strategies of remediation and interventions rooted in the medical model of disability (Ashby, 2012).

We argue there is an urgent need to work with both pre- and in-service teachers and school stakeholders to instill strength-based inclusive philosophy and practices and to sustainably develop an inclusive culture that anticipates, welcomes and values disability as a valuable form of diversity. One way to achieve this purpose is through PDS partnerships which "are clinical field sites in which the school and university partners focus together on improving teacher education and the professional development of practicing teachers as well as increasing student achievement and conducting research" (Castle *et al.*, 2006, p. 65). Professional development schools can facilitate the implementation of inclusive education providing school stakeholders with a common culture and discourse around inclusive education and disability (Elder, 2019). Linking research to practice has the potential to create

new ways of promoting access to inclusive education and the potential to change “the environment from a reproducing and assimilative context to a generative and inventive one” (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007, p. 362).

This study is part of a larger PDS work that began over seven years ago at our PDS school. We have established structures to build the capacity of faculty, staff and administration to support students with disabilities through the application of explicit inclusive practices including: (1) co-teaching support (i.e. teaching alongside the general education teacher and applying accommodations and modifications needed to cater to diverse learners), (2) inclusive strategies modeling, (3) inclusive extracurricular programs, (4) ongoing professional development on inclusion and (5) action plan meetings which we introduce below. We call our approach to this project “critical PDS” (Damiani & Elder, 2023), by infusing disability studies in education (DSE) (Connor *et al.*, 2008), disability critical race theory (DisCrit) (Annamma *et al.*, 2013) and social justice frameworks (Bell, 2016) into the inclusive education PDS work. The purpose is to bring school stakeholders to work together towards a common goal of building a learning environment that provides quality inclusive education for students regardless of ability, race, gender, ethnicity and identity markers.

Within our PDS school, we created a school professional learning community through what Waitoller and Kozleski (2010) called “professional learning schools” where researchers and practitioners at different levels of expertise and interests collaborate with a common goal to improve students’ outcomes. The purpose is to create partnerships and bring school administrators and teachers to work as colleagues (Housman & Martinez, 2001), to connect general and special education teachers around shared goals (Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013), to raise students with disabilities’ voices (Nind, 2014) and to enhance capacity building for sustainable improvement (Stroll *et al.*, 2006). Through interviews and various iterations of qualitative research since 2016 with school community stakeholders, we were able to capture some of the contextual impact of this critical PDS project (Elder, 2019, 2020; Elder *et al.*, 2021).

Theoretical frameworks

We frame this PDS work around three theoretical and conceptual perspectives: (1) inclusive education that informs the goals of the project; (2) community-based participatory research (CBPR) that engages school stakeholders in the inclusive education reform; and (3) DisCrit that helps to promote students’ multidimensional identities and adds critical dimension to the CBPR for inclusive education (see Figure 1 below).

Inclusive education

Extant literature has shown that the implementation of students with disabilities inclusion in general classrooms enhanced their academic and social performance (Hehir *et al.*, 2016). According to SWIFT Schools (2023),

Inclusive education means everyone is included in their grade-level in their neighborhood school. Inclusion means students are given the help they need to be full members of their class. Inclusive education involves districts supporting schools as they include ALL [emphasis in original] the students who live in their communities. (p. 1)

This definition supports inclusive legal mandates like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), which both helped establish the rules and requirements to ensure that all students have access to equal educational opportunities and outcomes. Still, disparities remain between students of color and white students in achievement, disproportional representation in segregated special education classrooms, dropout rates, graduation rates, employment opportunities, representation in college and in discipline and referrals (Valle & Connor, 2019).

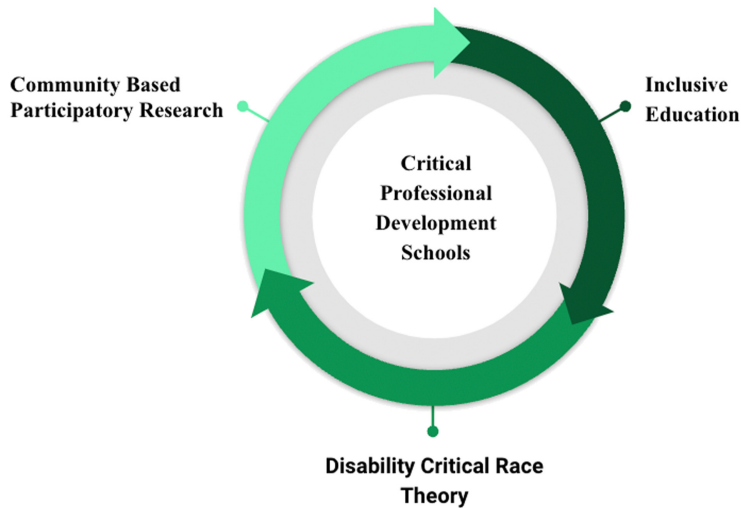


Figure 1.
Overarching
theoretical framework:
PDS grounded in
DisCrit, inclusive
education and CBPR

Source(s): Figure created by author

Additionally, students of color are three times more likely to live in poverty than their white counterparts (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2019; Nieto, 2015). These disparities point to the need for professional development programs that use disability studies approaches aligned with social justice and critical theories (Ashby, 2012). Such inequities stand against the original purpose of inclusion and point to the significance of attitudes towards students with disabilities in shaping their career trajectories (Valle & Connor, 2019). Inclusive education grounded in DSE requires the educational community to critically examine ableist practices that hinder the achievement of social justice goals (Baglieri & Bacon, 2020).

Disability critical race theory (DisCrit)

Disability Critical Race Studies proposed by Annamma *et al.* (2013) is a theoretical framework that incorporates a dual analysis of race and ability and highlights the interdependent, intersecting and mutually constitutive aspects of race, ethnicity, class and disability in education. DisCrit is a synthesis of disability studies and critical race theory combined considering the ways race and disability are co-constructed to solve issues faced by people of color (Annamma *et al.*, 2016).

DisCrit scholars point to ability and disability as socially constructed based on ideologies of race and located within social and institutional structures and personal attitudes that impose identities on individuals by applying socially constructed labels (Annamma *et al.*, 2013). These scholars seek “to understand ways that macro level issues of racism and ableism, among other structural discriminatory processes, are enacted in the day-to-day lives of students of color with disabilities” (Annamma *et al.*, 2016, p. 15). In other words, DisCrit scholars highlight how racism and ableism work together to frame a scientific justification (e.g. disability diagnosis) of discrimination against children of color. These scholars believe the intersections of race and disability have contributed to the overrepresentation of students of color in emotional, intellectual and learning disability categories (Annamma *et al.*, 2016). They also value multidimensional identities and privilege the voices of marginalized

populations. In practice, this means that DisCrit scholars engage in research that captures the perspectives and lived experiences of children and youth of color and that is founded on activism and resistance to the systems of oppression that hinder their educational equity, access and success.

The DisCrit tenets most connected to this paper are: (1) Tenet Two that underscores the valuing of multidimensional identities, (2) Tenet Four that calls for privileging voices of marginalized populations and (3) Tenet Seven which is related to activism and resistance to reduce the impact of oppression (Annamma *et al.*, 2013). These tenets stress the value of meaningful inclusion of people of color with disabilities in education and research.

Community-based participatory research (CBPR)

Our collective approach to the development of sustainable inclusive practices and DisCrit-informed research is grounded in CBPR. CBPR engages project participants (e.g. students of color with disabilities and their families), but not necessarily in all phases of the project (e.g. analysis and publication) (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003). Through this project, we have emphasized community collaboration and promoted student- and family-centered research practices with the ultimate goal of initiating actions (e.g. students with disability labels accessing inclusive classrooms) with clear application to local communities (Israel *et al.*, 1998; Stanton, 2014). In this case, our goal is to have our research practices lead to more equitable access to high-quality inclusive education for students of color with disabilities on par with their peers without disabilities. In this project, we view CBPR as both a method and a theoretical perspective we leverage to promote inclusive practices at this PDS (Elder *et al.*, 2021).

Taking a DisCrit approach to inclusive education through CBPR

Applying DisCrit and CBPR in this project enables us to explore disability as a social construct and allows us to better understand the educational experiences of students of color with disabilities who live at the intersection of multiple identity markers. We draw on the work of Connor *et al.* (2008) when they state, “Disability is not a ‘thing’ or condition people have, but instead a social negation serving powerful ideological commitments and political aims” (p. 447).

Research has shown that students of color with disabilities face multiple facets of exclusion based on their identity markers through special educational labeling and colorblind disciplinary policies and practices (Annamma *et al.*, 2020). Unfortunately, these exclusions still persist within inclusive settings and inequitable contexts that privilege whiteness, smartness and goodness as property (Broderick & Leonardo, 2016). Thus, applying a critical lens from DisCrit and CBPR has the potential to contribute to identifying these inequities and then to promote equitable access to inclusive education for students labeled with disabilities. Collaborative work through CBPR offers a way for addressing exclusion that continues to arise within inclusive classrooms (Elder *et al.*, 2021).

Taking a CBPR approach in this project has allowed us to promote inclusive practices that align with DisCrit Tenets. Without grounding this work in these tenets, this work would not be participatory, nor would it be rooted in the lived experiences of students of color with disabilities. Centering these narratives allows us to act upon the interdependent forces of ableism and racism that limit access and equity to inclusive settings in this school. Leveraging both DisCrit and CBPR provides us a way to systematically and sustainably identify and address the specific barriers to inclusive education in the specific context of our school community.

Positionality

Latifa joined the PDS team in 2021 with the purpose of helping to dismantle the ideological and instructional strategies that continue to label and exclude students at the intersection of race and ability from equitable educational opportunities. She identifies as a Muslim woman of color who grew up in a post-colonial country where issues of power and privilege dominate. She uses an intersectionality lens based on her ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious background supplemented by her global knowledge and experience with multiple cultures, to understand herself and how to balance her identity and experiences in dealing with research decisions and approaches.

Latifa's positionality as a former global educator who witnessed and experienced situations of racism and stereotyping and a parent of a child with a perceived disability, heightened her attention to issues of systemic marginalization and power dynamics at the intersection of multiple identities. She values diversity, questions educational policies and practices that sustain the reproduction of racism and ableism and strives in making a positive change to support children of color with disabilities with whom she connects in many ways.

Brent's positionality as a non-disabled white cis-man is inherently tied to United States-based perspectives on disability and education. As a result of these realities, acknowledging these locations is critical. Because of his privileges as an educated academic, he has no desire to speak for people of color with disabilities. Aware of these privileges, he actively critiques how his work may perpetuate marginalizing or oppressive systems. His hope is that students with disabilities, their families and other stakeholder colleagues in this PDS community view him as an ally who centers their lived experiences of disability in his work. While his positionality as a non-disabled scholar positions him as an outsider in relation to students of color with disabilities and their families, he does have extensive experience conducting transnational CBPR and inclusive education-based social justice research in the United States and around the world.

Brent is the professor in residence (PIR) at the school where this project takes place. At this school, while not a teacher nor administrator, he is considered an equal partner committed to inclusive school reform. He helps to identify factors crucial to the success of the school's inclusive program and helps to enact teaching and research practices that promote inclusive education, DisCrit and CBPR. At this school, he has worked for more than seven years to establish structures and processes that promote proactive and sustainable inclusive education practices. He has done this through professional development sessions and by implementing action plan meetings aimed at desegregating the school.

Method

Using the CBPR methodology described above, we present an overview of the school context, the PDS project, the research participants, data sources and data analysis methods in this section.

Context

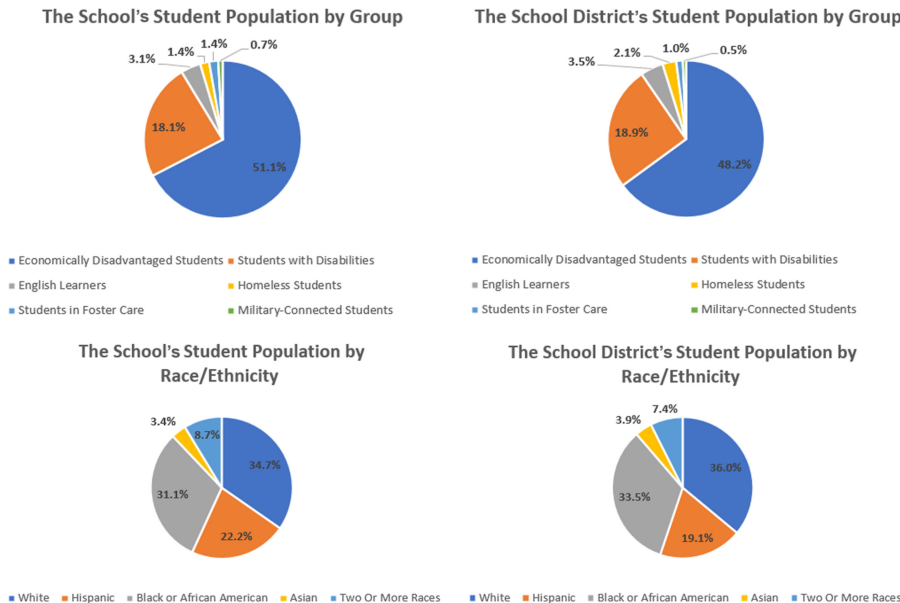
Inclusive practices can vary depending on the context and overlapping social forces. A school's context includes the school community's present and historical, political, socio-cultural and economic conditions, as well as the school district supports, resources, budgeting, management structure and approaches (Kozleski *et al.*, 2013). Inclusive education looks different based on cultural, historical, economic and political contexts of national and local school communities (Kozleski *et al.*, 2013). In addition to analyzing Census data, to gain a better understanding of the racialized history and social structures in the local community, we intentionally read the book on the history of the region (Tucker, 2019). Tucker is an

African American scholar/historian who grew up in the area where this research took place, and his work provides a community-centered lived experience perspective of the history of race in the area. Not only do we believe this approach is critical to this work, but it also aligns with DisCrit's tenets.

Based on the 2021 Census data, the city where this school is located has a total population of 23,149 with an employment rate of 57.2% versus 62.7% in the state and a poverty level of 24.4% versus 9.2% in the state. The racial demographics (see Figure 2 below) are 17.4% African American, 11.3% Hispanic and 15.4% people with disabilities (10.3% in the state).

Our elementary school is in the northeastern United States and is a Title I suburban school serving approximately 400 students in grades 4 through 6. During the 2021–22 school year, racial demographics were 34.7% white, 31.1% African American, 22.2% Hispanic, 3.4% Asian/Pacific Islander and 8.7% with two or more races (see Figure 2 below). Across the population of students, approximately 51.1% of students come from low-income families (citation removed for anonymous review). A total of 84 students (18.1%) were identified as having a disability and have individualized education programs (IEPs), including speech and language pathology services, occupational therapy, counseling and specialized instruction. The school accommodates about 35% of these students with IEPs (29 students) in two self-contained and one “multiple disability” (MD) classrooms. In this school district, 12% of students with disabilities are placed in out of district schools compared to 6.9% state target placement and only 51% of students with disabilities are placed in general education classrooms for more than 80% of the time in 2019.

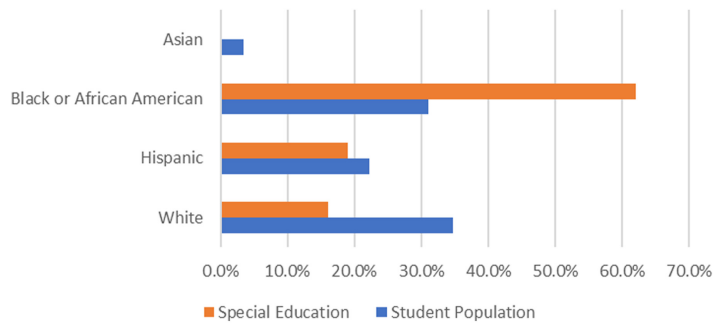
In addition to these demographics, we specifically highlight, in Figure 3 below, the overrepresentation of students of color in special education in our school. About 62% of students receiving special education services are African American, 19% are Hispanic and 16% are white while these students make up respectively 31%, 22% and 35% of the whole population. This means that African American students are two times more likely to be



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Figure 2.
Economic and racial
demographics of the
school and district

Figure 3.
Overrepresentation of
students of color in
special education



Source(s): Figure created by author

labeled with a disability than their white counterparts. These data represent the urgency of this work and call for a rethinking of school and district procedures and practices that channel these students in segregated self-contained classrooms. Disproportionality appears more in disability categories (e.g. learning disabilities, intellectual and emotional disabilities) that are based on more subjectivity (Losen & Orfield, 2002) pointing to the social construction of the disproportionality phenomenon and professional referral and placement bias (Blanchett, 2006). Applying DisCrit tenets in this research provides us with opportunities to identify and disrupt intersections of structural racism and ableism that justify a disproportionate number of students of color with disabilities in segregated classrooms.

Description of the PDS project

The aspects of the project we present in this article are situated within a larger ongoing and Institutional Review Board-approved PDS research project on inclusive education rooted in DSE. We conduct this work in a suburban and diverse school where school community members participate in developing an inclusive environment and help to promote the transition of students of color with disabilities from self-contained special education classrooms to inclusive classrooms (e.g. via on-going teacher professional development, holding action plan meetings). The school demographic data described above show evidence of overrepresentation of students of color in special education (Cruz *et al.*, 2021; Harry & Klingner, 2014).

To center student and family perspectives as we developed proactive and sustainable inclusive education practices, we utilized action plan meetings (Sailor *et al.*, 1996) as one specific strategy to guide our desegregation practices (Elder *et al.*, 2021). Action plan meetings are actionable and tangible ways of desegregating schools (Elder, 2019). These meetings involve stakeholders in organizing integrated services for inclusive education, help practitioners to implement strengths-based special education practices, promote students IEP goal progress and support teachers in providing inclusive instruction.

In our school, these action plan meetings serve as a means to promote ongoing communication between stakeholders “so that adequate student supports are developed and monitored to ensure student success and to provide proper in-class supports” (Elder, 2019, p. 26). During these meetings, stakeholders reflect on their perspectives towards student inclusion and share their experiences and feedback on the successes and challenges when including students of color with disabilities. The intentional infusion of DisCrit tenets and a strength-based approach in the action planning process encourages reflections on ideas and actions about providing access and equity to marginalized student populations.

Participants

We conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews based on stakeholders' experiences participating in our action plan meeting structure. Sixteen stakeholders participated in the interviews, including two students with IEPs and their parents, the school principal, the school special education director, three general education co-teachers, four special education co-teachers (two of them serve as PDS teacher liaison), two self-contained special education teachers and one speech and language therapist. Regarding participants' race and ethnicity, eleven educators identified as white and one teacher identified as an African American. One participating student with IEP and his mother are African American and the other student with IEP and her mother are Hispanic.

Data sources

We used data from semi-structured interviews and action plan meeting notes. The semi-structured interviews with the stakeholders include questions about the inclusion benefits and challenges, the supports needed, the new strategies used, the impact of inclusion on teachers, students' access and lives, their peers, their families and communities and the relationship of these changes to the larger system of oppression. The interviews lasted about 30–45 minutes and we audio recorded them for transcription. We also performed action plan meetings of about 30 minutes for each student with disabilities, three times during the school year (i.e. October, January and April).

Data analysis

We analyzed both data from interviews and our action plan meetings. We used qualitative methods of data analysis and theming (i.e. looking for themes) and content analysis (i.e. looking for frequencies and patterns) and organized data in a way to allow a better understanding of intersecting themes and information corroboration from different sources (Yin, 2011). In addition to co-analyzing the interview data, the authors debriefed each other after each action plan meeting and edited meeting minutes to ensure a common understanding of meeting activities and outcomes. We analyzed the interview transcriptions and meeting notes through open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) using Dedoose software (2021). During the open coding process, we created and applied codes such as “inclusive strategies,” “academic benefits,” “social benefits,” “critical awareness about systems of oppression,” “what works well,” and “what needs more support.” After identifying the most frequent open codes, during the axial coding phase, we looked at the intersections of codes and their underlying data to find how they can be grouped into categories such as “what needs more support *and* professional development”, “what's going well *and* inclusive culture” and “academic benefits *and* access to learning”. Finally, during the selective coding process, we identified core categories and integrated them, arriving at the top four themes that spoke most powerfully to the research focus. In addition, we presented our understanding from the participants' quotes through member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) as a way for participants to confirm the validity of emerging findings. We report the main selective themes in the subsequent *Findings* section.

Findings

In this section, we present the following four major findings that emerged during our data analysis: (1) participants recognizing systems of oppression and developing a critical consciousness, (2) embracing an inclusive philosophy and culture; (3) student social, academic and personal benefits of inclusion and (4) the need for on-going professional development activities. We argue that teachers' recognition of the system of oppression against people

with disabilities and their critical consciousness about inequities and disability stigma facilitated an inclusive philosophy and a school-wide culture of inclusion as well as students with disabilities' social, academic and personal benefits.

Recognizing systems of oppression helped teachers understand the urgency of supporting marginalized students and develop a critical consciousness toward equity and social justice (Theme 1). This critical consciousness development can enable a more inclusive philosophy and culture that is rooted in social justice (Theme 2). Educators' inclusive philosophies and their emerging critical consciousness can translate into implementation of inclusive strategies leading to student benefits (Theme 3). To do so, educators need opportunities to put inclusive ideas into practice and to learn from and with one another through on-going social justice and DisCrit-infused professional development activities (Theme 4). In each finding section below, we introduce quotes from a variety of participants, then connect these quotes to relevant literature.

Theme 1: Recognizing systems of oppression and developing a critical consciousness

How are we going to get to dismantling a system that's so unequal? - Self-Contained Special Education Teacher.

Critical awareness of the systemic forms of discrimination (Shin *et al.*, 2016) and recognizing systems of oppression are a starting point for implementing a socially just inclusive education (Bell, 2016). During interviews, educators showed both an awareness about inequities that students with disabilities face in school and a critical consciousness about their roles in attending to social justice. They pointed to the stigma as a segregation effect as mentioned by a self-contained special education teacher, "It could be further stigmatizing to the student if they're not in a setting where they're included. We don't want them to feel isolated or uncomfortable." These educators also recognized the overrepresentation of students of color in special education in their school. A general education teacher said, "We seem to be highly populated with [African American male students] in self-contained classes. You want to get them out of there, so that they have the same opportunity that the other students are having."

In addition, these administrators and teachers questioned their roles as educators in a system that perpetuates inequalities (Milner, 2010) and showed their willingness to make transformative changes toward a more equitable education (Huber, 2021). During interviews, some educators showed a critical consciousness about their role in supporting students' inclusion. An administrator shared, "Those are the kids that are being more isolated because we don't know how to adapt to support them." A self-contained special education teacher also shared, "Inclusion is definitely a possibility for all, and I feel like my job isn't just to help them reach their goals, but also to help them transition into inclusion." She continued, "I've taken initiatives to just incorporate inclusion as much as I can, like I am the advisor of the Unified Bowling Club." Another special education co-teacher showed her advocacy for her students saying, "When you're concerned like I am and you're an advocate for all students, it makes a difference."

These quotes connect to Freire's (2000) praxis concept to advocate for changing normative practices that perpetuate deficit ideological systems, recognize their material impact on students' everyday lives and make a transformation towards emancipation. Providing an opportunity to participating teachers in "critically engaging with dominant and oppressive epistemologies" (Moore & Slee, 2019, p. 276) could trigger reflective and actionable inclusive practices and prompt administrators and teachers to situate their roles and responsibilities in attending to social justice. In the next section, we present participant quotes related to educators embracing an inclusive philosophy and culture in the school.

Theme 2: Embracing an inclusive philosophy and culture

I truly believe that all students can learn. However, they learn differently, and we have to meet them the way they are. - General Education Co-Teacher

We argue that as educators recognize larger systems of oppression at play in their schools, they develop critical consciousness about systemic inequities which helps them embrace an inclusive philosophy and culture. Scholars emphasized the development of critical consciousness as a driver for intentional inclusive practices towards dismantling learning barriers for students with disabilities (Rice, 2006). From a disability studies perspective, inclusion is defined as “a fundamental philosophy about how we perceive and respond to human difference” (Valle & Connor, 2019, p. xiii).

This inclusive philosophy means welcoming differences and presuming competence in all students. This was highlighted by one general education co-teacher, “Any child is capable of just about anything if you give them the proper tools and support.” In the same vein, a school administrator underscored the strength-based perspective by saying, “I think they’re [teachers] naturally starting to move that way and starting to get a little further away from all the ‘can’t’ and the ‘aren’t able to’ more into these are the strengths.”

In addition to promoting an inclusive philosophy, teachers and administrators also emphasized the importance of developing a sense of belonging for students with disabilities. A school administrator shared, “We’re making the difference. We’re starting with ‘everybody’s my friend’ kind of approach. We all belong.” Furthermore, this inclusive philosophy created a positive school culture that welcomes disability and inclusion as expressed by a general education co-teacher, “I feel like [our] school has become so inclusive and so centered on making sure that everything that we do is purposeful in its inclusivity that it’s becoming second nature. . . Now this is our culture.”

These quotes represent educators’ DSE perspective considering disability as a social construct and recognizing the need for adaptation within the physical, pedagogical and attitudinal environments rather than within students with disabilities (Baglieri *et al.*, 2011). Teachers’ biases based on their focus on students with disabilities’ weaknesses rather than their strengths could lead to disability labels and adverse effects on students’ outcomes (Baglieri, 2022). Holding a critical philosophy of commitment to social justice is essential to disrupt exclusionary practices that limit access of students with disabilities to meaningful opportunities (Kurth & Foley, 2014). In the next section, we highlight quotes that move beyond the development of an inclusive philosophy and focus on what participants described as the myriad benefits of inclusion.

Theme 3: Student social, academic and personal benefits

I was still able to make lots of friends. -Student with an IEP

Recognizing larger systems of oppression can lead to teachers’ critical consciousness and inclusive philosophies and culture which can translate into student benefits. Literature shows that inclusive practices “confer substantial short- and long-term benefits for children’s cognitive and social development” (Hehir *et al.*, 2016, p. 26). A general education co-teacher made the link between the system of inequalities, her critical consciousness and the impact on students’ self-esteem by stating, “We want to get these kids [students of color with disabilities] involved, included because they can learn. [A student’s] self-esteem is so high now and that makes a difference.”

Like this teacher, a school administrator pointed to the social and academic benefits of inclusion stating, “I think that’s working well socially for the students as well as academically to have them work with other students in cooperative groups and individually in the room.” Like this administrator, a special education teacher noted the academic benefits that they

believe were linked to the access and exposure to the grade level content, “That’s definitely an advantage to transitioning to inclusion is just collaborating more with other peers and getting more exposure to grade level content.” Also, the speech and language therapist also highlighted the opportunity of expanding friendship beyond classes about a student with speech and language disorder who uses a communication device and was included in special classes (e.g. music, art).

A student of color with disabilities, who is now fully included in a general education classroom, recognized, “It was hard for me to read because they always made us read like these math problems. So, when I started asking my teachers for help, my grades [went] up.” Also, a parent of a student of color with disabilities who was included in a science class said,

Just getting into the science class. It’s something that he really likes, and he really enjoys and is excited about, because it has a lot of things to do with exploring and learning new things. He’s very creative. He likes to make things. I think being in science classes is exciting for him.

Furthermore, teachers and administrators highlighted the impact of inclusion on students’ personal lives and their self-advocacy as underscored by a school administrator who said, “I’ve had an opportunity to jump in on some of those action plan meetings and that’s been wonderful to see those students advocating for themselves and being part of.” In the same vein, this administrator highlighted extracurricular inclusive programs as a great opportunity for students to develop social skills,

I think we serve in many ways as a model for the other buildings in our district. . . We had our student council students working to help create those programs that provided opportunities for our students with disability labels to interact with their non-labeled peers, and it was just such a positive experience.

A parent shared about the inclusive after school bowling program that, “[My son] is always looking forward to going bowling. And I think it’s the interaction and meeting with his peers and playing and that kind of thing. So, we find that entertaining.”

These participants’ quotes show that, when diversity is valued, a flexible curriculum and instruction that addresses the needs of a range of diverse students can be envisioned and implemented (Baglieri, 2022). Inclusive strategies including peer tutoring and cooperative learning are effective in improving student participation, social interactions and academic performance (Mitchell, 2014). In the next section, we highlight participants’ expressed need for on-going professional development to develop and support their ideological and instructional inclusive strategies.

Theme 4: On-going professional development activities

The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) training that we had last year was extremely beneficial and informative. It does not only apply to special education classrooms, but all classrooms. - Self-Contained Special Education Teacher.

During interviews, most participants highlighted the need for on-going professional development to better promote inclusive practices at the school. Teachers and administrators recommended professional development in different ways including: (1) training on inclusive philosophy, (2) training on UDL and inclusive strategies and (3) modeling and mentorship on inclusive practices.

First, a general education co-teacher pointed to the need for more training to develop an inclusive philosophy, “I think training is needed because there’ll be new partnerships, and also, maybe a difference in philosophy.” A special education teacher noted that they also required additional professional development to create awareness about systemic inequities in their school by stating,

I think with workshops and training. . . I think actively choosing the students of color, the students that are kind of stigmatized in special education, doing everything we can again to break down those barriers to just face the issues head on and really work hard towards.

In addition to teachers requiring on-going professional development, a general education teacher noted that paraprofessionals need to be considered for training, “Because our paraprofessionals are constantly rotating in and out of classrooms, they need training.”

Second, educators identified UDL as a specific training topic the faculty needed. “We have some teachers who were trained in UDL. They are implementing UDL and then turnkeying that information again. We need to expand it and ensure that more teachers are implementing UDL in the classrooms,” a school administrator noted. A special education teacher shared the need for support to general education teachers on inclusive strategies implementation, “I think they [general education teachers] feel like they want to help the students, but maybe they don’t necessarily know what they can do or how to help.”

Third, administrators and teachers highlighted the need for modeling the implementation of inclusive strategies. A school administrator shared:

[the PIR] has worked with a few of our teachers in creating lessons and modeling, appropriate implementation of accommodations and modifications. And I like to see more of our staff be able to go in and observe the work that he’s doing with the teachers with whom he’s working with and really serving as a model for other teachers to follow.

In addition to modeling, educators pointed to the importance of mentorship to share inclusive practices from experienced teachers: “We’ve had teachers with more experience talk to teachers that don’t have as much. We used to have mentors who could mentor either somebody that’s new to inclusion or somebody that’s new to the school.”

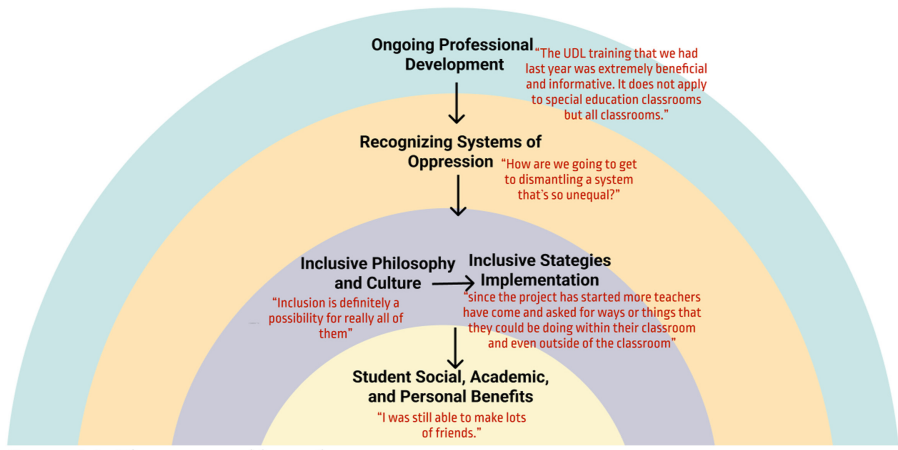
These quotes point to the need to better prepare teachers with the knowledge, skills and dispositions to facilitate access to students with disabilities to inclusive education (Klimaitis & Mullen, 2021). Universal Design for Learning emerged as an effective training. It is a research-based framework with the goal to build proactive means of representation, engagement and expression to improve learning accessibility by removing barriers to learning (Meyer *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, research has emphasized the need for co-teachers to have a shared commitment to inclusion and participate in professional development on inclusive strategies (Shaffer & Thomas-Brown, 2015). Additionally, professional development should be tailored to equip teachers with a DisCrit-infused philosophy and strategies to encourage educators to address the complex identities and needs of students at the intersection of compounding forms of marginalization (Waitoller & Artiles, 2013).

In summary, this critical PDS model with the purpose of transitioning students with disabilities from self-contained to general education programs included DisCrit-infused professional development on inclusion, action plan meetings, UDL, co-teaching support and inclusive extracurricular programs and initiatives. The implementation of this model created a schoolwide inclusive culture and yielded some social and academic benefits for all students. Figure 4 gives an overview of the findings where we present themes supported with quotes going from macro-systems (e.g. ongoing professional development) to micro-systems at an individual level (e.g. student social, academic and personal benefits).

Implications and conclusion

From our experiences engaging in this long-term DisCrit-informed inclusive education project at this school, we recommend a critical PDS model that aims at spreading inclusive education culture and practices, constantly looking at ways to build proactive communication and supports, centering student and parent perspectives and supporting students’ transition to inclusion. This model includes an intentional socio-political and

Figure 4.
Summary of the
findings with quotes



Source(s): Figure created by author

ecological perspective in providing the structure and supports through the application of explicit inclusive practices such as action plan meetings, inclusive strategies modeling and ongoing professional development on inclusion. To make these approaches more DisCrit-informed, we were intentional in talking about race and disability, raising awareness about the social construction of these constructs as well as their infiltration in our social and educational system creating inequities and disparities between our student populations. Our findings show the importance of teachers' critical consciousness about these systemic and structural systems of oppression and their development of an inclusive philosophy that would drive their quest for professional development opportunities and their implementation of DisCrit-informed practices.

It was important to foreground our inclusion project in equity and social justice principles and embark our stakeholders "in a continuous inspection of the shifting margins that exclude some students from meaningful access and participation in education" (Kozleski *et al.*, 2013, p. 6). Teachers and administrators who acquired a critical philosophy of commitment to social justice (Kurth & Foley, 2014) were advocating for these students and were dedicated to implementing inclusive strategies to improve their students' educational experiences and outcomes. Using a DisCrit framework allowed us to highlight the role of ideology in perpetuating inequities, challenge traditional and normative ways of conceptualizing race and disability within inclusive education and promote critical ways of thinking about students' multidimensional identities in enacting inclusive education. This study illustrates the connection between macro-level historical and institutional policies, discourses and practices and micro-level individual attitudes and behaviors towards disability, race and inclusion, which, in turn, produce systemic deficit-based ideologies that reinforce whiteness and perpetuate inequities (Love & Beneke, 2021). This critical PDS model helped to create a critical learning community that advocates for inclusion and social justice and to accomplish and sustain a real change "by focusing on a mutually agreed-upon educational initiative and using a systemic change model" (Doolittle *et al.*, 2008, p. 305). Scaling up our model of critical PDS to other schools would expand the inclusive education culture and improve educational experiences for students with disabilities.

We enacted inclusion research that represents students with disabilities' experiences and knowledge (Nind, 2014) applying the disability rights movement slogan "Nothing About Us

Without Us" (Charlton, 2000, p. 1). Amplifying the stories of students of color with disabilities through action plan meetings as a strength-based approach has the potential to encourage them to advocate for themselves against hegemonic views of disability and have control over their educational experiences in inclusive classrooms. Through this research, we were able to capture the stories of success in research of students with disabilities to inform strength-based practices and instill a culture of inclusion that welcomes difference and requires commitment and flexibility.

By continuing this study, we hope to add new knowledge in the fields of inclusive education and PDS to inform tailored professional development efforts aiming to improve teachers' socio-political development and best inclusive practices for the meaningful inclusion of students with disabilities. We stress the importance of the administrators' buy-in and their commitment to inclusion and social justice that enable a change in the policies and procedures (i.e. commitment to inclusion as a hiring requirement, professional development programs and extracurricular initiatives) and the creation of welcoming and supportive environments that value difference and disability. Future research is needed to critically explore teachers' perceptions of their inclusive teaching identities, "political consciousness" and their "situated agency" in enacting equity and inclusion (Danforth & Narayan, 2015, p. 73) to uncover and address social and academic barriers that students with disabilities encounter in the educational system. Organizing communities of practice groups who regularly meet to discuss and rethink inclusive practices and their impact on their students could be a continuation of the current project to sustain inclusive practices with the ultimate goal of access, success and equity.

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About the authors

Latifa Sebtı is Pre-doctoral faculty at William Paterson University's college of education. She previously served as a research project coordinator and Adjunct instructor at the Department of Interdisciplinary and Inclusive Education at Rowan University. Her research interest is focused on questioning educational policies and practices that sustain the reproduction of systems of racism and ableism, as well as advocating for equitable educational opportunities for students with disabilities and children of immigrants. Latifa Sebtı is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: sebtıl@wpunj.edu

Brent C. Elder is Professor-in-Residence at a PDS school and Associate Professor in the Wellness and Inclusive Services in Education Department. He teaches a variety of undergraduate, master's, and Ph.D. courses on topics related to disability studies. His research focuses on the development of sustainable inclusive education practices in under-resourced schools. Specifically, his work utilizes a critical disability studies lens to examine the intersections of disability, poverty and education.

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