Photovoice: Illuminating the Impact of Inclusive

Education Practices in United States Public Schools

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Abstract

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This study explores the impacts of inclusive education practices in United States public schools

from the perspective of students who receive these services. Majority of the literature on

inclusive education practices is written by people who have not experienced special education

services in the United States. Students targeted were from public schools in Washington state

between the ages of 14 and 21. It is hypothesized that the study will provide an increase for

students with disabilities to advocate for their own education and engage in self-advocacy.

Photovoice is a participatory research approach that has participants take pictures to illustrate the

research question that can later be supplemented by short stories or captions by the participants.

Students participating were able to talk with each other about the Photovoice process, common

themes they found in each other's pictures and captions, and brainstorm ways to target local

representatives and policy-makers. Data collection was strengthened by surveys to gather more

specific information on people's perceptions of inclusion and special education services. Themes identified include school experiences, employment and independent living, and stereotypes. Concepts from the Social Model of Disability and Dis/ability Critical Race Theory were used to further highlight student experiences. This study contributes to social work practice by providing an opportunity for students with disabilities to share their own perspectives and experiences within the public education system. This work will allow an opportunity for students with disabilities to become the principle speaker on special education reform.

Keywords: inclusion, education, photovoice, self-advocacy, empowerment.

Introduction

The Disability community is arguably the most underrepresented group throughout society whilst facing significant social, institutional, and systemic oppression. In fact, disability affects nearly one in four, or nearly 61 million, adults in the United States with a self-reported difficulty in at least one of six major areas including: mobility, hearing, vision, independent living, and self-care (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics collected data on people with physical, cognitive, or emotional disabilities and their employment, or unemployment, using the Current Population Survey (CPS) sent to a monthly sample of about 60,000 households. According to their findings, 19.1 percent of people with disabilities between the ages of 16-64 were employed in 2018 compared to people without a disability at 65.9 percent.

Social Model of Disability

The Social Model of Disability is a theoretical framework that posits people are in fact disabled by physical barriers, like inaccessible spaces for disabled bodies, or attitudinal barriers, such as assumptions that people with disabilities cannot participate in certain things or do tasks for themselves due to their disability, rather than being disabled by their impairment or difference (Scope, n.d.). By working to create physical spaces and a greater culture of societal understanding around the strengths and needs of the Disability community, it serves to contribute to create a better environment for all persons. This concept is also referred to as Universal Design (UD), which suggests that by designing products and spaces to be used to the greatest extent possible by all people without the need for adaption will have far-reaching benefits for all (Imrie, 2012). Creating a society and cultural understanding centered around inclusion will not only provide benefits to those directly receiving the accommodations or resources, but according to principals under UD, benefits will contribute to a better quality of life for all people.

Dis/ability Critical Race Theory (Dis/Crit)

Dis/ability Critical Race Theory, or DisCrit, combines aspects of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Disability Studies (DS) to examine the interdependent constructions of race and disability in education and society (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013). DisCrit recognizes how the complexities of racial and disability identities have existed throughout history with roots in white supremacy, and how the social construction of these identities were created as a response to the 'differences' from the norm (Annamma et al., 2013). Annamma et al. (2013) pose seven core tenets, three of which will be addressed throughout this paper, stating that DisCrit: 1) focuses on ways that the forces of racism and ableism circulate interdependently, often in neutralized and invisible ways, to uphold notions of normalcy, 2) emphasizes the social construction of race and ability and yet recognizes the material and psychological impacts of being labeled as raced or dis/abled, which sets one outside of the western cultural norms, and 3) privileges voices of marginalized populations, traditionally not acknowledged within research. DisCrit relates to the Social Model of Disability in which it holds that disability is viewed as a deviation from 'normalcy' when in reality the socially constructed labels placed upon the Disability community are from the perspective that disabled is inherently 'bad' or 'less than' rather than a difference in human experience. This theory also honors that multiple identities, such as disability and race, cannot be addressed separately but are two interconnected pieces of a person's identity and influences how they are perceived by society.

Education

Current state of United Stated public education. For the 2016-2017 school year in the United States, the national graduation rate for students was at 84.6 percent, compared to 67.1 percent of students with disabilities (NCES, 2018). The graduation rates for students with

disabilities range as high as 83.3 percent in Arkansas, to as low as 36.4 percent in Mississippi (NCES, 2018). The Department of Education has suggested these disparities exist because of differences in reporting between states. This suggestion further exemplifies how different education attainment is for students depending on geographic location. People with disabilities on average tend to have lower higher education attainment with 7 percent of people with disabilities acquiring a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 13 percent for people without disabilities, and are more likely to face economic disparities where people with disabilities earn 37 percent lower pay compared to that of people without disabilities (Yin, Shaewitz, & Megra, 2014). Education is one aspect of life for Disabled people that can act as a powerful target for change in the policies, procedures, and representation that affect this population. Throughout our education experience we learn skills around critical thinking, how to seek knowledge, be independent, and build meaningful relationships with those around us. These skills help prepare us as we transition into adulthood, making it critical that disabled and non-disabled students have ample opportunities to practice and strengthen these skills before exiting the public education system. In our current public education system, students with disabilities can be segregated from their peers by the busses they ride, the classrooms in which they learn, or from community and school sponsored events. This exclusion can be as ambiguous as holding events in facilities that do not support wheelchair accessibility, or, in heavily scented areas that can impact people with chemical sensitivities. As noted in the first tenet of DisCrit, ableism circulates throughout society in often invisible ways, where implicit biases become explicit actions that uphold ideas of normalcy (Annamma et al., 2013). Furthermore, we see that students with disabilities face more challenges to acquire a high school diploma or pursue higher education, making it more difficult for disabled students to see representation of other disabled students or instructors within academia. A recent study published

by the States News Service (2018) released findings from Johns Hopkins University that found black students who had just one black teacher by third grade were 13 percent more likely to enroll in college, and those who had two black teachers were 32 percent more likely. Representation among all identities, including race, disability, gender, age, and religion, is important because it helps students feel like they belong in an academic setting, whether in public or higher education, when they see someone in a position of power who looks like them.

Inclusion and special education. In 2004 the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was signed into law, increasing the federal involvement in supporting special education services in public schools (IDEA Partnership, n.d.). IDEA consists of two crucial parts: Part B provides services for people with disabilities from the ages 3-21, and Part C to ensure services for the person and family from birth-3 before they enter the public education system. The purpose of IDEA is to provide and enforce a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for all children within the public education system in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). IDEA also allows parents to be more involved in their student's education by implementing Individualized Education Programs (IEP) that create a team where the teacher, student, parents, pertinent school staff, and additional student supports meet and develop a specialized curriculum and identify needed resources to best support the student with the disability and their educational goals. It is important to note, however, that each student's educational outcomes and goals will differ from student to student. Education is not a one-size-fits-all program, but rather a system that works to support all students, using components from Universal Design (UD), to achieve their goals. Inclusion is more than a movement, but rather a tool to be utilized that is guaranteed to all students within our education systems so that each student can maximize success and growth in regards to their educational goals. Inclusive education can be thought of as a "movement seeking to create schools

that meet the needs of all students by establishing learning communities for students with and without disabilities, educated together in age-appropriate general education classrooms in neighborhood schools" (Bakken & Obiakor, 2016, pp. 3). Inclusion is a framework used to ensure that the students with disabilities are as integrated with the general classrooms to the highest extent possible throughout the day utilizing strategies such as co-teaching, interdisciplinary consultation, paraprofessional support, modifications in curriculum or testing, accommodations for specific disabilities, and any other service to properly support the person and their educational goals (Bakken & Obiakor, 2016).

Gaps in existing literature. Current literature on inclusive education practices within United States public schools, are largely written by able-bodied and non-disabled persons as the voices informing policy and procedures for special education services. This could be caused by authors and researchers not disclosing their disability, or the lack of representation of disabled people holding spaces in academia and leadership within organizations. The special education system is lacking the most knowledgeable perspectives- the voices that belong to the students experiencing this system. "Disability Thinking" is a blog for people with disabilities to share and comment on their own experiences. Blogger and self-advocate, Apulrang, comments on their post "Education, Segregation, Isolation" how the topic of inclusion is currently handled as if it were still a new idea rather than a core issue in Special Education law since the 1990's (2015). What current literature on special education is missing are the voices and perspectives of those who are directly impacted: the students. The current study utilizes a Community-Based Participatory Approach to allow a creative opportunity for students to engage in self-advocacy around education, making it one of the first of its kind to explore the impacts of special education services from student perspectives within the United States public education system.

Methods

Photovoice

The qualitative approach known as Photovoice was first developed by Wang and Burris in 1994 as a process in which people can identify and represent their perspectives through taking pictures. According to Wang and Burris (1997), Photovoice has three main goals: 1) to enable people to record and reflect on their community's strengths and concerns, 2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues through group discussion of photographs, and 3) to reach policy makers. Photovoice is a Community-Based participatory Approach (CBPA)[1] that has participants take photographs to illustrate the research problem or question, which is supplemented by interview data or simple sentences and used to target local policy makers (Povee, Bishops, & Roberts, 2014). Another strength to this method is that it allows the participants to be research partners or co-researchers throughout the process, rather than being the research subject. Povee and colleagues (2014) outlines the six stage of Photovoice that was utilized in their study for people with intellectual disabilities (Appendix A). The first two stages involves establishing a group of people who are interested in participating in the research process and defining a collective theme to explore, such as inclusive education services. Once that has been done, participants will take photographs and select the photos that reflect the theme. The group will work together to identify themes that arose from the pictures with the process ending by participants targeting an audience beyond the group, such as policy makers. Current existing literature on special education and inclusive education services come from the perspective of non-disabled people in positions of

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[1] Community Based Participatory Research is a "collaborative approach to research that equitably involves, for example, community members, organizational representatives, and researchers in all aspects of the research process… [Community partners] contribute 'unique strengths and shared responsibilities' to enhance understanding of a given phenomenon and the social and cultural dynamics of the community, and integrate the knowledge gained with action to improve the … well-being of community members" (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998, pp. 177).

power, either within academia or the education system itself. Using Photovoice allows the opportunity to elevate student voices and bring a perspective on special education services from those who know it best and whose voices are not always heard.

Photovoice within disability centered research. Photovoice has been used as an accessible and inclusive method to engage the voices of people with disabilities in academic research. This method has been used with people with disabilities to address health disparities (Jurkowski & Paul-Ward, 2007), explore identities and social roles in the community (Povee, Bishop, & Roberts, 2014; Schleien, Brake, Miller, & Walton, 2013; O'Grady, 2008), share perspectives on job satisfaction (Akkerman, Janssen, Kef, & Meininger, 2014), to advocate for community resources (Newman, Maurer, Jackson, Saxon, Jones, & Reese, 2009), and as a resource and support group for mothers with intellectual disabilities (Booth & Booth, 2003). The strengths of using Photovoice as a tool to engage voices from the Disability community include being able to capture the perspectives of people who may have more than one disability, or are more impacted by their disability where involvement in traditional research could be more difficult for participants (Cluley, 2016). Other benefits expressed by participants include a sense of pride and confidence because of the method's use of photography, a fun and enjoyable activity, to share personal experiences and stories (Jurkowski & Paul-Ward, 2007).

In an education context, Photovoice has been used to share student perspectives within higher education around campus accessibility, then using those conversations to target public policy makers to address barriers for people with disabilities in accessing higher education (Agarwal, Moya, Yasui, & Seymour, 2015). Photovoice has also been used to engage students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) to help build social skills and provide an outlet for students to share experiences around their education in secondary school in Australia (Danker, Strnadová,

& Cumming, 2016). As more research needs to be conducted to include the voices of students with disabilities in our education systems here in the United States, the present study will be used to provide an opportunity for students receiving special education services in U.S. public schools to share their voices and engage in advocacy.

Purpose

The primary aim for the survey is to establish the need for participatory based research regarding special education services within a United States public education system context. Existing literature lacks the informative perspectives of student experiences to inform current and future policies. The purpose of the current Photovoice study is to 1) allow an opportunity for empowerment and self-advocacy for participants, and 2) act as an exploratory study to contribute to existing research on inclusive education practices by highlighting student voices.

Approval Process

Approval for both the survey and Photovoice was acquired through the University of Washington Institutional Review Board. The Vice Principal from the school met with the Primary Investigator (PI) and expressed interest in having their school participate in the proposed study. Once a partnership with the school had been established, further endorsement was acquired to conduct research within the district and its schools. This required gaining approval from the Director of Program Evaluation within the district and having the presentation voted on amongst board members. After support had been granted from the school and the district, the PI met with school staff who deliver special education curriculum to garner their support for the study as well.

Study Design

Survey. This exploratory study was conducted in two parts over the course of two years. During the first part, a survey was distributed using a convenience sample to gain an understanding

on public perspectives around inclusive education from disabled and non-disabled people. Participants were provided consent at the beginning of the survey. Surveys consisted of ten questions (Table 2) to ask participants about their perceptions of inclusive education practices in United Sates public schools. The survey questions were created by the PI as no existing survey instrument existed for people with disabilities to share their perspectives on a variety of aspects of their special education services. Included in the survey were three items asking participants to rate their feelings on a scale of 1 to 10 to identify the importance of different aspects of inclusive education (α=.28), two items asking if participants felt students with disabilities were treated differently by school or staff (α=.70), and two items asking if students with disabilities are included and valued parts of their school and extracurricular activities (α=.89). The last four questions utilized a five-point Likert scale where responses were coded from 0 to 4 where respondents would rate their selections by choosing one of the following options: Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Very Often, or Always. Demographic information was not collected. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze frequencies to explore the relationship between self-identification of disability and perceptions on how students with disabilities are treated by school staff, other students, and feelings around being perceived as included and valuable aspects of the school and extracurricular activities.

Photovoice. Photovoice is a Community-Based Participatory Approach (CBPA) that has been utilized in the field of social work to gather rich, qualitative information from the perspective of community members. Using this method is especially important as the PI is non-disabled, making it particularly significant to highlight the voices of students who have received direct special education services. It is hypothesized that using this method as the primary resource to collect data will provide the students with a source of empowerment to creatively share their

perspectives and advocate for their rights to a meaningful education. The current study utilizes a mixed-methods approach where quantitative surveys were supplemented with qualitative data gathered from the photo taking process to create a holistic understanding on the perceptions of special education services. The quantitative portion uses a pre-experimental design and an exploratory approach to collect information from students and community members on their perceptions of the education system that currently do not exist. Survey responses were used to demonstrate the need for community based research where students, past or present, with disabilities are provided the opportunity to share their experiences. The qualitative portion uses a phenomenological approach to gain an understanding on how the participants make meaning of their lived experiences through school.

Current Study: Photovoice

Recruitment. Three different school districts in the greater Seattle area were approached to seek approval to participate in the study. Two school declined for reasons including changes in staff positions and staff availability being barriers to engage. Once the partnership with the school was finalized and approval to conduct research within the district was acquired, meetings with school administration and special education teachers occurred to share information about the study and to garner teacher support. All students within the high school that receive special education services are eligible to participate in the study. Student demographic information was not collected. Teachers care deeply not only to provide a meaningful education for their students, but they are deeply committed to their healthy development into adulthood and well-being. This was a collaborative process, making the study much stronger. Teachers were able to provide feedback on ways to make the study more accessible, such as including visual steps for the four sessions, for their students different levels of learning.

Consent. 60 parent permission slips were sent home with students within each of the three special education classes where a total of six parent permission slips were returned with parent approval. A brief meeting occurred with the students prior to their spring break to learn about the study, meet with the Primary Investigator (PI), and decide if they would like to participate in the project. At the beginning of each of the four sessions the students would provide verbal and written assent for participation.

Data collection. Once permission slips were acquired, the PI met with the teachers to develop a schedule for data collection so not to interfere with student or classroom learning. Data collection occurred over the course of four consecutive days to prevent regression and uphold retention. Students were supported by the PI and Para-Educators within the classroom who had strong relationships with the students throughout study procedures to promote student engagement. During the first session, students took a brief survey to gather their perspectives on education and had the opportunity to practice using the cameras around the classroom. The survey consists of 12 questions (Table 1): two yes or no questions, three scaling questions ranging from 1 to 10, and seven short response question with one asking participants to define inclusive education. Students had the opportunity to supplement any responses with additional written comments. During the second session, students used a guide (Table 3) to help narrow down places or objects they would want to focus on for the photo taking process. Students discussed places around the school campus that included their classrooms, lunch room, gym, pool, office, and the outdoor campus grounds. After completing the picture taking process, students were asked to pick their top two pictures to focus on for the remainder of the project. The third session was centered around students reviewing their pictures where they talked together, along with the PI and Para-Educators, about the common themes that were present in the pictures. After discussing themes from pictures, students were

asked to caption their pictures and brainstorm three things they would like to write about in their letter to their local policy makers to prepare for the next session. The letters provide Throughout the fourth and final session, students wrote their letter to their policy maker and practiced navigating the state legislature website to find information about who their representatives are and how to contact them.

Results

Survey

SPSS was used to run descriptive statistics and frequencies to compare results from the quantitative surveys collected. Surveys were distributed electronically and through paper using a convenience sample

Figure 1.

Perceptions of Student Inclusion in U.S. Public Schools
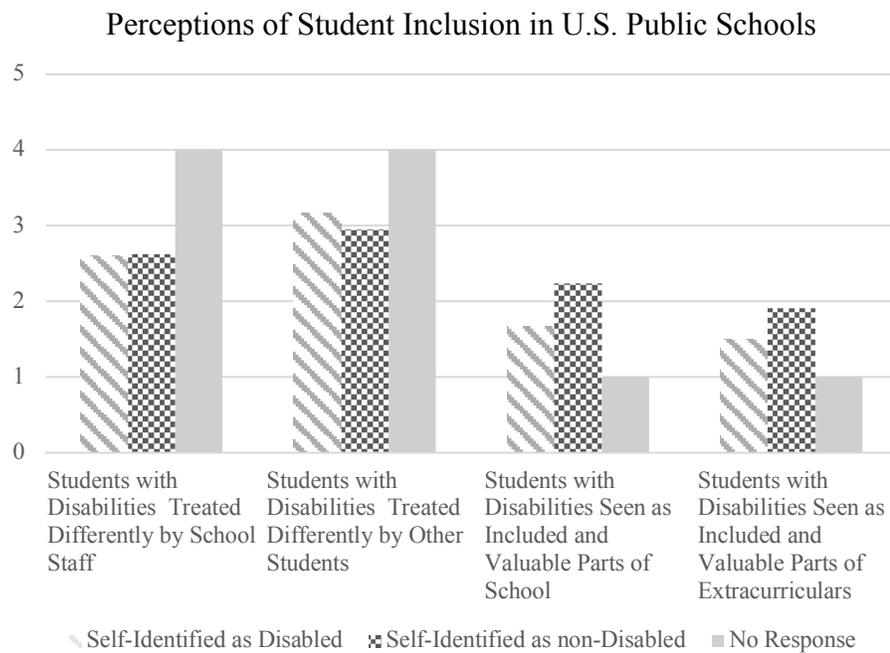
that resulted in 53 submitted surveys (N=53). Split case files were used to explore the difference in results based off participant's self-identification of disability (N=12) and self-identification of not having a disability (N=40). If participants selected more than one response their selection for that question was changed to "missing" (N=2) due to inability to determine their desired response. Of the submitted surveys (N=53), 98.1% of respondents rated a score of 8 or higher (Slightly Important-Very Important) on the value of inclusive education in public schools. When survey

responses were disaggregated by self-identification of disability, results showed that people without disabilities were more likely to rate levels of inclusion in schools and acceptance by peers and teachers at a higher rate than respondents who self-identified as having a disability. Data was supplemented by responses where participants had the opportunity to further expand on their answers by being asked if there was an example they would like to share. Some of the supplemental responses from participants that self-identified as having a disability include:

➢ *Segregating students is creating social divisions which lead to ableism.*

➢ *I think teachers in inclusive classrooms treated students with disabilities/receiving special education services differently because they didn't know how exactly to treat them.*

➢ *I still struggle socially because I was not free to interact with my peers as a young person.*

➢ *Having experience as a disabled person and having worked as a social worker in schools, I've seen just how inaccessible, ableist, and problematic schools can be.*

➢ *Although some folks prefer person first language, the majority of folks I know and am connected with who are disabled prefer to steer clear of this format. We are disabled people. Referring to us as people with disabilities leads to a color-blind mentality.*

Respondents shared their experiences with perspectives ranging from students reflecting on their educational experiences to continuing this work and narrative into their professional careers. Participants shared feelings that their special education instruction let to social divisions, a sense of "othering," and contributed to challenges around social interaction beyond public school. At the end of the survey, participants were asked to define inclusive education. Responses from participants who self-identified as having a disability include:

➢ *Education settings that can still highlight the differences, but still doesn't make those seem like an "other", or something meant to be excluded.*

➢ *Catering to people's individual needs without stigmatizing them or making them feel unequal.*

➢ *Inclusive education is accessible for all students. Separating classrooms into "mainstream" and "special education" perpetuates the idea that we are innately different and consequently less than. This is highly problematic and leads to ableist narratives.*

➢ *I would define inclusive education as education that includes and benefits all; specifically for students with disabilities, this means integrating and including them in classrooms when possible, so that they may have as "normal" a childhood experience.*

Survey participants had different ways to approach their definition of inclusive education, yet touched on central themes around supporting people's need to promote their success in the classroom and recognizing how power dynamics or a sense of "othering" can impact the education experience.

Photovoice

A total of five students participated through the entire Photovoice process. Three students were in 10th grade and two students were in 9th grade. When asked "Do you have a disability?" three of the five students responded "No" while all five responded "Yes" to having received special education services in a United States public school. All five students also expressed interest in pursuing employment after graduation with job interests ranging from working in a restaurant to their favorite retail stores.

   School experiences. Students shared their favorite experiences within school that included physical activity such as extra-curricular sports and P.E. Students also expressed overwhelming interest and support of Unified Supports, or Special Olympics. One student, Malcolm[2], shared throughout the project how his involvement in multiple sports including swimming and track helped him feel included and valuable at school. Malcolm connected his passion for sports to an issue he cared about in his letter to his

"This shows everybody that we are all equal… I think it is important that we choose to include people with disabilities. When you choose to include all students can play sports, makes (sic) friends, and have fun. I want you to support the special Olympics program." - Malcolm

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[2] All names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of students.

policy makers where he wrote *"I think it's important to choose to include people with disabilities. When you choose to include, all students can play sports, make friends, and have fun. I want you to support the special Olympics program."* Andrea shared that she likes to use the computers at school where her teacher used computer time and printing pictures of her favorite movie characters as a

"I like delivering mail. I deliver mail to staff mailboxes. I like putting mail in envelopes. It's important to deliver mail because people need to get their mail." - Derek

positive reinforcement for focused and respectful behavior throughout the school day. Job training skills were also an aspect of the school day that majority of the students looked forward to. In his letter, Derek shared *"at school my job is to deliver mail. I like delivering and sorting the mail. I like delivering to the classrooms and teachers delivering mail (sic) to be responsible… I think its (sic) really important for all students to practice skills for a job please remember this and support job training skills at schools."*

Employment and independent living. Students also talked in depth about their goals for work post-graduation and its relationship with independent living. All students expressed interest in working after graduation with employment jobs ranging from retail, restaurants, or USPS mail delivery. After school, Andrea wants to work at a restaurant where she can help people cook. For Andrea, it's "important to work and make money because I can use it for rent so that I can live with other people or buy a phone." Similarly, Elena believes finding a job after graduating is important because she "can used (sic) money to pay rent bills buy clothes and phones car (sic) and

"This is where I eat lunch. I like to eat lunch by myself. I like this picture of the ceiling. I like to look at the lights. The lights are pretty." - Ethan

paying P.U.D. electricity bills." In a letter to his representative, Ethan wrote: *When I graduate from school, I want to work at USPS. I want to be a mailman. Mailmen get to deliver mail and see people. I think it's important to learn how to work while I'm in school please think of me and my goal to learn how to work while I'm in school so that I can get a job when I graduate.* Not only is it important for Ethan to find employment after graduation, but for him having a job where he can "see people" and interact with his community.

Stereotypes. The final theme around stereotypes were communicated by two of the participants. In her survey, Andrea felt that she was treated differently from school staff or peers in middle school where "some people used to be mean but now [in high school] everyone is nice to me." In her letter to her local representatives, Elena shared:

> "I think school is important because it helps you get your diploma. People who say stereotypes about black people dropping out of school make me really mad because I find it stereotypical and I don't think it's true. I think black kids power through and go to school without getting bullied and get their GED or high school diploma. Thank you for hearing about my pictures and interests. I hope you remember me and the pictures I shared with you- I'm not trying to be negative, but these are things that are really important to me. I hope when you make decision (sic) about schools and people in your district that you focus on work skills being taught in high school, to not let people get to you, and stay strong."

Discussion

Survey

While there is such an overwhelming amount of support for both inclusive education and for an increase in interaction of students with and without disabilities beyond the classroom, it is important to note that people who self-identified as having a disability expressed that having a supportive inclusive education system is not the reality. Results showed that people without disabilities were more likely to rate levels of inclusion in schools and acceptance by peers and teachers at a higher rate than respondents who self-identified as having a disability. This may be caused by students without disabilities who tend to have more positive views about the inclusion of disabled students because nondisabled students do not understand the challenges experienced by students with disabilities when being included in the school system. DisCrit challenges the norm and looks to privilege the voices of marginalized populations that are not traditionally acknowledged within research (Annamma et al., 2013). Survey results help show that perspectives on inclusive education vary greatly depending on if it is disabled or nondisabled students who are being asked. This further emphasizes the need for academic and policy related research on inclusive education services to not only include, but prioritize the voices of the students with disabilities in which they are serving. DisCrit Theory identifies that in society, disability is seen as a deviation from the norm and as stated by one of the participants, "perpetuates the idea that [people with disabilities] are innately different and consequently less than." How students with disabilities are treated and included throughout their education experience has lasting impacts, as one of the participants from the surveys discussed how they still struggle socially because they did not have the same opportunities to interact with their peers when they were in school. Participants shared that students who received special education services were treated differently by teachers

"because they didn't know how exactly to treat [the students]." By not acknowledging that the special education system would benefit from positive reform that uses the voices of people who have experienced the system, it is not only affecting these students while they are receiving education but its impacts extend into adulthood. Our public education system is a foundational piece in a person's development and impacts every single child in the country. People with disabilities are sharing that our education system as it stands is not properly supporting disabled students and their academic and social-emotional growth by implicitly, or explicitly, perpetuating biases around disabled student's abilities in the classroom, from peers, and by their educators.

Photovoice

The participating students, while being only in the first two years in their high school education, shared profound feelings around the importance of not only being included themselves, but also including others. Themes centering on school experiences, employment and independent living, and stereotypes within school were important to each of the students and showed through their pictures, surveys, and letters sent to policy makers. In order to participate in the study, students needed to be receiving special education services and have a formal IEP through the district. However, in their surveys, three of five students responded "No" to "Do you have a disability?" and highlights the differences in disability identity. While all students are viewed by the district as having a disability due to their IEP plan and accommodations provided through school, the Social Model of Disability recognizes that disability is attributed more to the physical and altitudinal barriers posed by society that view disabled people as lesser. Students may not see themselves as disabled, but society labels them so due to their differences in abilities and use of accommodations. With similar principles of UD, by working to create a greater culture and societal

understanding about the strengths and needs of the Disability community, it serves to contribute to create a better environment for all persons.

The School to Prison Pipeline is attributed by implicit and explicit policies that push our nation's students, especially those most at-risk, out of the classrooms and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems where African-American students with disabilities represent only 18.7 percent of our nation's special education population yet comprises 49.9 percent of special education students in correctional facilities (DREDF, 2005). A disproportionate number of students of color and English Language Learners, compared to their white and English speaking peers, are placed in special education services and are therefore labeled as disabled due to their deviation form society's norm (Annamma et al., 2013; DREDF, 2005). Throughout the study, Emily, a Black student who self-identified as non-disabled, speaks to this point "where students with disabilities are treated differently when we all just want to learn together" and discusses stereotypes around Black students graduating from high school and being successful in their academic careers. Adults, educators, and professionals alike may assume that negative beliefs towards students with disabilities and students of color are an abstract and distant concept, but even with the brief opportunity Elena was able to share how these concepts impact her today. DisCrit addresses the complexities of both racial and disability identities and that the social construction of these identities were created as a response to differences from the 'norm' (Annamma et al., 2013). Throughout this process, Elena speaks to people's biases around Black students and their ability to thrive academically. Supporting students with disabilities requires an intersectional approach, one that recognizes and holds each part of a person's identity and views how different identities shape their life experiences and how they are viewed by society.

During March and April of 2019, conversations around funding that impacts the Disability community became a prioritized topic within our government among both political parties. The Fiscal Year (FY) 2020 budget proposed cuts that total in tens of millions of dollars that would disrupt critical funding for services for the Disability community including education, employment, assistive technology, and independent living (Ridge, 2019). The current Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, proposed $17.6 million, or ten percent, in cuts towards Special Olympics (Mervosh, 2019). As Malcolm, Elena, Ethan, Andrea, and Derek all shared, Special Olympics and sports in schools were one of their favorite and most valued parts of the school day. Something that may seem as unimportant as team sports are, in fact, a significant opportunity for inclusion for people with and without disabilities and an opportunity to be a part of a team that creates a sense of community and belonging. The participating students view Special Olympics and sports as a fundamental and critical part of their education and lives, not as something so irrelevant it would not be missed when the topic of budget cuts enter conversations.

Limitations

The present study was conducted within one high school, where these students experiences and perspectives on their special education services could be vastly different if their school was in a neighboring district or a different state. This study provides a snapshot of what students with disabilities value in their education only within only one school in the Greater Seattle Area. While not all components of this study may be generalizable due to the small sample size, as an exploratory study, Photovoice shows promise in its ability to allow students with disabilities the opportunity to reflect and share their education services and engage in the advocacy process. Also, in order to be initially contacted, parents had to provide prior parental consent. This could be a barrier due to historical mistrust of research, not being able to provide study materials in a variety

of languages, or parent's personal views on research and education that could have prevented more students from engaging. Additionally, this study was conducted within a well-resourced school district where students have access to tangible resources, such as laptops. This research also exists in a district that has the ability to pay their staff fair wages that upholds staff-retention where educators are able to stay within a district for an extended amount of time and build meaningful relationships with their students. The results found in this study may vary significantly depending on geographical location, where special education services can be drastically different between educational districts with a state and between the states themselves. While being small, this sample provided a deep perspectives on their education and highlighted what students truly value in their education.

Implications

Photovoice is a promising method in its ability to use an enjoyable and creative outlet with photography to engage traditionally marginalized voices in research. In our schools, students already have access to photography through classes, extracurriculars like yearbook, or with the rise in use and availability, their own smartphones. This work has the capacity to move beyond this one school and provide an opportunity for students with disabilities across the nation to share their perspectives on inclusive education. Students with disabilities are the expert in their own experiences and have personal knowledge with the strengths, challenges, and successes faced by disabled students in the public education system. As a nation that takes pride in its education system, it is time we change how we obtain knowledge and research and move towards a societal culture that allows those who are directly impacted to become the key voices.

Conclusion

This study provides a direct and accessible opportunity for students with disabilities to share their perspectives on the education services received within United States public schools. Students with disabilities are often not included in conversations around curriculum development, funding, or extracurricular development but this needs to change. These students bring valuable and immeasurable experiences on what is really important within special education services because it is their lived experience. Students shared the importance of feeling included and being able to explore their interests within the school day whether it's through joining an after school club, sport, or having the opportunity to look up their favorite movie characters online. Education is a fundamental human right where Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) and equitable services delivered to students with disabilities in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) are federally mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Students with disabilities in our public schools have immense knowledge on what is important in special education, what works well and what doesn't, and where legislators should prioritize funding because of their direct lived experiences. Elena, Andrea, Malcolm, Derek, and Ethan all had incredible knowledge around their experiences in special education and what was most important, all they needed was someone to listen and a creative outlet to share those messages with their policy makers.

Appendix A

Six Stages of Photovoice

1 — Establishing a group of people interested in conducting research

2 — Collectively identifying a theme to be explored using Photovoice

3 — Taking the photographs

4 — Selecting photographs either individually or as a group that reflect the theme of the project and contextualizing or telling stories about the photographers

5 — Codifying or identifying the collective themes, issues, and theories that occur across the participants' photographs

6 — Targeting an audience beyond the group, such as policy-makers

Adapted from Povee et al., 2004

Table 1

Student Survey Questions

Q 1. Do you have a disability?

Q 2. Have you received special education services from a United States public school?

Q 3. How do you feel that the epical education programs you're in has helped to set you up for life after high school?

Q 4. Do you feel that you were an important and valuable part of your school and school activities?

Q 5. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being extremely low and 10 being extremely high, how would you rate your experience in your special education program?

Q 6. Did you ever feel that you were treated differently from staff or your peers?

Q 7. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being extremely low and 10 being extremely high, how important do you think it is that students with disabilities can spend time with their friends (with or without a disability) outside your special education classroom?

Q 8. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being extremely low and 10 being extremely high, how important do you think it is to have classes where students with and without disabilities can spend time together at school?

Q 9. What are some good things about the special education program you are in ?

Q 10. What are some bad parts, or things that could be changed about the special education program you are enrolled in?

Q 11. What do you believe could be done to make special education programs in schools better?

Q 12. How do you define inclusive education?

Table 2

	Public Perceptions of Inclusive Education Practices in United States Public Schools				
			Frequency		Percent
Q 1	Do you have a disability?	Yes	12		22.6
		No	40		75.5
		Missing	1		1.9
Q 2	Do you have a family member or friend with a disability?	Yes	20		37.7
		No	31		58.5
		Missing	2		3.8
Q 3	Did that family member or friend receive special education services in a U.S. public school?	Yes	25		34.0
		No	18		47.2
		N/A	10		18.9

		N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Q 4	On a scale of 1-10, please rate the importance of special education programs in the US.	53	0.00	10.00	8.42	3.19
Q 5	On a scale of 1-10, please rate the importance of students with disabilities being able to interact with their peers without disabilities outside of the classroom.	53	8.00	10.00	9.74	0.62
Q 6	On a scale of 1-10, please rate how valuable you think inclusive education is in public schools.	53	2.00	10.00	9.70	1.17
Q 7	How often did you feel that students with disabilities were treated differently by school staff?	52	0.00	5.00	2.70	0.94
Q 8	How often did you feel that students with disabilities were treated differently by other students?	53	1.00	5.00	3.02	0.93
Q 9	Do you feel that students with disabilities were an included and valuable part of the school?	53	0.00	5.00	2.08	1.16
Q 10	Do you feel that students with disabilities were an included and valuable part of extracurricular activities?	53	0.00	5.00	1.80	1.24

Table 3

Guiding Questions

Q 1.   Take a picture of your favorite place

Q 2.   Take a picture of a place you don't like

Q 3.   Take a picture of something you like

Q 4.   Take a picture of something you don't like

Q 5.   Think of a goal you have. Take a picture that describes that goal. For example, if you have a goal to work in a library, you could take a picture of the library.

Q 6.   Take a picture of your favorite part of school.

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