

# Amplifying Voices: Preparing Teachers with Self-Advocates' Stories and Strategies for Inclusion

## AUTHORS

*Danene Fast*  
*Katie M. McCabe*  
*Kaylie Clinton*  
*John Mitchell Ulibarri*

Journal of Special  
Education Preparation  
5(2), 50-61  
© 2025 Fast et al.  
Licensed with CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 Li-  
cense  
DOI: [https://doi.org/10.33043/t78s-  
j64kqzk](https://doi.org/10.33043/t78s-j64kqzk)

## ABSTRACT

One critical responsibility of special education faculty lies in effectively preparing preservice teachers to meet the needs of students with disabilities. This article provides teacher educators with practical strategies for using contact-based interventions as a tool for informing preservice teachers about the unique challenges and strengths of students with disabilities. Faculty members from two different universities employed similar teaching strategies that integrated personal stories from self-advocates with autism into their introductory course curriculum. By collaborating with self-advocates and incorporating their personal perspectives within the courses, the professors created a bridge between theory and practice, ensuring that future educators are equipped to support diverse learners. These narratives can enhance preservice teachers' understanding while amplifying the voices of individuals with disabilities, thereby promoting empathy and informed practice. This article highlights the professors' shared commitment to working with self-advocates and illustrates how others can leverage self-advocacy as a pedagogical tool to enrich their teacher candidates' experience. Self-advocates themselves contributed to the article, demonstrating how authentic voices and lived experience can positively impact course design as well as preservice teachers' perspectives about disability.

## KEYWORDS

**Collaboration, contact-based interventions, empathy, preservice teachers, self-advocacy, students with disabilities, teacher education**

**A**ccording to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, approximately one in six children in the United States has been diagnosed with a developmental disability (Maenner et al., 2023). With a national trend toward more inclusive placements for students with disabilities, these students' presence in general education classrooms is steadily increasing (Williamson et al., 2020). Approximately 67% of students with disabilities now spend 80% or more of their school day in general education classrooms (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Yet, despite this shift, many educators enter the workforce with limited understanding of disability and may hold misconceptions about how to effectively support students with varying disabilities (Barned et al., 2011).

Traditional teacher education programs have been rooted in general education philosophies and traditional special education practices, which may leave little room for hands-on experience or coursework that addresses inclusive practices. To help equip future educators with tools they will need to support students with disabilities in inclusive environments, teacher education programs must adjust. Because the decisions that educators make regarding students with disabilities significantly influence their access to general education curriculum and environments (Ruppar et al., 2017), it is important for teacher education programs to include practical, inclusive teaching strategies that are grounded in respect, equity, and the lived experiences of people with disabilities.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION KNOWLEDGE IN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

Over the past 50 years, schools have evolved from exclusive spaces to today's settings where general education teachers are required to meet the needs of diverse populations, including students with disabilities. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) students with disabilities are entitled to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). The LRE principle ensures that, whenever appropriate, students with disabilities are educated alongside their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent possible to meet their individual needs. Commonly referred to as inclusion, this approach involves supporting students with varying abilities within the general education classroom. In order to effectively prepare all teachers, both general and special education, to meet the expectations of the law and effectively serve students with disabilities along with their non-disabled peers, teacher education programs are evolving to include special education content and coursework for all preservice teachers. Because an introductory course on special education is sometimes the only disability-related course that general education preservice educators take, exposure to authentic lived experience is a powerful way to increase the impact of such limited coursework (Clausen et al., 2023; Thompson et al., 2012). Special education teacher educators must embrace this responsibility as they are typically the people who teach disability-related content to most, if not all, teacher candidates at their institutions.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2024), 7.5 million students—15% of all students within public school settings—aged 3 to 21 were served under the IDEA in the 2022-23 school year. Of school-aged students receiving services, 95% were enrolled in regular schools, 2% were enrolled in separate schools for students with disabilities, 2% were partially placed in regular schools, and a combined 1% were educated in other environments (i.e., homebound, hospital, separate residential facility, correctional facility; NCES, 2024). Furthermore, 67% of these students spent 80% or more of their time in general education classrooms (NCES, 2024), highlighting the need for general education teachers to have knowledge of inclusive practices that address the needs of students with disabilities. However, studies suggest that general education teachers are not always aware of the unique needs of students with disabilities or how to create classroom spaces where everyone can achieve success (Bruggink et al., 2016; Byrd & Alexander, 2020; Leko et al., 2015; Smit & Humpert, 2012).

Effectively preparing general and special education teachers for inclusive classrooms remains an ongoing challenge and a topic of debate among teacher educators (McHatton & Parker, 2013; Shade & Stewart, 2001). Teacher education programs aim to show teachers how to create inclusive learning environments where all students have the chance to succeed. Nevertheless, many of these training programs often fall short when it comes to giving general education teachers the specific tools, strategies, and confidence they need to success-

fully work with students who have disabilities (Byrd & Alexander, 2020; Ingvarson et al., 2014; Rock et al., 2016). As a result, many teachers feel unprepared to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities in their general education classrooms.

## A FRAMEWORK TO AMPLIFY DISABLED VOICES IN TEACHER EDUCATION

A framework can help educators clarify why certain practices are being introduced or used so that practical ideas are not just activities, but a meaningful approach to learning. Disability Studies in Education (DSE) is a framework that provides teacher candidates with a critical approach for rethinking traditional special education practices and policies (Freedman, 2016). Grounded in an asset-based perspective, DSE emphasizes the social model of disability and challenges deficit- and medically-oriented approaches.

While conventional special education models often dominate teacher education programs, integrating DSE into these programs can better prepare future educators to create inclusive and accessible classrooms (Ashby, 2012; Broderick & Lalvani, 2017). It is essential for teacher candidates to not only understand disability through a DSE perspective but also explore how disability can be meaningfully embedded in the curriculum to reduce barriers for students with disabilities (Collins & Ferri, 2016). By adopting inclusive instructional strategies and embracing a holistic view of diversity, teacher candidates can position themselves as advocates for equity and agents of change in their educational communities (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019).

<sup>1</sup> Although person-first language (e.g., person with a disability) is often preferred in professional and academic writing, the authors feel that practitioners should recognize that preferences within the disability community vary. This article intentionally uses a combination of person-first and identity-first language (e.g., disabled person) to reflect the voices of self-advocates and to respect individual and community choices. Some individuals embrace identity-first language as a source of pride and political identity, while others prefer person-first language to emphasize personhood over diagnosis. Although practitioners are encouraged to use person-first language when writing for publication, the choice to use both forms reflects a commitment to honoring varied perspectives and to promoting respectful, inclusive discourse.

**TABLE 1:** Suggested Course Materials Centering Disabled Voices

Category	Title	Author/Creator(s)	Year
Book	Being Heumann: An Unrepentant Memoir of a Disability Rights Activist	Judith Heumann	2020
Documentary	Crip Camp	James Lebrecht and Nicole Newnham	2020
Documentary	Deaf President Now	Nyle DiMarco and Davis Guggenheim	2025
Book	Demystifying Disability: What to Know, What to Say, and How to Be an Ally	Emily Ladau	2021
Book	Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century	Alice Wong	2020
Documentary	Forget Me Not	Olivier Bernier	2021
Book	Owning It: Our Disabled Childhoods in Our Own Words	Jen Campbell, James and Lucy Catchpole	2025
Book	Sipping Dom Pérignon Through a Straw: Reimagining Success as a Disabled Achiever	Eddie Ndopu	2023
Book	Sitting Pretty: The View from My Ordinary Resilient Disabled Body	Rebekah Taussig	2020
Book	The Future is Disabled: Prophecies, Love Notes, and Mourning Songs	Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha	2022
Documentary	The Ride Ahead: Love, Tattoos, and Other Disabled Things	Samuel and Dan Habib	2024
Book	We're Not Broken: Changing the Autism Conversation	Eric Garcia	2021

*Note.* This is a sample of materials that could be used in an introductory course on disability-related topics. All listed items center disabled voices and lived experience, as they were created by individuals with disabilities or their families.

### Collaborating with the Disability Community in Teacher Education

One way that DSE challenges traditional special education practices is by making the voices and lived experiences of disabled people<sup>1</sup> a central part of teacher education. By hearing directly from the disability community, teacher candidates can reframe disability as an identity that is shaped by social, cultural, and political forces. Individuals with disabilities can name and challenge assumptions about normalcy, independence, and notions of intelligence. When teacher candidates engage with narratives from the disability community, they have opportunities to critically examine their own biases and consider how ableist practices may limit participation and belonging in general education classrooms. In addition, the inclusion of perspectives from disabled individuals challenges the traditional hierarchy of higher education, in which non-disabled professionals' voices are

the only ones heard in discussions about disability (Bialka et al., 2024). Moreover, when teacher educators establish the importance of positive disability dialogue, it reinforces and models ways that teacher candidates can do the same in their future classrooms. Research has shown that leaving disability out of classroom conversations can negatively impact the educational experiences and identity development of students with disabilities (Mueller, 2021; Orr & Goodman, 2010).

While traditional teacher education programs often rely on conventional special education models and textbooks, these materials may not provide the full picture of disability. For instance, they often frame disability as something that needs to be fixed and leave out disabled individuals' perspectives and positions (Brantlinger, 2006). To move toward more inclusive and authentic teaching, teacher educators should first find ways to engage with content created by disabled people themselves. Social

media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Substack have become rich spaces where disabled activists share knowledge, community practices, and advocacy efforts. These platforms offer accessible entry points for discovering creators whose work centers disability justice and education equity. Engaging with such content can help teacher educators diversify course materials and introduce students to content that supports inclusive pedagogies and models the importance of valuing disabled voices in education. Additionally, to meaningfully incorporate disability perspectives into courses, faculty should intentionally select texts that reflect positive and diverse disability experiences. These might include memoirs, documentaries, podcasts, or other works created by people with disabilities. Such sources can offer authentic insights that challenge a deficit-based model of disability and foster critical reflection among preservice teachers. Table 1 offers a list of recommended materials to help teacher

educators get started.

While texts and media can be effective in facilitating learning within teacher education programs, we advocate going beyond traditional teaching methods by focusing specifically on the power of lived experiences. Our experience highlights what can happen when teacher educators partner with the local disability community and create opportunities in their courses for people with disabilities to share their stories directly with future educators. This article represents collaboration on different levels. It is the result of the collaborative efforts of two faculty members within teacher education programs from different institutions who each collaborate with self-advocates from the autism community. We highlight how using contact-based interventions with disabled partners can bring essential insights to conversations with preservice teachers and embed self-efficacy and collaboration into teacher education programming. By combining professional knowledge with the real-life experiences of people with disabilities, this article outlines how contact-based interventions can advance the impact of teacher education programs and provides suggestions for potential adaptations by other institutions.

## CONTACT-BASED INTERVENTIONS

Traditionally, contact-based interventions have been used in the medical field as a means of reducing stigma surrounding mental health (Gurung et al., 2023). Described as “brief contact with a stranger that is quite different from naturally occurring contact, often combined with an educational component,” contact-based interventions have been identified as the most effective approach for reducing stigma and discrimination (Jorm, 2020). For the purposes of this article, contact-based interventions are defined as *differentiated learning*

*experiences that combine classroom learning with presentations by individuals with personal stories related to class objectives.* Direct contact with disabled people is intended to reduce stigmatized perceptions teacher candidates may hold about disability.

Recent literature emphasizes that preservice teachers’ attitudes toward educating students with diverse needs in inclusive classrooms are influenced by a variety of factors, such as their personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, individual beliefs, and the inclusive teaching approaches presented during their teacher education programs (Beacham & Rouse, 2012; Forlin et al., 2009; Ismaïlos et al., 2022; Tiwari, 2024). Because experiences within teacher education programs impact the successful inclusion of students with disabilities into general education classrooms, all such programs must adapt to more effectively prepare preservice teachers with the knowledge, strategies, and confidence required to support the diverse needs of all learners. As demonstrated by Rosenbaum et al. (1986), high quality, direct contact with disabled people can be effective in decreasing stigma. Integrating contact-based interventions that feature personal stories of disability and self-advocacy is one way teacher education programs can offer students meaningful and direct interactions with individuals who have disabilities.

### Contact-Based Interventions Across Two University Programs

The authors of this article came together to discuss how contact-based interventions are currently being used in introductory special education courses. At The Ohio State University, this is the only course on disability that preservice general education majors take. The majority of preservice teachers who enroll are in their third or fourth year of programming, with some enrolled in stu-

dent teaching placements concurrently with this class. At Buffalo State University, preservice teachers are usually in their first or second year of programming, hailing from varying education majors and age/grade levels (e.g., secondary English education, social studies education, music education, career and technical education, elementary education, early childhood education). This is one of the few courses where preservice teachers will learn about disability. Since these preservice teachers will assume many different teaching roles upon graduation, we often reinforce the shared responsibility for providing differentiated instruction and supporting disabled students in general education settings.

Across both universities, the introductory course addresses student learning objectives pertaining to the history of inclusion, accessibility laws, and differentiated learning practices for students classified as having a disability under IDEA. Both instructors are faculty with backgrounds in special education and implement similar teaching strategies to leverage applicable assignments that shape perceptions of disability. They both integrate personal stories from self-advocates with disabilities, including texts by disabled authors, to reinforce inclusive pedagogies. Specific to this article, the faculty highlights first-hand accounts from two collaborative partners from the disability community: Kaylie Clinton and John Mitchell Uli-barri, often called “Mitch.”

### Meet the Self-Advocates: Kaylie and Mitch

Kaylie is a 21-year-old graduate of Williamsville South High School, located just outside Buffalo, New York. She is an avid learner with a wide range of interests, including reading, writing, musical theater, and cheering on her favorite football team, the Buffalo Bills. Kaylie’s passion for advocacy and

education has led her to engage with preservice teachers by sharing her lived experience as a person with a disability. Her journey as a communicator began in her teenage years, when she was invited to respond to a book written by fellow spellers—individuals who use spelling to communicate. Since that time, her writing and public speaking have continued to evolve. Most recently, Kaylie presented at the TASH National Convention, where she spoke to professionals, families, and individuals with disabilities, answering questions and offering insight. Her work reflects a commitment to fostering understanding and inclusion in educational spaces. Dr. McCabe and Kaylie initially connected through an email inquiry from Kaylie that had been printed and displayed above the copier at the university. The email expressed a desire to be a guest speaker in education classes, so Dr. McCabe reached out to her for a collaboration.

Mitchell is an author and advocate whose work centers on sharing his experiences as an individual on the autism spectrum. He has written three books (soon to be four) about his childhood, offering insight into life on the spectrum from a deeply personal perspective. In addition to his published work, Mitch hosts a blog and podcast titled *Rules for a Greatastic Life*, where he reflects on his adult experiences and continues to build understanding and connection. He currently works at New Story Schools, the same institution he attended following his diagnosis, bringing his journey full circle. Beyond storytelling, Mitchell is passionate about building friendships—a meaningful pursuit shaped by the limited social connections he experienced growing up. Dr. Fast and Mitchell initially connected when he was a high school student working in her son’s classroom. After Mitch graduated, Dr. Fast reached out to ask if he would share his personal experiences with inclusion

and exclusion as part of her university coursework. This connection has since grown into an effective partnership that offers preservice teachers meaningful collaboration.

### **Why Contact-Based Intervention?**

Ed Roberts, a leading figure of the international disability rights movement, emphasizes that “when others speak for you, you lose” (Charlton, 1998). When aligned with content that prioritizes knowledge from those with lived disability experience, contact-based interventions can help ensure voices from the disability community are recognized and heard within preservice teacher training. By implementing such interventions, teacher educators can offer teacher candidates a critical, asset-based framework that challenges them to resist deficit-driven special education models (Ashby, 2012; Broderick & Lalvani, 2017).

Contact-based interventions introduce personal stories from individuals with disabilities into learning, often offering powerful insights that can reshape how we prepare future educators. Rather than relying solely on textbooks or traditional methods, hearing directly from people with lived experience brings a human-centered perspective that is often missing in teacher training. For example, Kaylie shared that speaking with university students helps her feel seen “as a person first, rather than a label,” and Mitch reflected on how becoming an advocate allowed him to be the kind of support he once needed as a student. These reflections remind us that educational systems have historically overlooked or marginalized disabled voices and that meaningful change begins by listening. This article centers those voices, offering practical ways to bring lived experience into the classroom and strengthen inclusive practices in teacher

education programs.

Integrating the voices and personal narratives of individuals with disabilities into teacher education courses enriches learning and promotes inclusive educational practices. Faculty aiming to foster inclusive learning environments should intentionally invite disabled people to share their perspectives on relevant course topics. Both Mitchell and Kaylie tell personal stories about navigating both inclusive and exclusionary educational settings. These authentic stories not only humanize course content but can deepen student understanding and empathy.

### **Integrating Contact-Based Intervention into Teacher Education Coursework**

Across both universities, contact-based interventions have been used to successfully promote similar goals and emphasize that teachers have the ability to impact and serve all students, including those with disabilities. In addition to knowledge-based instruction and theory of education, coursework is designed to offer students with examples of lessons, strategies for differentiation, and experiences that lead to real-world applications of inclusive practices in everyday environments, both in the classroom and beyond. In addition to these experiences, both instructors also involve stories from experts with lived experience of disability. In this way, self-advocacy is leveraged as a pedagogical tool and a powerful strategy for promoting inclusion, empathy, and understanding of the needs of disabled students. These interventions and partnerships have proven to be effective and can be adapted for use in other teacher education programs. In the following section, we offer suggested steps for teacher educators to effectively incorporate contact-based interventions into their courses.

### **Step One: Remind Teacher Candidates that Education is a Journey**

Many preservice teachers begin their careers with limited classroom experience, which can feel overwhelming at first. As such, it is important to remind them that teaching is a journey—one that starts with curiosity, openness, and a willingness to grow. Just like the excitement of setting out on a new trip, the early stages of teacher education should be filled with energy and a positive mindset. Research suggests that a teacher's belief in their ability to work with students with disabilities predicts their attitude and willingness to engage in inclusive settings, with stronger senses of personal efficacy linked to more positive attitudes (Brownell & Pajares, 1999; Lifshitz et al., 2004; Lopes et al., 2004; McHatton & Parker, 2013). One way to strengthen this sense of efficacy in preservice educators is by exposing them to the lived experiences of people with disabilities. Encourage your content experts to share their own journeys as a way to inspire new teachers, as Kaylie and Mitch do in the following stories.

**Kaylie's Words:** *My educational journey was a "long and winding road" (thanks, Dad, for my love of oldies!) I started at a school for Autistics. At that time, I couldn't really communicate, so I think the teachers assumed I was developmentally disabled. They used ABA [Applied Behavior Analysis], which was more training than teaching. I didn't learn much, but to be honest, the repetition was a comfortable way to get through the day. The food rewards weren't too bad either!*

*Beginning in sixth grade, I went to a public school, where I was in a self-contained class. I had also begun to learn to type, which caused an explosion of learning, or rather, my ability to demonstrate*

*my learning. I had been absorbing my whole life, but now I could "wring out" what I knew! Because of this, I began to be mainstreamed into academic classes the following year.*

*Mainstreaming rocked! I learned so much, and I loved the challenge. One advantage in middle school was that my aide support was consistent, and I was comfortable with her. That made a huge difference. In high school, I often felt like a burden—or an afterthought. I was assigned to support staff who were not trained to work with me; some were even afraid of me. That lack of that consistency affected my success in high school, something I am still upset about, years after graduation.*

*Don't get me wrong—I learned a ton in high school! But without consistent support from someone trained to work with me, I couldn't communicate my learning, or when I was confused or overwhelmed. That led to outbursts, which, frankly, scared teachers and peers, and further alienated me. High school was, many times, a very lonely period of time. But I persevered and earned a Regents Diploma, something I am very proud of!*

**Mitch's Words:** *My educational experiences vary based on the grade I was in and the school I was attending. Elementary school was not good for me due to the lack of support that was necessary for me, since I was undiagnosed. Middle school was a better experience for me because, now that I was diagnosed with autism, I had better support in the new school. However, during those years, I was struggling with internalized self-doubt because instead of simply being quirky, I had to learn how to live*

*with a disability. My years in high school were the most successful of all my years of schooling because of the internship program offered. It gave me the freedom to learn in the way I needed, and it also gradually helped me become more confident as an autistic person.*

### **Step Two: Model Success Through Stories**

When teaching in inclusive settings, many teachers report uncertainty, negative attitudes, and a lack of competence and confidence regarding the integration of disabled students (de Boer et al., 2011; McHatton & Parker, 2013). Similarly, research by Shade and Stewart (2001) indicates that teachers may feel simultaneously hopeful about the goals of inclusion and overwhelmed by the challenges it presents. It is common for both new and experienced teachers to question their ability to effectively support diverse learners. These doubts are understandable, but they also highlight the need for practical, relatable examples in teacher education. As a teacher educator, you can ask self-advocates to highlight things that teachers have done to support their learning as well as actions that have created barriers for them in the classroom. When Kaylie and Mitch share first-hand accounts with preservice teachers, they provide contextual examples that can support teacher candidates' confidence levels and generate ideas for future inclusive teaching strategies.

**Kaylie's Words:** *I think teachers have a lot of power to make school successful. Special education teachers should communicate constantly with general education teachers. They need to be their students' greatest advocate, and need to work with general education teachers, support staff, and administration to coordinate the students' programs and sup-*

*port services. General education teachers should not hesitate to ask for help when needed and should include individuals with disabilities as much as possible. When this was done for me, school was fun, I was held to high expectations and was successful!*

*School was less successful when mainstreaming wasn't well planned. General education teachers shouldn't be "surprised" by a mainstreamed placement, or left to fend for themselves after the student arrives. Most importantly—train the support staff! It is extremely unfair to them, the general education teacher, and the student, as well as their non-disabled peers, to go into a situation completely unprepared. Setting up students for success is time consuming and political, but so very necessary!*

**Mitch's Words:** *Before I was diagnosed, my peers didn't know what was "wrong with" me. At that time, I had a crush on my best friend Sam. When my teachers noticed our connection and gave her the responsibility of being my peer buddy, this made my time in elementary school better.*

*There were also times when teachers made my life more challenging. I was diagnosed before Autism had become a pop culture thing (early on it felt like it was just Rain Man and me who had it). So, before I was diagnosed, my classmates thought I was just a little weird for no reason; in my first year of middle school, before I transferred to a different school, it felt like the teachers were reinforcing, and even actively participating, in that belief.*

Kaylie's and Mitch's insights are an example of how lived experiences, both positive and negative, are essential in

shaping inclusive and effective teacher education. During her presentations, Kaylie emphasizes the critical role teachers play in student success, noting that when special and general education teachers collaborate, communicate, and advocate together, students thrive. She shares that her most positive school experiences came when she was included, held to high expectations, and supported by a well-prepared team, including a support staff who understood her needs. In contrast, poorly planned mainstreaming efforts left her feeling unsupported and set up for failure. Mitch's reflections echo this need for intentionality. Before his autism diagnosis, he often felt misunderstood by both peers and teachers. However, when educators recognized his strengths and created opportunities for connection, specifically through the use of a peer buddy, his school experience improved. Both voices highlight that inclusive education is not just about placement; it is about preparation, empathy, and educators' willingness to see and support the whole student.

### **Step Three: Amplifying Lived Experience in Teacher Education**

Incorporating self-advocates into teacher education models the importance of amplifying student voice in inclusive education. When individuals with disabilities share real-world examples, they highlight the importance of differentiation and individualized support and reinforce the need to create classroom environments that are responsive to all learners. In addition, these partnerships can allow preservice teachers to share their thoughts and questions in a space that is welcoming and inclusive.

Actively involving preservice teachers in the process of contact-based interventions can make them more meaningful experiences. You might prepare students ahead of time by using differentiated learning techniques, such as free-writes,

jigsaws, or turn-and-talk activities, to help them generate thoughtful questions and ideas. These strategies not only encourage reflection but also ensure that teacher candidates are ready to engage in meaningful dialogue with guest speakers.

For online or virtual visits, instructors can invite preservice teachers to submit questions in advance and share them with the presenter. This helps create a more personalized and purposeful experience for everyone involved. Whether in person or online, these interactive approaches help preservice teachers connect theory to practice, model inclusive teaching strategies, and recognize the value of lived experience in shaping their understanding of disability and inclusion. In these stories, Kaylie and Mitch share what it is like to have this voice and to interact with preservice teachers in the university classroom.

**Kaylie's Words:** *I love the advocacy work I'm doing at the university level! First off, it allows me to spend time with non-disabled peers, which is so much fun! I really like the idea that I can teach them—being the "helper" rather than the "helped" is a wonderful reversal of roles. I think it also allows college students, especially those going into education or other "helping professions," such as occupational therapy, physical therapy or speech/language pathology, to meet an individual with a disability in a more casual way.*

*I encourage the students to ask questions, and they don't disappoint! I feel like answering questions teaches the students to see me as a person first, rather than a label or diagnosis. Answering questions is my favorite part of presenting—questions range from personal, like how I met my boyfriend, to very thoughtful, like how it feels to be unseen and unheard. Answering these questions allows me to be com-*

**FIGURE 1:** Responses from Teacher Candidates

<p><b>Challenging Assumptions:</b> Hearing directly from self-advocates helped teacher candidates confront and rethink their assumptions about disability.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “We cannot underestimate the ability of students with disabilities, especially those that are highly capable of the same things that students without disabilities are.”</li> <li>• “This is a little hard for me to admit but speaking and interacting with Kaylie made me a little more aware of my unintentional bias or maybe misunderstanding about her disability. I enjoyed her sense of humor and really appreciated her vulnerability. It was so eye-opening.”</li> <li>• “Something that really stood out to me in your presentation is the importance of teaching children boundaries in friendships and all relationships. I think this is something that some adults may assume to be common sense but is an extremely important lesson for all students to learn and practice.”</li> </ul>
<p><b>Value of Lived Experience:</b> Teacher candidates found the personal and honest sharing by the presenters to be powerful and eye-opening, offering insight into the lived experience of disability.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Hearing about your journey allowed us to see the world through your eyes, which sparked meaningful discussions and reflections among my classmates and I.”</li> <li>• “I’ve never interacted with family members or friends who are on the autism spectrum, so hearing about your struggles with classmates, teachers, and even self-confidence was striking. And I say that because I’ve learned everyone on the autism spectrum has different experiences and stories to tell, so hearing yours is eye-opening.”</li> <li>• “I know that the saying goes, ‘If you meet one kid with autism, then you’ve only met one kid with autism,’ but it’s a lot harder in practice to not resort to generalization to an issue. Kaylie showed me other aspects of the experiences of autism that I had not considered before.”</li> </ul>
<p><b>High Expectations and Support:</b> Teacher candidates empathized with the need to hold high expectations while providing supports for students with disabilities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Some key insights I learned today were to always hold your students up to a high standard to be met. Kaylie emphasized the fact that if she wasn’t held to a higher standard and wasn’t given the opportunity, she would not have gotten to where she was today.”</li> <li>• “Be aware of students’ disabilities in order to support their needs but never use the disorder as a crutch or a reason to doubt the student’s true abilities.”</li> <li>• “Hearing a self-advocate with complex communication needs has deepened my understanding of inclusion. It emphasized the importance of respecting diverse communication styles and providing tailored support.”</li> </ul>
<p><b>Relevance and Lasting Impact on Practice:</b> The presentations were viewed as highly relevant to teacher preparation and inspired candidates to apply inclusive practices in their future classrooms and commit to continue learning from the disability community.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Hearing Kaylie’s presentation gave a better and more direct insight into life with her disability which leads to a greater understanding of how to approach students in similar situations.”</li> <li>• “I loved how she said that every student has something to offer and that it is the teacher’s job to help find that. I think that brought to light why I want to go into this career path.”</li> <li>• “Mitchell, thank you for coming into our classroom and sharing your story with all of us. I really enjoyed hearing your journey growing up, and how differing circumstances affected not only your performance in school, but your emotional well-being. Touching on both of these subjects really put into perspective and reinforced the idea of how much of an impact a teacher (as well as school members) has on their students’ lives long-term.”</li> </ul>

pletely honest with them and shows the students how much we are alike.

**Mitch’s Words:** *It’s a little surreal. When I was in high school, I wished that there had been advocates helping my teachers out in my early education,*

*and now I’ve hopefully become what young Mitchell wanted for another kid.*

Kaylie’s and Mitch’s reflections powerfully illustrate why amplifying the voices of individuals with disabilities is essential in teacher education. Kaylie

shared how meaningful it is to engage with university students as a peer and teacher—flipping the traditional dynamic of being the one helped to being the one who helps. Her favorite moments come from answering students’

questions, which allow her to be seen as a whole person, not just a diagnosis. Mitch echoed this importance, reflecting on how his role as an advocate now fulfills a need he once had as a student to help his teachers understand him better.

### **THE IMPACT OF CONTACT-BASED LEARNING: YES! IT WORKS.**

Existing literature, including findings on the effects of training, suggest that contact-based interventions are an effective way to decrease stigma and increase knowledge of disability among preservice educators (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015). In exploring whether contact-based interventions were effective in our university classrooms, we used two different strategies to assess preservice teachers' knowledge and perspectives. First, preservice teachers completed surveys before and after a classroom visit in which a guest speaker shared personal stories, offered feedback, and answered questions, creating a space for authentic dialogue. While the survey tool had some limitations as far as alignment with the course goals, the results still revealed meaningful changes in student thinking. Key takeaways include:

- **Understanding individual differences:** Before the visit, some preservice teachers believed children with autism were very similar to one another. After hearing the speaker's story, nearly all recognized the diversity within the autism community, showing increased awareness of individual differences.
- **Support for inclusion:** Preservice teachers already believed in inclusive education, but after the presentation, more expressed strong confidence in integrating autistic students into general

education settings. Their views became more nuanced, reflecting deeper consideration of what inclusion truly means.

- **Clarifying misconceptions:** A significant number of preservice teachers initially were not sure whether children with autism could "outgrow" it. After the intervention, nearly all correctly understood that autism is a life-long condition, and uncertainty dropped to zero.
- **Value of peer relationships:** Preservice teachers increasingly affirmed the importance of encouraging interactions between students with autism and their typically developing peers, recognizing these relationships as key to successful inclusion.
- **Role of general education teachers:** While most preservice teachers disagreed with the idea that only special education teachers can support autistic students, the post-survey showed a broader range of opinions. This shift suggests that preservice teachers began to see the role of general educators as part of a larger support system.
- **Confidence in teaching:** After the presentation, more preservice teachers strongly agreed that general education teachers can make a meaningful difference for students with autism. This reflects growing confidence in their own ability to support diverse learners.

Secondly, we collected exit tickets from preservice teachers after Kaylie and Mitch presented at each university. Our students found the presentations highly valuable, informative, and engaging. Responses written by preservice teachers indicated that hearing from self-advocates challenged

their own assumptions about disabilities. Many appreciated the speaker's honest and personal sharing of life and school experiences, which provided an impactful and eye-opening perspective on lived experience of disability. Preservice teachers reflected on the importance of holding high expectations and providing support for their future students. Kaylie's and Mitch's presentations were praised for being direct, thoughtful, and rich with practical strategies and insights applicable to general education settings. Notably, preservice teachers wrote about how learning from self-advocates will impact their future practice and indicated their willingness to continue learning from the disability community to incorporate more inclusive teaching practices in their future classrooms. Figure 1 provides a sample of responses from teacher candidates.

Overall, the inclusion of Autistic guest speakers helped preservice teachers move beyond textbook knowledge. It gave them a chance to hear directly from individuals with lived experience, reinforcing the importance of listening, empathy, and inclusive practices. For faculty looking to enrich their courses, inviting self-advocates into the classroom can be a powerful way to connect theory with real-world understanding.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

Preparing effective educators begins long before they enter their own classrooms, making the quality of preservice teacher education a critical factor in long-term success. Kaylie and Mitch have proven to be an invaluable source and wealth of information for our preservice educators. In exploring the implications of contact-based interventions, outcomes span two key areas: first, providing higher education professionals with strategies to more effectively design, structure, and deliver

“For faculty looking to enrich their courses, inviting self-advocates into the classroom can be a powerful way to connect theory with real-world understanding.”

disability-related content in teacher education programs; and second, offering practical insights and resources directly applicable to preservice teachers as they navigate their training.

Hearing stories from individuals with disabilities who once navigated the education system themselves is a valuable experience, not only for preservice educators but also for faculty who work in teacher education programs. The firsthand accounts of people with lived experience offer insights that traditional training materials often miss. While faculty may be experts in pedagogy, policy, or research, contact-based interventions bring a human dimension that deepens preservice teachers' understanding and challenges their assumptions. Ultimately, when teacher educators also engage with these voices, they are better equipped to prepare future teachers who are not only knowledgeable but also compassionate and inclusive in their teaching. Kaylie shared, “*I think college professors need to put aside textbooks in favor of real, immersive learning. There needs to be a balance between book learning and practical experiences. Having individuals with disabilities in the classroom provides this exposure in a more comfortable way.*”

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND CLOSING THOUGHTS

Positive and negative narratives of lived disability experience in educational settings can challenge assumptions about disability, encourage reflection on ableism in traditional special education practices, and promote strategies to improve educational experiences and outcomes. When designing coursework to inform preservice educators about the importance of recognizing and serving students with disabilities in classroom settings, teacher educators can collaborate with disabled individuals as an effective way to humanize disability and encourage critical thinking about equity across educational settings. This type of feedback goes beyond textbooks and theory, providing future teachers with authentic advice.

As we reflect back on the information shared throughout this article and look ahead to new practices that can be used in teacher education, Kaylie's and Mitch's voices remind us why collaboration is so important. Their stories offer an essential perspective, not only for preservice teachers but also for faculty involved in teacher education. By creating space for these voices, we move closer to building classrooms that are truly inclusive, empathetic, and responsive. In the words of Kaylie, “*Individuals with disabilities are individuals first, and disabilities second. It takes time and effort, but it is essential for teachers to get to know their students.*” And, in Mitch's words, “*You, as authority figures in school, have the ability to shape a special needs child's life, whether they are in your class or in a coworker's class.*” Use of contact-based interventions and continued research into the benefits of this strategy will contribute meaningfully to teacher education strategies for promoting inclusion through collaboration.

## REFERENCES

- Ashby, C. (2012). Disability studies and inclusive teacher preparation: A socially just path for teacher education. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 37(2), 89-99. <https://doi.org/10.1177/154079691203700204>
- Baglieri, S., & Lalvani, P. (2019). *Undoing ableism: Teaching about disability in K-12 classrooms*. Routledge.
- Barned, N., Flanagan Knapp, N., & Neuharth-Pritchett, S. (2011). Knowledge and attitudes of early childhood preservice teachers regarding the inclusion of children with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 32(302), 302-311. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10901027.2011.622235>
- Beacham, N., & Rouse, M. (2012). Student teachers' attitudes and beliefs about inclusion and inclusive practice. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 12(1), 3-11. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-3802.2010.01194.x>
- Bialka, C. S., Hansen, N., Kan, I. P., Mackintosh, D., & Jacobson, R. (2024). From deficit to difference: Understanding the relationship between K-12 teacher training and disability discussion. *AERA Open*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584241245089>
- Brantlinger, E. (2006). The big glossies: How textbooks structure (special) education. In E. A. Brantlinger (Ed.), *Who benefits from special education? Remediating (fixing) other people's children*, 45-75.
- Broderick, A., & Lalvani, P. (2017). Dysconscious ableism: Toward a liberatory praxis in teacher education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 21(9), 894-905. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2017.1296034>
- Bruggink, M., Goei, S. L., & Koot, H. M. (2016). Teachers' capacities to meet students' additional support needs in mainstream primary education. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practices*, 22(4), 448-460. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2015.1082727>
- Brownell, M. T., & Pajares, F. (1999). Teacher efficacy and perceived success in mainstreaming students with learning and behavior problems. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 22, 154-164.
- Byrd, D. R., & Alexander, M. (2020). Investigating special education teachers' knowledge and skills: Preparing general education teacher preparation for professional development. *Journal of Pedagogical Research*, 4(2), 72-82. <https://doi.org/10.33902/JPR.2020059790>
- Charlton, J. I. (1998). *Nothing about us without us: Disability oppression and empowerment*. University of California Press.
- Clausen, A. M., Anderson, A., Spooner, F., Walker, V. L., & Hujar, J. (2023). Pre-

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### Danene Fast, Ph.D.

Danene Fast is an Associate Professor at The Ohio State University, where she leads the Programs in Visual Impairments, including Ohio's only Orientation & Mobility (O&M) program. With over 20 years of direct experience serving students with visual impairments prior to her time at the university, Danene's research centers on accessibility and inclusion for students with disabilities. In her current role, she prepares future educators and rehabilitation professionals to expand services in high-need areas, reflecting a lifelong commitment to advocacy and education.

### Katie M. McCabe, Ph.D.

Katie McCabe is currently an Assistant Professor at Buffalo State University. Prior to earning her Ph.D. in Special Education from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Katie worked as a special education teacher in rural areas. She researches and teaches ways to implement inclusive practices, especially for students with complex support needs. Her work prepares future educators to advocate for students with disabilities and promote access to general education for all learners.

### Kaylie Clinton

Kaylie Clinton is a public speaker and self-advocate living in Buffalo, New York. She is a graduate of Williamsville South High School. Kaylie is passionate about sharing her lived experience with Autism and her communication journey with professionals, families, and other individuals with disabilities.

### John Mitchell Ulibarri

John Mitchell Ulibarri is an author, self-advocate, and podcast host whose work explores life on the autism spectrum. He shares personal insights through books, blogging, and his podcast *Rules for a Greatastic Life*. Mitch currently works as a Teacher Support for students with autism at New Story Schools in Columbus, Ohio, the same school he attended after his initial autism diagnosis.

- paring general education teachers to include students with extensive support needs: An analysis of "SPED 101" courses. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 46(2), 146-161. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08884064221114133>
- Collins, K., & Ferri, B. (2016). Literacy education and disability studies: Reenvisioning struggling students. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 60(1), 7-12. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.552>
- de Boer, A., Pijl, S. J., & Minnaert, A. (2011). Regular primary school teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education: A review of the literature. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 15, 331-353. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110903030089>
- Forlin, C., Loreman, T., Sharma, U., & Earle, C. (2009). Demographic differences in changing pre-service teachers' attitudes, sentiments and concerns about inclusive education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 13(2), 195-209. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110701365356>
- Freedman, J. E. (2016). Disability studies in education (DSE) and the epistemology of special education. In M. A. Peters (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of educational philosophy and theory* (pp. 1-7). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-532-7\\_451-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-532-7_451-1)
- Gillespie-Lynch, K., Brooks, P., Someki, et al. (2015). Changing college students' conceptions of autism: An online training to increase knowledge and decrease stigma. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 45, 2553-2566. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-015-2422-9>
- Gurung, D., Kohrt, B. A., & Wahid, S. S. (2023). Adapting and piloting a social contact-based intervention to reduce mental health stigma among primary care providers: Protocol for a multi-site feasibility study. *SSM - Mental Health*, 4. <https://rave.ohiolink.edu/ejournals/article/432885381>
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), 20 U.S.C. § 1400 et seq. (2004).
- Ingvarson, L., Reid, K., Buckley, S., Kleinhenz, E., Masters, G., & Rowley, G. (2014). *Best practice teacher education programs and Australia's own programs*. Canberra: Department of Education.
- Ismail, L., Gallagher, T., Bennett, S., & Li, X. (2022). Preservice and in-service teachers' attitude and self-efficacy beliefs with regards to inclusive education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 26, 175-191. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2019.1642402>
- Jorm, A. F. (2020). Effect of contact-based interventions on stigma and discrimination: A critical examination of the evidence. *Psychiatric Services*, 71(7). <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.201900587>
- Leko, M. M., Brownell, M. T., Sindelar, P. T., & Kiely, M. T. (2015). Envisioning the future of special education personnel preparation in a standards-based era. *Exceptional Children*, 82(1), 25-43. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0014402915598782>
- Lifshitz, H., Glaubman, R., & Issawi, R. (2004). Attitudes toward inclusion: The case of Israeli and Palestinian regular and special education teachers. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 19, 171-190. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856250410001678478>
- Lopes, J. A., Monteiro, I., Sil, V., Rutherford, R. B., & Quinn, M. M. (2004). Teachers' perceptions about teaching problem students in regular classrooms. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 27, 394-419.
- Maenner, M. J., Warren, Z., Williams, A. R., et al. (2023). Prevalence and characteristics of autism spectrum disorder among children aged 8 years — Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, 11 sites, United States, 2020. *MMWR. Surveillance Summaries*, 72(2), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.ss7202a1>
- McHatton, P. A. & Parker, A. (2013). Purposeful preparation: Longitudinally exploring inclusion attitudes of general and special education preservice teachers. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 36(3), 186-203.
- Mueller, C. O. (2021). "I didn't know people with disabilities could grow up to be adults": Disability history, curriculum, and identity in special education. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 44(3), 189-205. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406421996069>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2023). *Fast facts: Students with disabilities, inclusion of*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=59>
- National Center for Education Statistics (2024). Students with disabilities. *Con-*

- dition of Education. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgg/students-with-disabilities>
- Orr, A. C., & Goodman, N. (2010). "People like me don't go to college": The legacy of learning disability. *Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research*, 4(4), 213–225.
- Rock, M. L., Spooner, F., & Nagro, S. (2016). 21st century change drivers: Considerations for constructing transformative models of special education teacher development. *Teacher Education and Special Education* 39(2), 98-120. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406416640634>
- Rosenbaum, P., Armstrong, R., & King, S. (1986). Improving attitudes toward the disabled: A randomized controlled trial of direct contact versus Kids-on-the-Block. *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics*, 7(5), 302-307. <https://doi.org/10.1097/00004703-198610000-00005>
- Ruppar, A. L., Allcock, H., & Gonsier-Gerdin, J. (2017). Ecological factors affecting access to general education content and contexts for students with significant disabilities. *Remedial and Special Education*, 38(1), 53-63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932516646856>
- Shade, R. A., & Stewart, R. (2001). General education and special education preservice teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. *Preventing School Failure*, 46, 37-41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10459880109603342>
- Smit, R., & Humpert, W. (2012). Differentiated instruction in small schools. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 28, 1152-1162. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2012.07.003>
- Thompson, J. R., Klass, P. H., & Fulk, B. M. (2012). Comparing online and face-to-face presentation of course content in an introductory special education course. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 35(3), 228–242. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406412441627>
- Tiwari, A. (2024). Urban educator preparation program: Assessing preservice teachers' preparedness for inclusive education. *Education and Urban Society* 56(7), 830-846. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00131245231220899>
- Williamson, P., Hoppey, D., McLeskey, J., Bergmann, E., & Moore, H. (2020). Trends in LRE placement rates over the past 25 years. *The Journal of Special Education*, 53(4), 236-244. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466919855052>