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An Intersectional Equity and Justice Framework for Disability-Inclusive Teaching

Un marco de equidad y justicia interseccional para una enseñanza inclusiva para personas con discapacidad

Wane jukuwa'ipa süpüla anasükalü ma'in otta pa'anapajirawaa pütchi sa'aka naatawaa akuwa'ipaa süpüla ekirajawaa ewiichikana namüin na wayuu kapülaasükana e'raajaa

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Abstract

Inclusive education research has often addressed disability, teacher dispositions, or systemic inequities in isolation, limiting understanding of how intersecting structures of power shape classroom inclusion. Guided by an intersectional lens, this qualitative multiple instrumental case study employed constructivist grounded theory to examine how in-service elementary educators' identities, biases, social-emotional competencies, and professional experiences influence inclusive teaching for students with disabilities. Across four cases, analysis of semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and reflective writing tasks revealed that inclusive practice emerges through the dynamic interaction of educator identity, relational classroom practices, and systemic conditions. The Equity and Justice Framework for Inclusive Teaching was generated, conceptualizing inclusion as an intersectional process shaped by ableism, professional dispositions, and structural contexts. The framework challenges normative expectations of teaching and learning ability and offers a model for transforming educator preparation, policy, and practice toward justice-oriented inclusion.

Keywords: ableism, disability, equity, inclusive education, intersectionality, teacher training.

Resumen

La investigación sobre la educación inclusiva suele abordar de manera aislada la discapacidad, las actitudes de los docentes o las desigualdades sistémicas, lo que limita la comprensión de cómo las estructuras de poder que se entrecruzan dan forma a la inclusión en el salón de clases. Guiado por una perspectiva interseccional, este estudio de caso cualitativo, instrumental y múltiple empleó la teoría fundamentada constructivista para examinar cómo las identidades, los prejuicios, las competencias socioemocionales y las experiencias profesionales de los docentes de primaria en servicio influyen en la enseñanza inclusiva para estudiantes con discapacidad. A través de cuatro casos, el análisis de entrevistas semiestructuradas, observaciones en el aula y tareas de escritura reflexiva reveló que la práctica inclusiva surge a través de la interacción dinámica entre la identidad del docente, las prácticas relacionales

en el aula y las condiciones sistémicas. Se generó el Marco de Equidad y Justicia para la Enseñanza Inclusiva, que conceptualiza la inclusión como un proceso interseccional moldeado por el capacitismo, las disposiciones profesionales y los contextos estructurales. El marco cuestiona las expectativas normativas sobre la capacidad de enseñar y aprender, y ofrece un modelo para transformar la formación de los docentes, las políticas y las prácticas hacia una inclusión orientada a la justicia.

Palabras clave: capacitismo, discapacidad, equidad, educación inclusiva, interseccionalidad, formación docente.

Jüküjia palitpütchiru'u

Tü achajawaakat pütchi achiki ekirajawaa ewiichikana aashajashi ne'e waneesia pütchi sünain kapülaa e'raajaa, jukuwa'ipa na ekirajüshiikana otta tü mujulaa eitaasü mmaipaa, müshiijese'e nnojolin keraajüin joolu'u jukuwa'ipa tü laülaayuuka pütchi sa'aka ekirajawaa sulu'u piia ekirajiipalee. Süka tü pütchi asirúajirawaa sulu'u naatawaa akuwa'ipaa, tü achajawaakat pütchi joolu'u sa'akajee achajawaa pütchi ee'raajüshi jukuwa'ipa na ekirajüshiikana sulu'u ekirajawaa palajanat, e'raajashi sünain jukuwa'ipa wayuu, kapülaa saa'in wayuu, anasükalü saa'in otta a'yatawaa mmaipaa süpüla ekirajawaa ewiichikana namüin na ekirajaanakana eekai kapülaan.Sa'akajee piei (4) jukuwa'ipa achajawaa pütchi, asakajawaa pütchi, e'raa ekirajawaa otta ashajajpütchi, e'raajashi sünain tü ekirajawaa ewiichikana joolu'u sa'akajee pa'anapajirawaa pütchi sa'aka jukuwa'ipa ekirajüshi, jukuwa'ipa sulu'u piia ekirajiipalee otta pütchi eitaasü mmaipaa. Eitaasü tü pütchi süpüla anasükalü ma'in otta pa'anapajirawaa pütchi sa'aka naatawaa akuwa'ipaa süpüla ekirajawaa ewiichikana, eekai saashajain achiki ekirajawaa sa'aka naatawaa akuwa'ipaa, jukuwa'ipa ekirajüshiikana otta pütchi sulu'u mma chaa. Tü pütchikat katsuinjirashi pütchi süpüla ekirajawaa otta ekirajaanaka, otta e eitaasü wane jukuwa'ipa jeketü süpüla ekirajawaa na ekirajüshiikana, pütchi eitaasü mmaipaa otta a'yatawaa süpüla ekirajawaa ewiichikana eekai anain ma'in joolu'u.

Pütchi katsuinsükat: Pütchi katsuinsükat: capacitismo, wayuu kapülaasükana e'raajaa, anasükalü ma'in, ekirajawaa ewiichikana, asirúajirawaa sulu'u naatawaa akuwa'ipaa, ekirajawaa na ekirajüshiikana.

Introduction

Inclusive Education: Persistent Gaps Between Policy and Practice

Despite decades of policy commitments to inclusive education, students with disabilities continue to experience inequitable educational opportunities within general education classrooms (Artiles, 2013; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Keefe, 2022; Smigielski, 2025). Persistent barriers include compliance-driven teacher preparation, deficit-oriented conceptions of disability, structural ableism, and the emotional labor inherent in inclusive teaching (Farber, 1991; Hargreaves, 2001; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Keefe, 2022; Schutz & Zembylas, 2009). Current theoretical models and preparation programs frequently emphasize policy compliance and top-down pedagogical strategies, overlooking the complex lived realities educators face in inclusive classrooms and producing a recurring disconnect between inclusive ideals and the relational, emotional, and reflective practices that genuine inclusion demands (Allday et al., 2013; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Harvey et al., 2010; Keefe, 2022; Tomlinson & Moon, 2013).

A persistent challenge lies in the dominance of deficit-based conceptions of disability, reinforced through teacher education programs and broader school structures (Keefe, 2022; Lalvani & Broderick, 2013; Naraian, 2021; Valencia, 2010). Without intentional, sustained training, educators often adopt ableist mindsets rooted

in the medical model of disability, perspectives further reinforced by rigid curricula, standardized assessments, and accountability regimes that constrain teacher agency (Artiles, 2013; Karalis Noel et al., 2023; Keefe, 2022; Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013). Researchers have consistently called for new theoretical models grounded not in deficit thinking but in equity-oriented, asset-based theory that reflects the situated realities educators face (Annamma et al., 2013; Forber-Pratt et al., 2017; Smigielski, 2025).

Normative Expectations of Teaching and Learning Ability

Two interlocking normative expectations sit at the center of this disconnect: the figure of the "able teacher" and the figure of the "able learner." The able teacher is constructed as emotionally regulated, productive, neutral, and never burned out, an expectation produced by accountability regimes, curriculum overload, and the cultural script of teacher self-sacrifice (Chang, 2009; Farber, 1991; Hargreaves, 2001; Schutz & Zembylas, 2009). The able learner is constructed as independent, on grade level, and behaviorally predictable, an expectation produced by standardized testing, rigid curricula, and the medical model that frames disability as deficit (Artiles, 2013; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Keefe, 2022; Valencia, 2010). Together, these expectations produce a normative frame against which both teachers and learners are measured, and against which both are routinely found wanting (Artiles, 2013; Keefe, 2022; Yuval-Davis, 2015).

Naming and contesting these normative expectations is the mandate to which this manuscript responds. By tracing how the able teacher and the able learner are constructed through the intersecting power structures of ableism, racism, and accountability politics (Annamma et al., 2013; Artiles, 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2015), the framework developed in this study reimagines both figures through a more inclusive lens grounded in equity and justice.

An Intersectional Approach to Inclusive Education

This study adopts intersectionality not as an inventory of identities but as an analysis of how systems of power, among them ableism, racism, and accountability politics, operate simultaneously and inseparably (Anthias, 2013; Crenshaw, 1989; Yuval-Davis, 2015). The genealogy of this analytic is transnational rather than exclusively Anglophone, with co-originary roots in U.S. legal scholarship (Crenshaw, 1989), Brazilian Black feminist thought (González, 2024), and British feminist theory (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1983), a genealogy developed at length in the Theoretical Framing. Teacher education research on social justice has largely adopted the language of intersectionality without consistently performing its analytic labor: in their 25-year systematic review, Pugach et al. (2019) found that 52 of 53 empirical studies treated identity unidimensionally and that disability was foregrounded as a principal concern in only one. Accordingly, inclusive education is understood here not as integration, placement, or policy compliance, but as the structural transformation of educational environments, policies, and practices so that all

students, particularly those historically excluded, can access, participate, and achieve under equitable conditions (Annamma et al., 2013; Artiles, 2013; Forber-Pratt et al., 2017; Naraian, 2021).

Purpose, Research Question, and Contribution

This study investigated how in-service general educators' social-emotional learning (SEL), emotional intelligence (EI), and soft skills shaped their inclusive teaching for students with disabilities, with particular attention to how educators' perceptions of their own biases and identities influenced their approaches to equity, justice, and inclusion (Smigielski, 2025). The study employed a qualitative multiple instrumental case study design integrated with constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Yin, 2017). The guiding research question for this manuscript was: How can the lived experiences of in-service elementary educators be theorized through an intersectional lens to advance a framework for disability-inclusive teaching that names and contests normative expectations of teaching and learning ability?

This study contributes to the special issue in three ways. First, it generates the Equity and Justice Framework for Inclusive Teaching, an empirically grounded model that integrates educator dispositions, relational classroom practices, and systemic influences within an intersectional, equity- and justice-centered architecture (Smigielski, 2025). Second, the framework specifies how the able teacher and the able learner are constructed by intersecting systems of ableism, racism, and accountability politics, and how each can be reimagined through a more inclusive lens (Annamma et al., 2013; Artiles, 2013; Pugach et al., 2019; Yuval-Davis, 2015). Third, the study advances a methodological critique of single-axis approaches in inclusive education research and contributes empirical evidence of how intersectional teaching emerges through the dynamic interaction of educator identity, relational practice, and systemic conditions (Anthias, 2013; Pugach et al., 2019; Viveros Vigoya, 2023).

Theoretical Framing

Intersectionality as a Transnational Tradition

The version of intersectionality this study inherits is not the Anglophone single-origin account that has dominated United States teacher education research (Pugach et al., 2019). Intersectional analysis emerged in the late 1980s on two sides of the Americas at once: Crenshaw (1989) developed the term in U.S. legal scholarship to demarginalize the intersection of race and sex, and González (2024) theorized amefricanidade in Brazil as a cultural-political category for Afro-descendant peoples across the entire continent, refusing both the United States' monopoly on the term “American” and the Eurocentric framing of Latin America as a primarily European inheritance. Viveros Vigoya (2023) characterized intersectionality as a “teoría viajera” (traveling theory, after Said) that has been received, re-signified, and repoliticized in Latin America in conversation with González, Sueli Carneiro, María Beatriz do Nascimento, Luiza Bairros, and Jurema Werneck. This body of work

reframes intersectionality as a transnational tradition with overlapping genealogies whose Latin American voices have too often been treated as derivative when they are, in fact, co-originary.

Two decades earlier, Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1983) had advanced a parallel argument in British feminist theory, contending that gender, ethnic, and class divisions cannot be theorized additively and that the assumption of a universal "sisterhood" conceals the operations of race and class within feminism itself. The same caution applies to the universal "inclusion" claimed in much teacher education discourse (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1983; Crenshaw, 1989; González, 2024). For González (2024), these erasures operate differently across the Americas: she distinguished "open racism" in Anglo-Germanic societies, whose explicit segregation produces one form of inequity, from "racism by denial" in Luso-Hispanic Latin America, whose myths of "racial democracy" produce another, more sophisticated and equally damaging form. This distinction matters here, because the empirical site sits inside an open-racism history while much of this journal's readership operates within racism-by-denial regimes, and a framework developed in one regime travels into the other only with deliberate translation work (González, 2024; Viveros Vigoya, 2023).

Intersectionality as Power Analysis, Not Identity Arithmetic

Across these traditions, intersectionality is treated less as a list of identities to be tracked and more as an analysis of how systems of power operate simultaneously and inseparably (Anthias, 2013; Crenshaw, 1989; Nash, 2017; Viveros Vigoya, 2023; Yuval-Davis, 2015). Yuval-Davis (2015) argued, through her concept of situated intersectionality, that social divisions are mutually constituted but ontologically irreducible, each anchored in its own dynamic of power: class around production and consumption, gender around sexuality and reproduction, race and ethnicity around phenotypical and cultural boundaries, and, critically for this study, ability around "the notion of the normal." By naming ability as a structuring axis of power rather than a property of individual bodies, she opened the analytic space in which ableism becomes legible in the same register as racism and sexism (see also Artiles, 2013). Anthias (2013) sharpened this argument by distinguishing the levels at which intersectional analysis must operate: social categories, concrete social relations, and historicity. Inclusive education, on this account, must be analyzed at the dispositional, relational, and systemic levels at once, and the framework presented in this study is organized around precisely that multi-level architecture (Anthias, 2013; Smigielski, 2025; Yuval-Davis, 2015).

The institutionalization of intersectionality, however, has produced its own difficulties. Nash (2017) documented the "intersectionality wars," in which the analytic has been reduced variously to a "tool of diversity management" or a "racial alibi," cited for its performative force rather than mobilized for its critical labor; writing from a Latin American vantage point, Viveros Vigoya (2023) reported the same trajectory of "emptying and neutralization" once intersectionality is severed from its original political imprint. Pugach et al.'s (2019) review, discussed above,

shows this risk realized within the field that should be most equipped to resist it. Read together, these scholars make clear that an intersectional analysis of inclusive teaching must trace how power circulates across educator dispositions, classroom relations, and systemic conditions rather than performing intersectionality through identity inventories alone.

Decolonial and Afro-Feminist Resonances and Global South Positioning

This transnational reading deepens when read alongside the decolonial and Afro-feminist scholarship this journal's special issue centers. Tamale's Decolonization and Afro-Feminism, reviewed by Knowles (2021), reads colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism as mutually constitutive subjugations whose entitlements rely on binary thinking: Black/white, public/private, male/female, abled/disabled, normal/abnormal. Locating the abled/disabled binary inside the same colonial inheritance as race and gender binaries places ableism into the critical conversation Latin American decolonial scholarship has long sustained (Knowles, 2021; Viveros Vigoya, 2023), a conversation in which intersectionality has been actively repoliticized in social movement and community organizing rather than absorbed into standardized academic vocabularies (Viveros Vigoya, 2023). This study positions itself honestly within that conversation rather than claiming to speak from it. The empirical site is the United States, and the four participating educators are Black and White women and men teaching in elementary classrooms in one U.S. region. The framework that emerged from their lived experiences is offered as a contribution to a transnational, Améfrica Ladina dialogue, not as a Global North export and not as a substitute for the scholarship being generated by Latin American and Caribbean scholars (González, 2024; Viveros Vigoya, 2023). A framework that names ableism, racism, and the production of "the normal" as structuring axes of inclusive teaching will travel differently across the open-racism and racism-by-denial regimes González (2024) describes, and its claims should be read with that translation work in mind.

Disability, Ableism, and the Co-Construction of Race and Disability

If intersectionality is the analytic backbone of this study, the specific intersection of race and disability is its empirical center. Artiles (2013) argued that U.S. special education scholarship has long acknowledged "the racialization of disability," the documented disproportionality with which racial-minority students are diagnosed into high-incidence disability categories, but has been slow to theorize this racialization as an intersectional project. The medical model that has dominated this scholarship locates disability inside the individual body, "disaggregates race from disability," and reduces other markers of difference (gender, social class, language) to demographic descriptors (Artiles, 2013, p. 335). The result is what Artiles (2013) described as a "double bind": legal protections designed for students with disabilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act become sources of further inequity for racial-minority students whose disability diagnoses produce educational segregation, restricted access to the general education curriculum, and long-term negative outcomes. Race and disability, Artiles (2013) reminded us, have been

intertwined since at least the nineteenth century, with attributions of disability used to justify slavery and to deny rights to African Americans, and with "nonwhite races ... routinely connected to people with disabilities, both of whom were depicted as evolutionary laggards" (Baynton, 2001, as cited in Artiles, 2013, p. 331).

Artiles's (2013) intersectional reading aligns with the Disability Identity Framework (Forber-Pratt et al., 2017), which reads disability as a dimension of human diversity rather than as deficit, and with Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit; Annamma et al., 2013), which extends that work into a critical race register by naming the co-construction of race and disability within schooling and the ways ableism and racism reinforce one another in classroom and policy contexts. Read together, Artiles (2013), Forber-Pratt et al. (2017), and Annamma et al. (2013) reject what the medical model imposes as a "moral imperative to 'healthy normalcy'" (Watermeyer, 2013, as cited in Artiles, 2013, p. 334) and reframe inclusion as the structural transformation of educational environments rather than the relocation of students toward a normative body and mind. The teacher education literature on social justice has rarely held these intersections together (Keefe, 2022; Pugach et al., 2019), and the framework developed in this study is built in response to that gap, bringing disability and ableism into the same intersectional register this special issue centers and refusing to treat inclusion as either a narrow disability project or a non-disability social-justice project (Artiles, 2013; Keefe, 2022; Pugach et al., 2019).

Foundational Theoretical Lenses Integrated by the Framework

Three additional theoretical lenses inform the framework presented in the Discussion. Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2001) contributes the construct of self-efficacy and the principle of reciprocal determinism, the bidirectional shaping of educator beliefs, behaviors, and environments; Social Empathy Theory (Segal, 2011) extends empathy toward contextual awareness of structural inequities; and the Disability Identity Framework (Forber-Pratt et al., 2017) anchors classroom practice in the affirmation of positive disability identities. These three lenses interact dynamically across the framework's three constructs rather than mapping onto them one-to-one, and the framework's contribution is their synthesis within an intersectional, equity- and justice-centered model of inclusive teaching (Annamma et al., 2013; Artiles, 2013; Bandura, 2001; Forber-Pratt et al., 2017; Segal, 2011; Smigielski, 2025).

Methods

Research Design and Rationale

This study draws on data collected for the author's doctoral dissertation (Smigielski, 2025). It employed a qualitative multiple instrumental case study design (Yin, 2017) integrated with constructivist grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2006) to examine how in-service general educators' social-emotional learning (SEL), emotional intelligence (EI), soft skills, biases, identities, and previous life experiences shaped their inclusive teaching for students with disabilities. The two methodologies were

chosen for their complementary strengths. The multiple case study design enabled in-depth, context-rich exploration of each educator as a bounded case, while preserving the conditions for systematic cross-case comparison (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 2013; Yin, 2017). Constructivist grounded theory provided the iterative, interpretive procedures (theoretical sampling, constant comparison, and progressive coding from open to selective) needed to co-construct a substantive theoretical framework directly from participants' lived experiences (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This methodological synergy was deliberate: case study methods offered the within- and cross-case depth necessary to honor educator-level complexity, and constructivist grounded theory offered the procedures to move from rich description to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Yin, 2017).

An intersectional research stance, consistent with the theoretical framing developed in the Theoretical Framing, shaped three additional design decisions. Although intersectionality is not a method per se (Anthias, 2013), Anthias's (2013) call to analyze categories, social relations, and historicity simultaneously informed the study's design logic. First, participants were selected to enable analysis across racial identity, professional tenure, and school context together, rather than as isolated demographic variables (Anthias, 2013; Pugach et al., 2019). Second, data sources were triangulated to capture educator dispositions, classroom relations, and systemic conditions, the three levels at which intersectional analysis must operate (Anthias, 2013). Third, reflexive memo-writing tracked the researcher's positional location throughout analysis, consistent with situated-intersectional methodological commitments (Yuval-Davis, 2015).

Participants and Context

Four in-service elementary educators participated in this study, each constituting a distinct bounded case. Purposive sampling was used initially to identify educators teaching in inclusive classrooms with substantial experience supporting students with disabilities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Theoretical sampling was used iteratively as analysis proceeded, refining participant selection to support theoretical saturation of emergent categories (Charmaz, 2006). Participants varied in racial identity, gender, professional tenure, and school context, which enabled the cross-case analytic aims described in Section 3.4. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect participant confidentiality. Participant characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Information

Pseudonym	Race / Ethnicity	Gender Identity	Years Teaching	Current Grade Level	School Setting
Mrs. Bennett	White	Female	25	4th	Suburban / Title I
Ms. Thompson	White	Female	32	2nd	Rural
Ms. Walker	Black / African American	Female	4	5th	Urban / Title I

Pseudonym	Race / Ethnicity	Gender Identity	Years Teaching	Current Grade Level	School Setting
Mr. Davis	Black / African American	Male	4	3rd	Urban / Title I

Fuente: Author.

Participants were recruited through professional teacher networks via targeted outreach. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, with explicit communication of voluntary participation, confidentiality protections, and the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Participants received a small gift card in recognition of their commitment as a research subject across the three-month data-collection period. Ethical approval was obtained from the University at Buffalo Institutional Review Board (IRB ID: STUDY00008869).

Data Sources and Procedures

Data were collected over a three-month period (December 2024 to February 2025) through three triangulated sources: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and a reflective writing task. Triangulation was designed to capture educator perceptions, observable enactment, and reflective reasoning in tandem, strengthening credibility and analytic depth (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each participant completed two rounds of semi-structured interviews via Zoom, each lasting approximately one hour and audio-recorded for verbatim transcription. The interview protocol, refined from a prior pilot study (Smigielski, 2024), elicited educators' perceptions of SEL, EI, and soft skills; their biases and identities; and their previous life experiences in relation to inclusive teaching, with questions shared one week in advance to support reflective responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Initial interviews established baseline understandings, and follow-up interviews conducted after classroom observations probed emergent themes.

Each educator was also observed one time during typical instructional periods, with each observation lasting approximately one hour. The observation protocol foregrounded teacher-student interactions, inclusive instructional strategies, emotional responsiveness, classroom management practices, and the explicit and implicit expression of social-emotional competencies (Spradley, 1980), and field notes documented instructional moves, relational interactions, and emotional climate in detail. Finally, participants completed a reflective writing task structured as a "Letter to a Colleague," in which they advised a hypothetical first-year educator at their school on supporting diverse learners and integrating SEL, EI, and soft skills into daily practice. Charmaz (2006) emphasized reflective writing as valuable in grounded-theory research for capturing nuanced insights articulated directly by participants, and the task offered an additional analytic lens onto values, assumptions, and applied practice that interviews and observations alone might not have surfaced (Charmaz, 2006; Saldaña, 2016).

Data Analysis

Analysis followed grounded-theory procedures (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2015) integrated with within- and cross-case logics drawn from case-study methodology (Yin, 2017). Each educator's interview transcripts, observation field notes, and reflective writing were first analyzed individually as a bounded case. Line-by-line open coding generated initial concepts, and analytic memos documented reflective insights, emerging patterns, and analytic decisions throughout (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016). Within-case analysis prioritized the alignment between participants' narrated beliefs, observed practices, and written reflections, producing context-specific insights for each of the four cases (Charmaz, 2006; Yin, 2017).

Cross-case analysis then proceeded through axial coding, examining relationships among the embedded units of analysis (SEL, EI, soft skills, biases, identities, and previous experiences) across the four cases. Categories were compared, contrasted, and grouped to identify shared patterns and notable divergences (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Selective coding subsequently integrated these categories into a cohesive theoretical narrative, producing the central category of equity and justice in inclusive education and the three constructs that organize the framework presented in the Discussion: professional dispositions and skills, systemic influences, and relational classroom practices (Charmaz, 2006; Smigielski, 2025). The constant comparative method was used throughout, with newly emergent codes systematically applied back to earlier data to refine the developing theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Saldaña, 2016).

Trustworthiness, Researcher Positionality, and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness was supported through methodological triangulation, member checking, thick description, and a maintained audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Triangulation across interviews, observations, and reflective writing strengthened credibility by ensuring that thematic claims were supported by more than one data source (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Member checking allowed participants to review interview transcripts and observation notes, verify accuracy, and clarify the researcher's interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thick description of each educator's context, practice, and reflection supports transferability (Stake, 2006). The audit trail (interview protocols, coding tables, analytic memos, and a reflexive research journal) documents each methodological decision and supports dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Saldaña, 2016).

Confirmability was supported through ongoing reflexivity. The researcher is a former elementary educator with a hearing impairment whose dual positionality across hearing and hard-of-hearing communities resonates with Du Bois's (1903/1996) concept of double consciousness (see also Milner, 2007). This positionality shaped both the initial interest in this study and continuing analytic sensitivity to ableism, normative ability, and the lived experience of being read as non-disabled while navigating disability, what the researcher has elsewhere termed “hearing passing privilege.” Consistent with Peshkin's (1988) assertions about recognizing researcher

subjectivities, reflexive journaling, analytic memo-writing, and peer debriefing were maintained throughout to support balanced interpretation, attending explicitly to how the researcher's location across ability, professional role, and Anglophone academic training shaped attention to the constructs of "the normal" surfaced in the data (Yuval-Davis, 2015). All data were stored in a password-protected cloud system accessible only to the researcher; identifying information was anonymized through pseudonyms; and ethical oversight was maintained through the University at Buffalo Institutional Review Board (IRB ID: STUDY00008869) throughout the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Results

Findings are presented in two parts. First, brief portraits of each educator-case establish the within-case context necessary to interpret cross-case findings (Yin, 2017). Second, three cross-case themes are presented: (a) SEL, emotional intelligence, and soft skills in inclusive practice; (b) bias and identity in inclusive teaching; and (c) emerging challenges in inclusive teaching. Each theme is supported by data from semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and the reflective writing task (Smigielski, 2025).

Case Portraits

Mrs. Bennett, a veteran educator with 25 years of teaching experience, has spent the past 17 years teaching in an Integrated Co-Teaching setting within a suburban Title I elementary school. Raised in a predominantly white community with limited exposure to disability, she initially entered the classroom with high behavioral expectations rooted in personal accountability that unintentionally reinforced deficit-oriented perspectives on student behavior (Smigielski, 2025). Over time, sustained professional learning, structured participation in a Master Teacher Program focused on diversity, equity, and SEL, and the recognition that "all behavior is communication" reshaped her practice toward empathy-driven, SEL-infused instruction (Smigielski, 2025).

Ms. Thompson, also a veteran educator, brings over three decades of experience teaching second grade across urban and rural inclusive settings. Despite not holding formal special education certification, she has spent more than 25 years actively pursuing inclusive teaching in a rural district. Like Mrs. Bennett, she entered the classroom with minimal exposure to disability and diversity, and described her early views of inclusion as accommodation-focused and grounded in deficit thinking. Sustained reflection, professional learning, and direct classroom experience shifted her practice toward flexible, UDL-informed instruction and structured SEL routines (Smigielski, 2025).

Ms. Walker, an early-career educator with four years of experience, teaches fifth grade in an urban charter school serving predominantly students of color from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Her commitment to equity-oriented inclusive teaching is informed by her own experience attending under-resourced

urban schools and by her relationship with her younger brother, who is autistic and non-speaking. These experiences shaped an inclusive philosophy grounded in empathy, emotional safety, and structured SEL routines, though she described continuing tension between her inclusive ideals and the rigid pacing, standardized testing, and limited staffing of her current school context (Smigielski, 2025).

Mr. Davis, also an early-career educator with four years of teaching experience, teaches third grade in an urban Title I charter school. His path into teaching was nontraditional, shaped by prior nonprofit work supporting youth with disabilities and educational mentoring. Growing up in a diverse, under-resourced urban community heightened his sensitivity to disciplinary disparities affecting Black boys in particular, and informed an instructional practice that emphasizes relational trust, restorative discipline, and the reframing of student behavior as emotional communication rather than as misconduct (Smigielski, 2025).

Theme 1: SEL, Emotional Intelligence, and Soft Skills in Inclusive Practice

Across all four cases, SEL, EI, and soft skills emerged as central to educators' inclusive teaching, manifesting in patterns of emotional exhaustion and self-regulation, emotionally responsive instructional adaptation, relational practices that fostered students' SEL, and equity-oriented approaches to classroom management (Smigielski, 2025). All participants articulated the emotional cost of inclusive teaching, but they described it differently depending on tenure and school context. Mrs. Bennett, a veteran teacher, explained that "teachers emotionally drain themselves throughout the day because we have to be a good example … but by the end, you're emotionally spent" (Interview #1, in Smigielski, 2025). Ms. Thompson similarly described inclusive teaching as requiring constant self-monitoring and emotional modeling for students. Early-career educators in urban settings described emotional labor as more immediate and acute. Mr. Davis emphasized that "you have to be the stable one in the room, no matter what you're feeling" (Interview #2, in Smigielski, 2025), noting a particular burden on educators of color, and Ms. Walker described "the weight of always needing to be 'on'" (Interview #1, in Smigielski, 2025). These differences suggest that experience and school context interact to shape how educators perceive and manage the emotional demands of inclusive classrooms, a dynamic resonant with findings in the broader emotional labor literature (Chang, 2009; Farber, 1991; Hargreaves, 2001; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Schutz & Zembylas, 2009).

Emotional awareness emerged as a distinct dimension of EI across cases, expressed through real-time instructional adaptation. Ms. Walker used visual scaffolds and modeled retellings during a literacy lesson to support multimodal access aligned with UDL principles (Observation, in Smigielski, 2025). Ms. Thompson described intentionally rewording instructions and questions to support students' cognitive and linguistic processing (Interview #2, in Smigielski, 2025). Mr. Davis allowed a restless student to take a break before continuing an academic task, noting that forcing continued seatwork would escalate the situation (Observation, in Smigielski, 2025). Mrs. Bennett built emotional regulation into instructional pacing, guiding

transitions with statements such as “Let's take a deep breath before we move on. I'll give you a moment to think” (Observation, in Smigielski, 2025). These emotionally attuned practices are consistent with prosocial classroom and trauma-informed pedagogical principles (Hammond, 2015; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Souers & Hall, 2016), though, importantly, participants developed them largely through experience rather than through formal preparation.

Relationship-building emerged as the foundation for SEL development in inclusive classrooms across all four cases. Ms. Thompson described running a “calm classroom” and built a structured conflict-resolution protocol that students could navigate “without much adult intervention” (Interview #1, in Smigielski, 2025). Mrs. Bennett emphasized trust and emotional safety as preconditions for student risk-taking, writing in her reflective task, “When your learners feel a sense of trust and comfort in the classroom, they are more willing to take chances, participate, and be okay with failure” (Written Task, in Smigielski, 2025). Ms. Walker integrated SEL into everyday transitions, modeling co-regulation through brief check-ins and reminders that the class was “giving our brains a break, and getting ready for learning” (Observation, in Smigielski, 2025). Mr. Davis leveraged peer relationships explicitly, asking, “Do you want to take a walk with a buddy?” when supporting an emotionally dysregulated student (Interview #2, in Smigielski, 2025), and described relational practice as inseparable from inclusion. These findings align with culturally responsive and trauma-informed pedagogies that center relational trust and community interconnectedness (CASEL, 2020; Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Equity-oriented classroom management appeared across cases through a shared rejection of punitive, compliance-driven discipline in favor of restorative, relational, and culturally responsive strategies (Gay, 2018; Gregory et al., 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Weinstein et al., 2004). Ms. Thompson rejected deficit-based labels and insisted that “a teacher needs to be emotionally intelligent enough to read the kid and catch it beforehand” (Interview #2, in Smigielski, 2025). Mrs. Bennett emphasized that students with accommodations should not be visibly singled out from peers, writing in her reflective task that “if someone were to walk into your classroom, they should not be able to identify the students with needs from any other child” (Written Task, in Smigielski, 2025). Mr. Davis frequently repositioned students who had been disciplined elsewhere as classroom leaders, using positive reinforcement to re-engage them rather than reinforcing negative behavior labels (Observation, in Smigielski, 2025), an approach consistent with restorative-justice scholarship that emphasizes dignity, accountability, and the disruption of racialized discipline patterns (Anyon et al., 2016; Gregory et al., 2017; Welsh & Little, 2018).

Theme 2: Bias and Identity in Inclusive Teaching

Across cases, educators described inclusive identity development as a non-linear, ongoing process shaped by personal history, direct classroom experience, professional learning, and confrontation with systemic inequities (Smigielski, 2025). Their initial conceptions of disability were largely organized by deficit thinking and

were reshaped over time through reflective practice (Forber-Pratt et al., 2017; Keefe, 2022; Lalvani & Broderick, 2013; Naraian, 2021). Ms. Thompson, reflecting on her earliest students, said, "I think back and I'm like, those kids probably [had disabilities], but nobody ever told any of us. They were just the 'bad kids,' and I hate that now" (Interview #1, in Smigielski, 2025). Mrs. Bennett described disability as having been "invisible" in her own schooling and recalled that her initial perceptions began shifting in college when she encountered the framing of mental health concerns as disability (Interview #1, in Smigielski, 2025). Ms. Walker described a similar shift through direct teaching experience, noting that "some behaviors I thought were disrespect or disengagement were really expressions of something deeper happening at home or emotionally" (Interview #1, in Smigielski, 2025). Mr. Davis credited his prior nonprofit work with shaping his view that "behavior is communication, not something to punish immediately" (Interview #2, in Smigielski, 2025).

Personal histories shaped educators' inclusive identities in distinct ways. Ms. Walker described her relationship with her autistic, non-speaking brother as the foundation of her commitment to inclusion, calling disability "near and dear to my heart" (Interview #1, in Smigielski, 2025). Mr. Davis credited a foundational conversation with his uncle about disability for his understanding that "everyone has needs … just that your needs are different" (Interview #1, in Smigielski, 2025). In contrast, Ms. Thompson and Mrs. Bennett, both of whom grew up in predominantly White suburban contexts with minimal exposure to disability or diversity, described coming to inclusive practice through direct teaching experience and ongoing reflection rather than through formative personal exposure (Smigielski, 2025). These contrasting trajectories illustrate the role of personal background in shaping educators' inclusive readiness and underscore the necessity of structured opportunities for reflective and equity-focused professional learning, particularly for educators whose early life experiences offered limited disability and diversity exposure (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Kelchtermans, 2009; Smith, 2005).

Privilege and systemic positioning emerged across cases as foundational to inclusive identity development. Ms. Walker connected her own experience as a student in an under-resourced urban district to her current commitment, reflecting that "we didn't get the best chance at learning because of where we were from" (Interview #1, in Smigielski, 2025). Mr. Davis, drawing on his experience as a Black male educator, explicitly named the racialized patterns of school discipline he observed in his urban context, critiquing "punitive systems disproportionately affecting marginalized students" and describing his deliberate use of restorative strategies as a refusal to reinforce those patterns (Interview #2, in Smigielski, 2025). His practice reflected what Annamma et al. (2013) and Artiles (2013) name explicitly: the co-construction of race and disability in U.S. schooling, and the way ableism and racism reinforce one another in classroom and policy contexts. By repositioning students who had been disciplined elsewhere as classroom leaders, Mr. Davis enacted a justice-oriented

refusal of deficit-based behavioral framing, demonstrating how educators may disrupt the racialization of disability through everyday relational and instructional choices (Annamma et al., 2013; Artiles, 2013; Forber-Pratt et al., 2017).

Deficit thinking persisted as a structural feature of educators' environments even where individual educators had moved beyond it. Educators consistently described curriculum overload, standardized testing, and limited staffing as systemic pressures that produced behavior they themselves did not endorse. Ms. Walker, for example, articulated a strong commitment to patience and proactive support but was observed responding to a student with "There's a line, we don't have time. Put your hand down" (Observation, in Smigielski, 2025). Mr. Davis advocated for student autonomy but was also observed providing intensive step-by-step scaffolding, acknowledging in his reflective task that "just because we teach a skill, it does not mean that it was implemented to understanding" (Written Task, in Smigielski, 2025). These contradictions are consistent with Artiles's (2013) and Keefe's (2022) accounts of how structural ableism and accountability politics constrain educators' inclusive intentions, and they illustrate the limits of individual disposition in the face of systemic pressure (Karalis Noel et al., 2023; Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013).

Theme 3: Emerging Challenges in Inclusive Teaching

A third theme captured the emerging challenges educators faced in sustaining inclusive practice: emotional labor and burnout, pedagogical tensions between differentiation and standardized curricula, and structural barriers including inflexible school policies, inadequate resources, and insufficient professional development (Smigielski, 2025). All four educators described emotional exhaustion, though it manifested differently across tenure and context. Mrs. Bennett described the felt cost of sustained emotional engagement, writing that "the burden is heavy, the recognition often minimal … but the importance of the work you do is immense" (Written Task, in Smigielski, 2025). Mr. Davis reflected that, early in his career, "I was taking a lot of it home … I would go through these emotions and blame myself," describing the deliberate work he had since done to "compartmentalize those feelings, to not transfer that energy from student to student" (Interview #1, in Smigielski, 2025). Ms. Walker, similarly, acknowledged that "you can not forget to rejuvenate, recharge, and readjust yourself daily" (Written Task, in Smigielski, 2025). These accounts are consistent with the emotional labor literature on inclusive teaching (Chang, 2009; Farber, 1991; Hargreaves, 2001; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Schutz & Zembylas, 2009).

Pedagogical tensions between inclusive ideals and standardized curriculum demands surfaced in every classroom observation. Mrs. Bennett described the difficulty of differentiating in real time, advising in her reflective task that "managing an integrated classroom that consists of students within the general and special education populations is both rewarding and difficult … This will require you to differentiate instruction, by content, process, and product" (Written Task, in Smigielski, 2025). Yet observations revealed differentiation as reactive rather than embedded, with teachers responding to student confusion individually after the fact

rather than designing for diverse access from the outset. Ms. Thompson acknowledged differentiating "on the fly" (Interview #2, in Smigielski, 2025) and was observed providing answers herself to maintain pacing during whole-group instruction. Mr. Davis articulated the irreducibility of student variation, observing that "there's 100 ways to learn … there's no structure to it at all because every student is different" (Interview #2, in Smigielski, 2025), while at the same time relying on tight, sequential teacher-directed scaffolding during observed lessons (Smigielski, 2025). These contradictions illustrate how rigid curricula and pacing pressures constrain the conditions under which inclusive intentions can be realized (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Tomlinson & Moon, 2013; Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013).

Educators consistently identified structural barriers as the most persistent threats to inclusive practice. Mrs. Bennett described the limits of one-size-fits-all instruction for students with significant disabilities, noting that "the only way [students with significant disabilities] are going to learn something is by having them either one-on-one or in a really small group, but then they're excluded from the rest of the class" (Interview #2, in Smigielski, 2025). Ms. Thompson named curriculum overload as a deterrent to inclusive co-teaching: "There is so much curriculum that has to be taught … it's keeping teachers from wanting to do co-teach or wanting to do an inclusion class because it is more work" (Interview #2, in Smigielski, 2025). Ms. Walker pointed to fast pacing as a fundamental equity issue, observing that "if a student is lost, it's going to be a long while before they receive help or support" (Interview #1, in Smigielski, 2025). Mr. Davis flagged staffing ratios as a structural constraint that limited his capacity to support students individually: "There are 15 of you, and 3 of us. I can't do what I have to do if you're all calling my name" (Observation, in Smigielski, 2025). These accounts converge with the broader scholarship documenting how inclusive ideals are routinely undermined by systemic conditions that are themselves rarely the focus of teacher preparation or accountability reform (Artiles, 2013; Karalis Noel et al., 2023; Keefe, 2022; Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013).

Cross-Case Synthesis

Three patterns emerged from the cross-case analysis. First, SEL, EI, and soft skills were universal in their importance across cases, but their distribution and sustainability varied with tenure and context. Veteran educators (Mrs. Bennett, Ms. Thompson) described emotional exhaustion as cumulative but manageable; early-career educators in urban Title I schools (Ms. Walker, Mr. Davis) described emotional labor as more acute, more immediate, and racialized in particular ways (Smigielski, 2025). Second, inclusive identity development was a non-linear process across all four cases, but the paths diverged according to early exposure. Educators with formative personal exposure to disability and racialized inequity (Ms. Walker, Mr. Davis) entered the profession already attentive to systemic patterns; educators without such exposure (Mrs. Bennett, Ms. Thompson) developed equity consciousness over years of teaching, reflection, and direct interaction with students and families (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Kelchtermans, 2009; Smigielski, 2025; Smith, 2005).

Third, contradictions between stated inclusive ideals and observed practice appeared across all four cases, but they were most pronounced in the urban Title I contexts where structural constraints (curriculum pacing, standardized testing, staffing ratios) pressed most directly on instructional decisions. These contradictions were not failures of educator commitment; they were the predictable consequences of educators' inclusive intentions colliding with the systemic conditions of their work (Artiles, 2013; Karalis Noel et al., 2023; Keefe, 2022; Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013). Read together, the three themes set up the central argument of the Discussion: inclusive teaching cannot be theorized at the educator level alone. It emerges through the dynamic interaction of educator dispositions, relational classroom practices, and systemic conditions, and a framework for inclusive teaching must hold these three levels in conversation. That framework is presented next.

Discussion: The Equity and Justice Framework for Inclusive Teaching

Overview of the Framework

The Equity and Justice Framework for Inclusive Teaching emerged inductively from cross-case analysis as a substantive theoretical model grounded in educators' lived experiences (Charmaz, 2006; Smigielski, 2025). The framework integrates three dynamically interconnected constructs (Professional Dispositions and Skills, Systemic Influences, and Relational Classroom Practices) around a central hub of equity and justice that operates as both the goal and the interpretive lens through which inclusive teaching is examined and enacted (Smigielski, 2025). It draws on three foundational theoretical lenses, Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2001), Social Empathy Theory (Segal, 2011), and the Disability Identity Framework (Forber-Pratt et al., 2017), and is grounded analytically in the intersectional and decolonial scholarship developed in the Theoretical Framing (Annamma et al., 2013; Anthias, 2013; Artiles, 2013; González, 2024; Knowles, 2021; Nash, 2017; Pugach et al., 2019; Viveros Vigoya, 2023; Yuval-Davis, 2015). Although developed from data on disability-inclusive teaching specifically, its equity- and justice-centered architecture is designed to be applicable across historically and systemically marginalized student populations, including multilingual learners, racially and ethnically marginalized communities, and students at the intersections of these identities (Smigielski, 2025). The framework is represented visually in Figure 1.

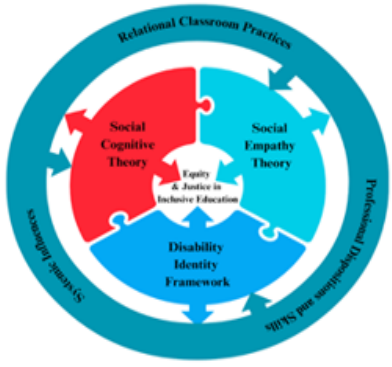

Figure 1. The Equity and Justice Framework for Inclusive Teaching

Central Hub: Equity and Justice as Lens, Not Destination

At the framework's core, equity refers to the provision of tailored supports that address individual student needs, while justice involves the active identification and dismantling of systemic barriers that produce inequitable outcomes (Smigielski, 2025). Participants voiced both principles in their own registers. Ms. Thompson located equity in the anticipatory work of knowing students, insisting that "a teacher needs to be emotionally intelligent enough to read the kid and catch it beforehand" (Interview #2, in Smigielski, 2025), while Mr. Davis located justice in his explicit critique of "punitive systems disproportionately affecting marginalized students" (Interview #2, in Smigielski, 2025). These dual principles operate not as endpoints to be achieved once the right strategies are in place, but as the interpretive lens through which all three constructs are read and enacted. This positioning of equity and justice as analytic lens rather than as goal directly contests the inclusion-as-compliance model that has dominated teacher preparation and policy (Allday et al., 2013; Keefe, 2022; Smigielski, 2025), and it aligns with the operational definition this special issue establishes: intersectionality as a critical analytical and practical approach to identifying, understanding, and challenging systems of oppression that reproduce educational exclusion (Viveros Vigoya, 2023).

The framework's grounding in this dual lens responds to a persistent gap in inclusive education theory. Prior models have often treated equity and justice as outcomes downstream of effective inclusion, rather than as the analytic frame through which inclusion itself is defined (Artiles, 2013; Naraian, 2021). By centering equity and justice as both the goal and the lens, the framework reframes inclusive teaching not as the accommodation of diverse learners within a normatively organized classroom, but as the structural transformation of the classroom itself (Artiles, 2013; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Naraian, 2021).

Professional Dispositions and Skills: Contesting the Normative "Able Teacher"

The construct of Professional Dispositions and Skills captures the educator's internal world: SEL, EI, soft skills, self-efficacy, empathy, and critical awareness of personal biases and identities (Bandura, 2001; CASEL, 2020; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Smigielski, 2025). Across cases, dispositions emerged not as static personal qualities but as competencies developed and continually reshaped through direct classroom experience, sustained reflection, and structured professional learning (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Kelchtermans, 2009; Smigielski, 2025). Mrs. Bennett's evolution from compliance-focused, deficit-oriented management toward an empathy-driven practice grounded in the understanding that "all behavior is communication" exemplifies this developmental arc (Smigielski, 2025), as does Ms. Thompson's shift from accommodation-focused inclusion toward UDL-informed flexible instruction over three decades of teaching.

Read intersectionally, the construct does more than catalog educator competencies; it contests the normative figure of the "able teacher" who is presumed to be emotionally regulated, productive, and never burned out (Chang, 2009; Farber, 1991;

Hargreaves, 2001; Schutz & Zembylas, 2009; Yuval-Davis, 2015). Across cases, the emotional labor of inclusive teaching was substantial and distributed unevenly: veteran educators described emotional exhaustion as cumulative and manageable, while early-career educators in urban Title I contexts described it as immediate, acute, and racialized in particular ways (Smigielski, 2025). Mr. Davis's observation that "you have to be the stable one in the room, no matter what you're feeling" (Interview #2, in Smigielski, 2025) names the normative weight of the able-teacher expectation directly, and Ms. Walker's description of "the weight of always needing to be 'on'" (Interview #1, in Smigielski, 2025) names its daily accumulation. The framework reimagines this construct by treating educator dispositions not as individual virtues cultivated in isolation but as competencies produced and constrained by the intersecting systems of ableism, racism, and accountability politics within which teachers work (Annamma et al., 2013; Artiles, 2013; Karalis Noel et al., 2023; Keefe, 2022; Yuval-Davis, 2015). What replaces the "able teacher" in this reimagining is an educator whose emotional, relational, and reflective labor is recognized, distributed, and structurally supported rather than absorbed into an invisible expectation of personal sacrifice (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Schutz & Zembylas, 2009; Smigielski, 2025).

Systemic Influences: Contesting the Normative "Able Learner"

The construct of Systemic Influences captures the structural and institutional factors that shape and constrain inclusive teaching: school and district policies, curriculum standards, resource allocation, professional development opportunities, and pervasive structural barriers such as standardized testing and inflexible curricula (Karalis Noel et al., 2023; Smigielski, 2025; Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013). Across all four cases, these systemic conditions emerged as the most persistent threats to inclusive practice, producing the equity contradictions through which educators' inclusive ideals were repeatedly undermined by curriculum pacing, staffing ratios, and standardized assessment regimes (Smigielski, 2025). Ms. Thompson named the mechanism directly: "There is so much curriculum that has to be taught ... it's keeping teachers from wanting to do co-teach or wanting to do an inclusion class because it is more work" (Interview #2, in Smigielski, 2025). Mr. Davis's in-the-moment accounting, "There are 15 of you, and 3 of us. I can't do what I have to do if you're all calling my name" (Observation, in Smigielski, 2025), captures how staffing ratios translate into withheld support in real time.

Read intersectionally, this construct contests the normative figure of the "able learner," the independent, on-grade-level, behaviorally predictable student against whom all others are measured (Artiles, 2013; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Keefe, 2022; Valencia, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2015). Artiles (2013) argued that the able learner is constructed at the intersection of ability, race, language, and class, and that standardization functions as a power technology producing this normative learner through assessment regimes, curricular sequencing, and disability diagnosis practices. The "double bind" Artiles (2013) named is visible across the urban Title I cases in this study: Ms. Walker's observation that "if a student is lost, it's going to be

a long while before they receive help or support" (Interview #1, in Smigielski, 2025) and Mr. Davis's account of racialized discipline patterns affecting Black boys (Smigielski, 2025) illustrate how the able-learner expectation produces compounding inequities for students whose racial, disability, and language profiles place them outside the normative frame. The framework reimagines this construct by refusing the medical model's "moral imperative to 'healthy normalcy'" (Watermeyer, 2013, as cited in Artiles, 2013, p. 334) and reframing inclusion as the structural transformation of the educational environment. What replaces the "able learner" is a model that designs learning environments for student variation from the outset rather than accommodating variation as an afterthought (Annamma et al., 2013; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Knowles, 2021; Naraian, 2021; Smigielski, 2025; Viveros Vigoya, 2023).

Relational Classroom Practices: Inclusion as Enacted Intersectionally

The construct of Relational Classroom Practices captures the tangible, observable enactments of inclusive teaching: teacher-student relationships, differentiated and responsive instruction, and equity-oriented classroom management (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Smigielski, 2025; Weinstein et al., 2004). Across cases, relational practice emerged as the site where dispositions met structures, where educators' inclusive intentions either translated into responsive, trust-based classroom interactions or were undermined by systemic constraints that pushed them toward compliance-driven approaches (Smigielski, 2025).

Read intersectionally, relational practice is the construct through which inclusion is enacted as a refusal of single-axis thinking (Annamma et al., 2013; Anthias, 2013; Artiles, 2013; Pugach et al., 2019). Mr. Davis's reframing of students who had been disciplined elsewhere as classroom leaders rather than as behavior problems exemplifies this refusal: rather than reading Black boys' behavior through the racialized discipline lens that dominates U.S. urban education, he built his classroom community on relational trust as a corrective to the school's structural inheritance (Smigielski, 2025). That repertoire was audible in small moments, as when he offered an emotionally dysregulated student, "Do you want to take a walk with a buddy?" (Interview #2, in Smigielski, 2025). Ms. Thompson's structured conflict-resolution protocol, Mrs. Bennett's conviction that "when your learners feel a sense of trust and comfort in the classroom, they are more willing to take chances, participate, and be okay with failure" (Written Task, in Smigielski, 2025), and Ms. Walker's daily SEL routines likewise enact relational practice as a refusal of compliance-driven discipline in favor of restorative, culturally responsive, and trauma-informed approaches (Gay, 2018; Gregory et al., 2017; Hammond, 2015; Souers & Hall, 2016). The framework reimagines relational practice not as a "soft" supplement to "hard" instruction but as the central site through which equity and justice are either enacted or refused (Annamma et al., 2013; Forber-Pratt et al., 2017; Smigielski, 2025).

Dynamic Interactions Across the Framework

The three constructs interact dynamically rather than functioning in isolation. Educators' Professional Dispositions and Skills directly shape their Relational Classroom Practices, with capacities such as emotional intelligence, empathy, and bias awareness translating into responsive, trust-based classroom interactions (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Smigielski, 2025). Systemic Influences, however, significantly moderate this relationship: supportive systems such as flexible curricula, adequate staffing, and ongoing equity-oriented professional development enable educators to enact relational practices consistent with their inclusive dispositions, whereas systemic barriers such as standardized testing pressures and curriculum overload undermine these efforts and produce the equity contradictions documented in the Results. Ms. Walker's case makes this moderation visible: an educator with a strongly articulated commitment to patience and proactive support was nonetheless observed telling a student, “There's a line, we don't have time. Put your hand down” (Observation, in Smigielski, 2025), a contradiction produced not by disposition but by pacing pressure. This dynamic interaction is consistent with Bandura's (2001) principle of reciprocal determinism, Segal's (2011) call for contextual empathy as the basis for systemic advocacy, and Anthias's (2013) insistence that intersectional analysis operate simultaneously at the levels of categories, social relations, and historicity.

Naming the Systems of Oppression the Framework Confronts

Consistent with this special issue's operational definition of intersectionality as a critical approach to challenging systems of oppression (Viveros Vigoya, 2023), the framework explicitly names the systems it is designed to confront: ableism, racism, classism, sexism operating through gendered emotional labor expectations, and the colonial logics of normalcy that organize them all (Annamma et al., 2013; Artiles, 2013; González, 2024; Knowles, 2021; Viveros Vigoya, 2023; Yuval-Davis, 2015). Mrs. Bennett's reflection that “the burden is heavy, the recognition often minimal ... but the importance of the work you do is immense” (Written Task, in Smigielski, 2025) names the sacrificial script through which that labor is normalized and absorbed. The framework treats these systems as mutually constituted rather than additive, consistent with the intersectional power-analytic tradition developed in the Theoretical Framing (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1983; Anthias, 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2015).

The framework also extends existing theoretical resources. It extends Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2001) by showing that educators' self-efficacy is moderated by racialized and ableist school policies and the emotional labor they demand; it extends Social Empathy Theory (Segal, 2011) by arguing that empathy must be accompanied by structural advocacy rather than treated as a private affective response; and it pushes the Disability Identity Framework (Forber-Pratt et al., 2017) toward the explicit critical race register that DisCrit (Annamma et al., 2013) provides, naming the co-construction of race and disability in U.S. schooling as a structural condition of inclusive teaching (Artiles, 2013; Smigielski, 2025). Finally,

the framework responds to the methodological critique Pugach et al. (2019) advance: it traces how power circulates across dispositional, relational, and systemic levels rather than performing intersectionality through identity inventories alone.

Transferability to Latin American, Caribbean, and Global South Contexts

The framework's potential applicability beyond its U.S. empirical site rests on a distinction between its architecture and its contents. The three constructs (Professional Dispositions and Skills, Relational Classroom Practices, and Systemic Influences) and the central hub of equity and justice are defined at a level of analysis that does not presuppose U.S. institutional forms; what is context-bound is the material that populates each construct. In this study, Systemic Influences took the form of standardized testing regimes, curriculum pacing mandates, and disability policy under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. In Latin American and Caribbean contexts, the same construct would be populated by different policy instruments, resource conditions, and colonial inheritances, while the analytic question remains constant: which structural conditions produce the normative "able learner" against whom students are measured, and how do those conditions constrain educators' inclusive intentions? The framework's power-analytic reading of intersectionality is, in this respect, closer to the repoliticized tradition Viveros Vigoya (2023) documents in Latin American social movements than to the diversity-management usage Nash (2017) critiques in institutionalized Anglophone settings, and its anti-normalcy core finds a ready interlocutor in decolonial scholarship that locates the abled/disabled binary within the same colonial inheritance as race and gender binaries (Knowles, 2021).

Translation work remains substantive rather than cosmetic. González's (2024) distinction between "open racism" and "racism by denial" implies that the co-construction of race and disability may operate differently across regimes: where explicit categorization drives the "double bind" Artiles (2013) documents in the United States, myths of racial democracy may render the racialization of disability less visible and therefore harder to contest (González, 2024; Viveros Vigoya, 2023). Whether the able teacher and the able learner are produced through comparable mechanisms under racism-by-denial conditions, and whether the framework's three-construct architecture holds when populated with Global South educational realities, are empirical questions this study cannot answer from its U.S. site. They are, however, precisely the questions the framework is designed to make askable, and the study explicitly invites scholars working from Latin American, Caribbean, Indigenous, and Afro-descendant positions to test, contest, and extend the model on their own terms (Annamma et al., 2013; González, 2024; Viveros Vigoya, 2023).

Implications for Practice and Policy

Implications for Teacher Preparation and Professional Development

Findings indicate that teacher preparation and professional development must move beyond compliance-driven training toward sustained, equity-oriented learning that integrates SEL, EI, and soft skills with explicit anti-bias, anti-ableist, and disability studies content (Annamma et al., 2013; Artiles, 2013; Keefe, 2022; Naraian, 2021; Smigielski, 2025). The framework's three constructs specify where in a program this work belongs and what form it can take.

At the level of Professional Dispositions and Skills, the contrasting developmental trajectories in this study carry a direct design implication. Educators with formative exposure to disability and racialized inequity entered the profession already attentive to systemic patterns, while educators without such exposure developed equity consciousness only over years of teaching (Smigielski, 2025); ensuring that early-career educators do not have to repeat this slow, unevenly distributed developmental arc is itself an equity issue (Pugach et al., 2019). Preparation programs can compress that arc deliberately. One concrete structure is an ability autobiography: a sustained reflective assignment, introduced in foundations coursework and revisited at each program milestone, in which candidates trace how their own schooling constructed the "able learner," inventory their exposure to disability and racialized inequity, and analyze how those histories shape their instructional assumptions (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Forber-Pratt et al., 2017; Kelchtermans, 2009). The assignment operationalizes the framework's premise that dispositions are developed and reshaped rather than fixed.

At the level of Relational Classroom Practices, programs can pair intentional clinical placements in inclusive settings with a rehearsal-and-coaching cycle: candidates practice responding to scenarios drawn from inclusive classrooms, such as supporting an emotionally dysregulated student without resorting to compliance-driven discipline, receive coached feedback organized around the premise that behavior is communication, and debrief observed lessons using the framework's relational construct as the analytic lens (Gregory et al., 2017; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Smigielski, 2025). Mentor selection matters here: placements should be sited with educators whose practice demonstrates restorative and relational approaches, not merely with those who have available classrooms.

At the level of Systemic Influences, preparation can make structural analysis an assignment rather than an aspiration. Candidates can conduct a bounded equity audit of their placement school, examining disaggregated discipline data, curriculum pacing demands, staffing ratios, and accommodation practices, and present findings through the framework's justice lens of identifying barriers to be dismantled (Artiles, 2013; Karalis Noel et al., 2023; Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013). For in-service professional development, this study's own data offer a proof of concept: Mrs. Bennett's evolution from compliance-focused management toward empathy-driven practice occurred through structured, multi-year participation in a cohort-based

Master Teacher Program focused on diversity, equity, and SEL (Smigielski, 2025). Districts can replicate that structure, replacing one-off compliance sessions with multi-year cohorts that integrate SEL, disability studies, and anti-bias content with facilitated reflective practice (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Professional development must also explicitly attend to the intersectional construction of educator identities, biases, and the emotional labor expectations placed on educators of color in particular (Annamma et al., 2013; Milner, 2007; Smigielski, 2025). Mr. Davis's observation that "you have to be the stable one in the room, no matter what you're feeling" (Interview #2, in Smigielski, 2025) names a racialized emotional expectation that compliance-focused professional development does not address. Concrete supports include structured peer debriefing groups with protected time, mentoring structures attentive to the particular emotional labor carried by educators of color, and workload policies that recognize relational and emotional labor as labor rather than absorbing it into an expectation of personal sacrifice (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Milner, 2007; Schutz & Zembylas, 2009).

Implications for Policy and Systemic Advocacy

Findings strongly indicate the need for systemic reform alongside educator development. Policies should mandate ongoing, iterative professional development on SEL, EI, equity, and disability studies; revisit resource allocation formulas to support districts serving marginalized students; ensure smaller class sizes, adequate support personnel, flexible curricular frameworks, and access to differentiated instructional resources; and institute regular equity audits and disaggregated climate surveys that move inclusive education beyond compliance toward measurable structural transformation (Artiles, 2013; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Karalis Noel et al., 2023; Smigielski, 2025; Tomlinson & Moon, 2013; Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013). Beyond classroom-level reform, findings call for broader advocacy connecting inclusive education to social justice movements addressing housing, immigration, labor, and disability justice (Annamma et al., 2013; Smigielski, 2025). The framework's intersectional architecture recognizes that the systems shaping classroom inclusion do not stop at the classroom door, and that meaningful transformation requires educators, policymakers, and communities to act in concert across these intersecting domains.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is methodologically rigorous but bounded in significant ways. First, the sample of four educators in one U.S. region produces deep, context-rich findings but does not support statistical generalization (Charmaz, 2006; Yin, 2017). Demographic patterning within the sample, with both veteran educators identifying as White and both early-career educators identifying as Black, is itself a substantive finding that warrants further investigation rather than dismissal as a sampling limitation (Smigielski, 2025). Second, the constructivist grounded theory methodology produces co-constructed rather than objective knowledge, and the researcher's

positionality, described in the Methods, shaped the study's analytic sensitivity to ableism and normative ability; reflexive memo-writing, member checking, and peer debriefing supported balanced interpretation but did not eliminate that influence (Charmaz, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Peshkin, 1988).

Third, the geopolitical site is the United States, and the framework therefore travels into Latin American, Caribbean, Indigenous, and Afro-descendant educational contexts only with the deliberate translation work discussed above (González, 2024; Viveros Vigoya, 2023). The framework's architecture is offered as transferable; its empirical contents are not, and its claims should be read with the difference between "open racism" and "racism by denial" regimes in mind (González, 2024). Future empirical work that tests, contests, and extends the framework from Latin American, Caribbean, Indigenous, and Afro-descendant scholarly positions is needed and explicitly invited by this study.

Finally, data collection methods carried their own limitations. Semi-structured interviews depended on participants' ability to articulate experiences and may have been subject to social desirability effects; classroom observations were short in duration and subject to the observer effect; and the reflective writing task elicited idealized as much as actual practice (Smigielski, 2025). Future research using larger-scale qualitative or mixed-methods designs, longitudinal study of educator development, and comparative work across geopolitical contexts is recommended (Charmaz, 2006; Smigielski, 2025).

Conclusion

This study generated the Equity and Justice Framework for Inclusive Teaching, an empirically grounded, intersectional model that integrates educator dispositions, relational classroom practices, and systemic conditions around a central hub of equity and justice (Smigielski, 2025). The framework's principal contribution is to specify how the normative figures of the able teacher and the able learner are constructed by intersecting systems of ableism, racism, and accountability politics, and how both can be reimagined when equity and justice operate as the lens through which inclusive teaching is defined, prepared for, and resourced (Annamma et al., 2013; Artiles, 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2015). Grounded in the transnational intersectional tradition of Crenshaw (1989), González (2024), and Viveros Vigoya (2023), the framework is offered as a contribution to a transnational Améfrica Ladina dialogue rather than as a Global North export. Inclusive education, on this account, is neither integration, accommodation, nor compliance; it is the structural transformation of educational environments, policies, and practices so that all students, particularly those historically excluded, can access, participate, and achieve under genuinely equitable conditions.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data availability statement

The qualitative data supporting the findings of this study (interview transcripts, classroom observation field notes, and reflective writing tasks) are not publicly available due to participant confidentiality protections required by the Institutional Review Board approval. De-identified excerpts and analytical memos are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical review.

Ethical implications

This study was conducted with the approval of the University at Buffalo Institutional Review Board (STUDY00008869). All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection, and participant confidentiality has been protected through the use of pseudonyms and de-identification.

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