“Why Did Devon Just Leave the Classroom?”: Disability Studies in Education-Informed Related Service Provision

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Abstract
Public schools often schedule related services through the use of pull-out and push-in instruction. This model poses challenges. The transitions to and from services are obvious to other students and can influence student identities and students may lose academic instructional time when they receive services. Using a Disability Studies in Education (DSE)/Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) informed approach, this article shares inclusive methods for organizing related service provision that strengthen student identities as individuals with disabilities in the teacher education classroom. By focusing on how our previous teaching and research experiences inform the pedagogical design in our teacher education courses, we seek to open the door for future research on how related services are constructed and enacted in public schools that are working towards more inclusive pedagogy and practice. In this article, the authors rethink teacher education curriculum as a site for helping beginning educators understand the array of service delivery models and for addressing ways to conceptualize how related services are offered to students in PreK-12 schools across all classroom settings.

Keywords
related services, inclusion, push-in services, pull-out services, inclusive schooling, Disability Studies in Education, DisCrit

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As a beginning classroom teacher, I (Laurie) had not spent much time considering the role of related services for my students receiving special education programs and services. Related services are additional supports, such as counseling, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy (OT) and physical therapy (PT), which a young person may receive as part of their individualized education program (IEP) to access their least restrictive schooling environment (LRE). It was not until the end of my first year teaching during a read aloud on a late, sweaty June afternoon that I realized how aware my fourth graders were of who was leaving the classroom for related services throughout the day.

As I read aloud in my newly perfected teacher voice, I was interrupted by the entrance of Ms. Rice who had come to collect Devon for his speech and language services session. As Devon nodded to Ms. Rice who stood in the doorway with a friendly smile, he slowly dragged his feet as he walked across the multi-colored rug. The rest of the class turned in his direction and watched his path before returning their eyes to the text. Proud that my students were engaged with our reading, I began once again. But then came the question I was not sure how to answer. “Why did Devon just leave the classroom with that blond-haired lady?” Andre blurted out from just below my feet.

Andre, leaning in a bit closer and whispered, “Is it because Devon is bad at reading?” Not only did Andre notice Devon leaving, but he also immediately assumed a deficit perspective as to why Devon left. Devon had an Autistic Spectrum Disorder classification and worked with several related services providers. Belying Andre’s assumption, academically, Devon was in fact one of the highest performing students in the class.

As a beginning educator who had only experienced bits and pieces of inclusive schooling in my own educational trajectory, I quickly puzzled over how to address Andre’s assumption. I responded, “The speech teacher is like the school basketball coach.” I said, “She provides some students with exercises to practice getting better at new skills. While the coach supports you all with dribbling and passing the ball, Ms. Rice provides an opportunity for Devon to practice his use of communication skills.” That answer seemed to satisfy Andre and the rest of the class.

This short vignette from Laurie's early days of classroom teaching continues to resonate in the current landscape of special education programs and services which aims to provide students instruction in their least restrictive environment. Through Laurie’s conversation with Andre that afternoon she realized that it was only because Andre and Devon shared a classroom space that this critical incident occurred. What she was coming up against as a beginning educator is demonstrated in the research, removing students for related services may sometimes be necessary to provide special education services but is not always socially beneficial to the young person (Flecky et al., 2019).

A further complication was the demographic make-up of Laurie’s school and classroom which reflected the larger school population, composed predominantly of Latine and Black students. In that moment Laurie was vividly aware of how Andre’s comment highlighted the distinctions between the racial make-up of the white teaching staff and the students in the classroom. Writing today, we realize that Andre’s question addresses the ways race and ability are often intertwined in how students are classified and sorted via their special education programs and services (Annamma et al., 2016).

According to National Center Education Statistics (NCES) data (2022) the percentage of disabled students who spend more than 80% of their day in general education has trended upwards since 2009. As of 2020, 66% of students who receive special education programs and services spend 80% or more of their school day inside a general education classroom. This shows that as schools move towards providing special education programs and services in more inclusive educational spaces, it is necessary
to consider related services and the places where these services may be delivered. Put another way, as more students receive special education programs and services in their general education classroom setting, related services appear to remain a legitimized reason for removing a student from a general education classroom during a student’s instructional day.

By focusing on how our previous teaching and research experiences inform the pedagogical design in our teacher education courses, we seek to open the door for future research on how related services are constructed and enacted in public schools that are working towards more inclusive pedagogy and practice. In this article we share how both authors are rethinking teacher education curriculum as a potential site for helping beginning educators understand the array of service delivery models and to address ways to conceptualize how related services are offered to students in PreK-12 schools across all classroom settings. We begin by sharing some theoretical frameworks that guide how we come to understand different service delivery models and how they inform the curriculum we develop in our teacher education courses.

A Disability Studies in Education Approach

In this article we use Disability Studies in Education (DSE) as a theoretical framework to show that there are various models for conceptualizing and understanding disability. A DSE approach acknowledges the plurality of disabled experiences and rejects the medical model of disability which treats impairment as a problem located within a person (Valle & Connor, 2019). Scholars who use the DSE framework often consider the environment as the disabling factor, which is referred to as the social model. From this perspective, it is the inaccessibility of the built environment that constructs a disabling experience. Furthermore, there are some disabled people who experience their impairment as a source of joy, a part of their identity and not a problem or deficit that should be remediated or fixed (Wong, 2022). Still, there are lived material realities that come along with identifying as disabled or having an impairment (Siebers, 2008). Recent research pushes the DSE framework further to account for richer intersectional analysis, regarding how other identities such as race (c.f. DisCrit eds. Annamma et al., 2022) gender and socioeconomics also impact how a person who identifies as disabled interacts with their built environment.

Disproportionality: Racism and Ableism

Research on disproportionality in special education is a well-established body of scholarly work that demonstrates Black and other non-dominant groups, predominantly young men, are overrepresented in special education programs and services (Artiles et al., 2010; Blanchett et al., 2009; Dunn, 1968; Kramarczuk-Voulgarides et al., 2017; Reid & Knight 2006). Research demonstrates that many Black and other non-dominant young people remain enrolled in some version of a restricted educational program which may include related service provision for at least a portion of their educational career (Annamma, 2018; Artiles et al., 2010; Blanchett, Klinger and Harry, 2009; Erevelles, 2014). DisCrit scholars argue that racism is always ableist and ableism is always inherently racist (Annamma et al., 2016). This mutual dependency of race and ability is an assumption of how disproportionality is understood in this article. The history in the United States context, one that is fraught with racist tensions and ideologies, rooted in the history of slavery, is coded today in how ability is conceptualized along with race (and other identity categories) in the educational landscape and our larger society.
Recent NCES reporting data shows how disproportionality persists in the provision of special education services in the U.S. During the 2019-2020 school year, 72% of students who identify as Black and disabled graduated with a regular high school diploma while students who identify as white and disabled graduate with a regular diploma at a rate of 79% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). This data suggests that Black students with disabilities are less likely to graduate from high school with a diploma that they can use to apply to college. We share this information about disproportionality and the DisCrit framework as backdrop to consider how sometimes it is through how service delivery models are constructed that exclusionary practices are enacted which may be ableist and racist. Helping beginning educators rethink how related services are provided is one way to address the (sometimes) double segregation that youth of color may experience during the PreK - 12 schooling years (Collins, et. al, 2016). Research shows that when disabled youth are educated with their nondisabled individuals in the least restrictive environment (LRE) all students benefit (Allan, 1999; Bogdan and Kugelman, 1984; Hehir et al., 2016, Leinhardt and Pallay, 1982). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) legislation provides two guiding principles for how the LRE concept should be employed by members of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team.

First, IDEA states that children with disabilities must receive their education in the general education classroom to the “maximum extent that is appropriate” (IDEA, 2004). Second, IDEA states that removal from the general education environment into special classes or separate schools should only occur if the child’s disability requires a specific program or service that cannot be provided in the general education environment.

This description of LRE from IDEA leaves to the members of the IEP team the interpretation of what is determined to be “appropriate” and which services needed by the student can or cannot be offered within the general education environment. Related service provision is sometimes used as a rationale for removing a child from their LRE in order to provide direct service. As we discussed above, this removal has implications for students who identify as Black/non-white and disabled. While progress has been made towards offering students more inclusive schooling environments, the use of DSE/DisCrit framing in research on related services and service delivery models is needed to help beginning educators conceptualize how related services might work to support inclusion in their classroom and schooling spaces. In the next section, we will explore the current research on inclusive related service provision.

Current Models of Related Service Provision

Related service is defined as supports such as, speech and language therapy (SLP), occupational therapy (OT), physical therapy (PT) and counseling which a young person who is classified with a disability may receive as part of their individualized education plan. Public schools in the United States often schedule related services through the use of pull-out and push-in instruction. This means the student receiving services is either removed from the classroom to another smaller location (pull-out) or stays in the classroom and a related service provider delivers instruction in the classroom (push-in). Related service providers and special educators refer to these as different service delivery models (Cline & Frederickson, 2013).

There is a limited amount of research which demonstrates which service delivery models (e.g., pull-out or push-in) are often the most beneficial for youth with disabilities (Flecky et al., 2019). Much
research about related services and their perceived effectiveness are heavily aligned with more traditional conceptions of special education as a medical intervention designed to fix a perceived lack or issue within the child (Forness, 2001). Flecky et al. (2019) citing Adair et al. (2015) discuss the limited research which focuses on more inclusive service delivery models which also emphasize participation with similar age non-disabled peers (p. 2). Flecky et al. (2019, citing Anaby et al., 2014) build an argument for the push-in service delivery model as it allows for the delivery of services in the young person’s primary schooling environment which can lead to the adaptation of certain services. This means a strategy which traditionally was taught or used with a student in a small group or 1:1 setting is now used in the child’s daily classroom. In this type of service delivery, the classroom teacher participates or is observing the strategies the related service provider is working on with the student. This helps the classroom teacher determine how certain aspects of the related service provision can be incorporated into the day-to-day classroom instruction for that student (and other students as well). As a result there are also more opportunities for service providers to help young people make connections between the direct service and how it translates to their day-to-day world. This improves student’s overall well-being and meaningful participation in the class and wider school community (Flecky et al., pp. 2-3).

Cline & Frederickson (2013) explore different service models in England, Scotland and Singapore noting that the Western approaches (England, Scotland) focus on individualism and independence as well as how Rights/legal frameworks influence the conceptualization and delivery of related service provision in those countries. This is similar to how related services are conceived in the US through IDEA legislation which is a Rights based framework. In addition to an emphasis on legal compliance and individualism, Giangreco et al. (2010) writes about the blurry lines between the role of a related service provider who acts as both direct service provider and special educator. The tension Giangreco et al. point out about the different roles related service providers take on in school settings is an important dimension to how different service delivery models are constructed in school. There is a lack of consistent personnel; often a public school district contracts with related service providers per area of delivery (e.g., SLP, OT, PT) who work across a few different school sites (Flecky et al., 2019). This is a major tension for how schools fund related services and serves as a barrier to capacity/relationship building between related service providers and school faculty/staff.

**Related Services as Contingent on Time, Place and Space**

Typically, in US public schools, related services are offered during the school day and overlap with instructional time, meaning a young person is either removed from the classroom to receive their service or the service is offered in the classroom during instructional time. A young person’s service delivery model is determined by the Individualized education plan (IEP) team at the annual or triennial review. Per IDEA, related services are written on the IEP in terms of frequency and duration (e.g., Student B will receive speech and language therapy three times a week for twenty minutes per session). There is variation as to whether the IEP team determines the service delivery model; this means the IEP team may or may not select where the related services provision occurs. Sometimes based on assessment data the IEP team may suggest that a student receive a related service in a small group setting or quiet setting. This choice is often rationalized by contending that a small group or quiet setting allows the related services provider opportunities to give more direct and intensive support. Still, this does not indicate that the small group or quiet setting necessarily needs to be located outside of that child’s daily
classroom environment. Yet, traditionally, a related services provider does interpret small group instruction or quiet setting as a location outside of a given child’s daily learning environment.

In this way, service delivery models pose several challenges for educators. For instance, the transitions to and from related services are obvious to other students (as shared in the opening vignette) and students may lose academic instructional time when they receive services outside of the classroom environment. This also (intentionally or not) reinforces the idea that a related service is an additional support being offered to fix or remediate a student instead of as a service to help that student access their instructional content and day-to-day world. Pull-out instruction also means the child is spending at least a portion of their day in a more restrictive environment, although the IEP team may determine this is necessary to provide the student with related services support. Determining which service delivery model (e.g., push-in or pull-out) presents another tension when thinking about how related services are conceptualized as part of a young person’s individualized education plan and the resulting special education programs and services the young person is entitled to.

In 1997 a conceptualization of special education as a “service and not a place” was put forth by Dorothy Kerzner Lipsky and Alan Gartner. This encouraged special educators and IEP team members to reconsider service delivery models. Focusing on the service instead of where the service is delivered (e.g., the resource room) has gained traction in the traditional special education research base as well as amongst inclusive education scholars. Moving away from place-based service delivery has challenged educators and researchers to expand their understanding of how and where special education services are delivered.

An added complexity to these conversations is the ideological shifts occurring within the field of special education in the last 20 years (Valle & Connor, 2019). Nevins et al. (2008) shared that related service provision has not experienced a similar shift in paradigms and remains fairly entrenched in the medical model of understanding disability as a fixed trait existing within a person that must be cured. DSE is helpful as a framework to understanding special education as a set of activities that are used to help students access the general education curriculum and/or the curriculum in their least restrictive environment (LRE). Part of how related services are often conceived and constructed in public schools is because of these paradigms or models of understanding disability and/or impairment. Many related service providers learn their skills in an environment that emphasizes a medical model where the therapy they offer (SLP, OT, PT and/or counseling) is conceived as fixing or addressing a problem a within a person (Flecky et al., 2019). This medicalized framing contributes to how a related service provider may emphasize remediation or individualized instruction during an IEP meeting while an inclusive educator might emphasize removal of barriers and accessible instruction. This means that IEP team members may be influenced by their differing understandings of disability when creating a student’s IEP document.

Alternate models of related services delivery do exist, but these re-conceptualizations are rarely located in public schooling spaces. Instead, it is often private or independent schools for youth identified as disabled which have taken a more integrated approach to service delivery models (Newhouse, 2020). As an example, at the independent school for students with low-incidence disability where Katie collected dissertation data, all related service providers were located within the school building. Most services (SLP, OT and PT) occurred within the classroom setting (push-in) with some related service providers co-teaching with the special education teacher in the classroom. This innovation is important and worthy of continued study because it offers a productive tension from a DSE orientation. The segregated nature of private and independent schools for disabled students and the different structures by which related services are funded in public and independent schools impacts a public
schools’ ability to explore alternative models of service delivery.

This literature has helped us to understand the need for the development of a teacher education course which frames the different models of service delivery from a DSE/DisCrit orientation. Below we share course activities that we have developed which work to support pre-service education in imagining a form of inclusive related service provision for their future school communities.

**Coursework that Infuses DSE-Informed Thinking About Related Services**

In our courses designed to support undergraduate and graduate students in becoming elementary school special education and general education teachers using inclusive practices, we want beginning educators to come away with the capability to use DSE-informed thinking to integrate the work of related services providers into their classrooms. The purpose of the activities that we designed is to identify and resist possible deficit/medicalized assumptions related to service provision. We also aim to provide beginning teachers with ideas for service delivery that explore pull-out/push-in approaches and move beyond that binary model.

**Activity 1: Making Related Services More Transparent**

To help students learn about service provider work, including what it looks like, what happens while services are provided and how providers consider culturally sustaining practices in their work, we ask our emerging educators to interview an in-service related service provider. Alternatively, we have also invited related service providers to visit our classes and share about their work in the form of a presentation or panel discussion. In recent semesters, we have used the interests of our students to choose which related service providers to invite into the higher education setting. For instance, Laurie has been working with undergraduate students who have not yet declared their majors and are often both interested in social work and education. So, she has invited school social workers into her undergraduate classroom.

After the teacher candidates complete their interviews (or attend the panel/presentation facilitated by a service provider), we ask them to share what they learned with a small group of their peers and develop ideas for how this information could be introduced to their classroom students. We encourage the emerging educators to include a plan for how the related service provider will be a part of this instructional moment. It is essential for our teacher candidates to think about how they may teach their own students what related service providers do to foster classrooms where attending related services is understood by all students. As they lesson plan, we ask our students to consider the following set of question:

- **What is the grade level and student population of your class?**
- **When during the day and academic year will this meeting be held?**
- **What goals do you have for the class meeting?**
- **What role will the related service provider play in facilitating the class meeting?**
- **What role will the classroom teacher(s) play in facilitating the class meeting?**
- **How will students get to know the related service provider? What activities will take place?**
- **How will students get to know what the role of the related service provider is in the school?**

After planning their class meetings, groups post their plans on large sheets of paper and we compare
and contrast ideas across grade levels, student populations and which related service provider engaged in the work. What we like about the class meeting planning is that it feels manageable to teachers at any grade level. Building on this interview activity, one extension is inviting emerging educators to craft a co-taught lesson with a related service provider. In the past, students have done this by planning elementary school literacy stations and assigning one station for the speech and language provider to facilitate. Another example came from a middle school science teacher who invited the OT provider to co-teach a lesson related to the accessible set-up of the science notebook. This included attention to supporting students who are developing their working memory capacity.

**Activity 2: Shifting Classroom Schedules to Incorporate Related Services**

Another way in which we support newer educators in shifting their relationship with related services is by having them reconsider the design of classroom schedules. Arguably, elementary educators may have more flexibility to design their own schedules, while at the middle and high school levels, schedule shifts might need to be a more coordinated effort across the entire school environment. We argue an awareness around the scheduling of related services should be explored by all classroom teachers at any grade level so that they can advocate for scheduling that minimizes loss of instructional time, destigmatizes related service provision and maintains the integrity of the work of the related service providers.

Before the class session, we ask student teachers to work with their cooperating teacher to identify some common challenges and successes that arise from students transitioning in and out of the classroom to receive support services. They discuss the classroom schedule with their cooperating teacher to identify the times of day students receive related services and if it is pull-out/push-in or another model. This discussion with their cooperating teacher also includes determining the demographic profile (e.g., race, gender, home language and socioeconomic status) of the students who currently receive related services. All students bring their school schedules and meeting notes from the discussion with their cooperating teacher to our next class session. By asking the emerging teachers to do this research, we start the work of activating their thinking about the role that related services and scheduling.

During the course session, we split them into groups by grade level band (elementary, middle and high school) to discuss their research and create a list of common issues and questions. We explicitly ask them to reflect on the following questions: How do you think students feel when they attend related services in your school? Why do you think they might feel differently in each institution? What role does the schedule play? Using the demographics you collected, what patterns do you notice about the identities of students who receive related services?

Finally, groups are challenged to redesign the schedule to address the issues that they have raised. If they are comfortable, student teachers are invited to share their new scheduling ideas with their cooperating teachers and ask for feedback.

In instances where access to a classroom and classroom teacher have not been possible, we have also done this activity by providing students with a case study of a classroom, two profile students and a classroom schedule. The two profiles students specifically center intersectional student identities often found in schools. One case study student is a Puerto Rican female with a speech and language classification who receives English Language services and the other is an African American male who is classified as emotionally disabled with a history of school suspensions. After reviewing the case study,
the emerging teachers are encouraged to role play the positions of the various adult stakeholders in order to design a plan for related service provision that highlights the student strengths and interests and optimizes their inclusion in the general education classroom. The directions for this task can be found in Figure 1.

Figure 1.  
*Example Task Directions for Activity 2*

- Arrange into groups of 5.
- Review the sample fourth grade class schedule, classroom profile, and two student profiles.
  - Student One is a profile of a Puerto Rican, female with a Speech and Language classification who receives English Language instruction.
  - Student Two is a profile of an African American, male who has been classified with an Emotional Disability and receives resource room services for reading.
- Assume the following roles.
  - Speech Teacher
  - EnL Teacher
  - General Education teacher
  - Special Education Classroom Teacher
  - Special Education Resource Room Teacher
- Pretend it is the beginning of the school year and you are developing a schedule for the first trimester.
- Come up with a plan for when the Special Education Resource Room Teacher, EnL teacher and Speech Teacher should work with each student.
- Come up for a plan for whether services should be provided in the classroom setting or in a separate setting.
- Write the plan on the schedule.
- Be ready to share your rationale for each decision with the class and discuss your process.

We have found that this activity makes visible inclusive pedagogical decision-making related to service delivery models. For instance, emerging educators have shared that before this activity they had not thought about how missing the first twenty minutes of a reading lesson where teacher demonstration typically takes place may have a more significant impact on a student’s inclusion in the general education classroom than missing the last twenty minutes. Similarly, from listening to the decisions that other teams made in scheduling, groups have recognized that missing arts and music instruction for related services can have a deleterious effect on some learners by making school a less desirable learning environment.

**Orienting Emerging Educators to a DSE Framing of Related Services**

In reflecting on how these activities have informed the thinking of the emerging educators with whom we work, two key takeaways surfaced. First, we have found that through these activities, emerging
educators often mentor one another in rethinking their orientation to related services. As college classrooms are seeing an influx of students with disabilities, we have found that emerging educators with disabilities use these activities to share their past experiences such as leaving the classroom to work with a speech pathologist. These personal narratives have served an important role in shifting the thinking of other emerging educators who have not had personal experiences with related service provision. For example, we have had a student share how she had mixed emotions working with a reading specialist as a child. While she liked the teacher and the learning, she also felt ashamed to leave the general education classroom and often came back to class confused about what she had missed. Another student shared that his separated special education instruction made him internalize feelings of inferiority and also resent his special education peers. By sharing these stories, emerging teachers who had received related services in K-12 schooling serve as important members of the classroom; their narratives disrupt traditional assumptions that ground related service provision as a segregated place for necessary remediation.

Despite the benefits of creating space to use a DSE-orientation to challenge traditional assumptions about related services, we have found that having an understanding of the orientation does not always lead to action. When Laurie first did this work with undergraduate students, she found that they were not able to invent creative ways to do related services. This showed students were understanding different paradigms but having difficulty applying them to practice. When presented with a case study student (see Activity 2), some students resorted to crafting a hypothetical schedule for this student that centered segregated schooling environments.

In order to encourage them to reorient how they approached the work, Laurie had to ban the use of segregated environments in their planning. Only when that option was taken off the table, were the emerging teachers able to come up with new ideas. This teaching example suggests that the pervasive ideologies about disability from one’s own schooling are deeply ingrained; repeated opportunities to reorient thinking about related service provision is likely necessary to counteract what emerging educators know from their own K-12 schooling.

A DSE approach with the lens of DisCrit is necessary to show how systems of providing support and services for students classified with disabilities easily guides emerging educators to take up medicalized models of disability. In debriefing Activity 2, students have been able to highlight how pull-out services for Student One may result in significant portions of her school day outside of the environment with her general education peers. Students have also argued for putting Student Two into a self-contained classroom. This activity has allowed us to build on student responses to take a DisCrit-informed approach. Follow-up conversations from the activity have allowed the class to analyze Student Two as not only a student with a disability classification, but also an African American male.

Avenues for Future Research

Our intention of beginning with Devon is a way to show how thinking about disability, race and related services reverberate throughout our careers. By drawing from our own lived experiences as classroom teachers, researchers and now teacher educators, our aim is to help emerging teachers apply the DSE framework and DisCrit tenets when determining how related service delivery supports the sustainability of accessible and capacity-oriented classroom environment. By using these specific activities, emerging teachers may address change through conducting their own research and then applying this research to direct action, such as shifting a schedule or co-teaching a lesson with a related
service provider. Further research into how emerging teachers come to understand and then apply a DSE/DisCrit-informed approach to related service provision is needed as well as how they sustain those approaches in K-12 school settings.

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