THE NECESSITY FOR DISABILITY IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

Honors Thesis

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Table of Contents

Abstract

Although over a quarter of the United States population has one or more disabilities, past studies and reviews of the social work curriculum indicate that students do not receive a well-rounded education on the topic. Building upon previous studies, this research study aimed to further understand social workers' education around disability in their social work programs. Social work students and graduates (N=78) completed an anonymous online survey exploring this topic. Social workers strongly believe that this is an important topic for social work education. While most learned about mental health disabilities, fewer than half reported learning about other types of disabilities (e.g., cognitive/intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, hearing disabilities, visual impairments, invisible disabilities). Only one-third believed they had learned how to recognize ableism in practice. These findings suggest that while some programs include substantial disability content, other programs have substantial work to do in this area.

Implications from this study urge social work programs to enhance visibility about disability in both the curriculum and the community. Most social work students understand the importance of disability education and wish it was covered more in the classrooms. The voices of disabled students indicate that disability is something that warrants more presence and celebration in social work programs. Another important implication is that the level of disability education a social work student receives is dependent on the program they attend, so disability is a topic that is being covered in some courses and programs. This demonstrates the need for consistency amongst accredited social work programs to ensure students are equally prepared to work with disabled clients.

Acknowledgements

For anyone that has had the pleasure of having an honors student in their life, you inevitably know about the dreaded thesis project. Now that I am completing this project, I am not going to act like it was all rainbows and sugarplums. This was the hardest thing I have ever done. It left me questioning several times; *why am I doing this?*

Since the moment I arrived at Salem State, there have been professors that have inspired my growth as a student, social worker, and human being. Dr. Lamont Simmons was my first professor at Salem State University, back when I wasn't in the honors program. From that first day of class up to my last day of senior year, Dr. Simmons instilled a passion for social work and lifelong learning in me. From the bottom of my heart, thank you, Dr. Simmons.

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Last, but not least, my family. My big, dysfunctional, beautiful family. You are the reason I am the woman I am today. You have shown me unconditional love and taught me resilience. Mom, you are my best friend and my hero. Mark, thank you for always believing in

me. Kevin, you are my number one always. Sara, Rachel, Jory, and Heath, you are the best support system I know. Thank you all.

Keith Michael Jarvis, my oldest brother, and the reason this project exists. Keith was born on September 11, 1987, and passed away on June 30th, 2010. He had cerebral palsy, was in a wheelchair, nonverbal, and needed a lot of care. A lot of people would hear that and think of his disability as a tragedy. My family would immediately beg to differ. Further, if you had the honor of meeting Keith, you would know that although his life was not always easy, it was beautiful. His smile could light up a football stadium, and he truly touched the lives of many. There are so many barriers for the disability community, and a lot of people forget to see the happiness and beauty that accompanies disability. Keith, I will always remember. I love you. Thank you.

Over a quarter of the United States has one or more disabilities. The Americans with Disabilities Act describes disability as “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment” (1990). There are many types of disabilities pertaining to physical health, mental health, cognition, vision, hearing, or motor skills (Slayter et al., 2023). Societal narratives of disability typically define disability as a tragedy, which assumes that those with disabilities might lack the capability, self-determination, and worth due to their disability (Coriale, 2012). As a result, disabled individuals often experience discrimination and stigma due to their disability and lack of recognition and understanding of disability. Disability advocacy groups including the American Association of Peoples with Disabilities (AAPD), The Arc, and the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) advocate for a more holistic understanding of disability, including disability culture, and a shift from defining disability as solely a medical problem that should be cured.

Many, if not all, practicing social workers will work with disabled clients. Social workers must understand disability culture, the language around disability, and the diversity and richness of the disability community. Previous research on social work education has found that social workers' attitudes toward disabled people and clients derive from their own socialization, societal contexts, and systems (Goulden, 2020). For example, when using the Social Work Attitudes Towards Disability Scale (SWABS) to research attitudes toward disability, it demonstrated that previous work with disabled people or personal affiliation produced positive correlations (Goulden, 2020).

Unfortunately, many schools of social work do not include substantial content on disability, disability culture, or competent work with disabled clients (Kim & Sellimaier, 2020). The absence of disability content in the core social work curriculum means that social work students graduate without this core knowledge and many social workers practice with a lack of knowledge about working with disabled clients (Moyle, 2016). Recently, accreditation standards and new frameworks have offered motivation and strategies to incorporate this essential disability content into social work curriculums (Kim & Sellmaier, 2020). This research study explores whether social work students are now learning the breadth and depth of disability content needed to prepare them to engage with disabled clients in a way that honors the values of the social work profession.

Literature Review

Defining Disability

What is disability? This might seem like a simple question, but the possibility and range of answers uncovers its complexity. A commonly used definition is found in the Americans with Disabilities Act [ADA], which describes disability as “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment” (1990 42 U.S.C. § 12101 et seq.). These conditions can include any impairments pertaining to physical health, mental health, cognition, vision, hearing, or motor skills. Examples of such conditions include cerebral palsy, blindness, autism, down syndrome, or chronic illness.

When assessing the definition of disability, it is necessary to recognize who is defining it and why. Berger & Wilbers (2021) explained that context often defines disability with prerequisites that determine and grant the status of disability (Berger & Wilbers, 2021). Due to the capitalist nature of cutting costs, receiving a diagnosis of disability can be a challenging task when attempting to receive assistance. Disabled individuals often find themselves fighting to prove they are “disabled enough” to qualify for services, often to professionals that are not disabled themselves (Berger & Wilbers, 2021). There is a long history in the United States of using a capitalist perspective to define disability. For example, prior to the passing of the American with Disabilities Act in 1990, a prominent definition of disability in the United States focused on the ability to perform labor and contribute to the functioning of society (Nielson, 2013). For those that could not work, disability would often be attributed as a barrier to progress. The Americans with Disabilities Act broadened our definition of disability past the ability to effectively perform labor.

There are several ways in which society defines disability. The definition used changes the meaning and experience of disability. The ADA definition provides one definition, which is that disability includes a type of condition or impairment that impacts one's functioning. However, other definitions aim to recognize disability as holistic, with the culture and experiences being included with the identity. Further, there are definitions that frame disability as a tragedy and feed into the negative attitudes toward disabled individuals. Disability theories help comprehend how these differing definitions came to be and what they mean for the disability community.

Disability Theories

Theories are a vital tool to use to understand human behaviors, processes, and experiences. There are several theories that can be applied and would be useful for emerging workers to comprehend disability and use them in practice with disabled clients. Some of these theories include the social constructionist perspective and the models of disability.

Social Constructionist Perspective

The social constructionist perspective highlights that people develop a sense of themselves and the social world through interactions (Hutchison, 2017). The social constructionist perspective posits that our reality, including our understanding of disability, is created by our social interactions with the world around us. Social constructs stem from this. Social constructs are the ideas and practices that have been both created and believed to be true by society (Slayter et al., 2023). One example of a social construct formed around disability is the misconception that being disabled makes one less worthy or capable of performing the same tasks as able-bodied people. This perspective poses some crucial questions about disability: Are there certain aspects of it socially constructed? Is disability itself a social construct? The medical and social models of disability aid in answering these.

Models

Much like theory, social workers adopt and apply models in social work practice. Further, models assist in understanding human behavior which can determine helpful services to best suit needs. Models act as a transition from understanding theories as abstract to applying them to real-world situations (Huda, 2021). Models are based on theories and are used to justify utilization in practice. Because there is an enormous scope of practice models that emerge, it is up to the practitioner to apply the best fit for the client/client system, and this decision heavily impacts the client's experience. When it comes to the identity of disability, there are two primary models used - the medical and social models (Slayter et al., 2023).

The medical model identifies a person’s disease, illness, injury, or condition and aims to correct it (Huda, 2021). The medical model is one that Western society has generally adopted and applied to disability. An assumption from this model is that disabilities are something that should be aimed to be “corrected” or “cured” so individuals can function in a world that presents significant barriers for disabled people. It aims to improve the person's life by making their condition an identifiable problem that can be solved. It fails to recognize the psychosocial aspects that come with the disability identity (Muyor-Rodriguez, et. al, 2019). A notable aspect of this model is that it embodies the ‘disability as a tragedy’ perspective, which sees disability as something that should be responded to with pity as it is a negative attribute (Coriale, 2012). This model often fails to empower and show dignity to those with disabilities by disregarding their humanity. Muyor-Rodriguez, et. al. (2019) explained, “With attention exclusively aimed at the body, no substantial change will occur in the recognition of the community’s civil, political, and social rights, nor in their condition of non-citizens" (pp. 843).

The social model is the second model that is commonly used to understand disability. This model moves the focus from the individual’s condition(s) and shifts it to society instead (Owens, 2015). Meaning, the social model describes disability as a product of how society functions, not the condition itself. Using social constructionist theory, this model emphasizes the notion that disability is a social construct and therefore, the world's inaccessibility and ableism are what makes one disabled. In the disabled community, the social model is viewed as positive, as it emphasizes the importance of society's responsibility to enhance rights, accessibility, and equality versus focusing on disability as a deficit or a problem. However, there are also important critiques of this model (Slayter et al., 2023). An individual’s experience of disability can include a combination of both models. A condition can be disabling due to both societal factors and the condition itself (Owens, 2015). The social model assumes that if society supported the disabled community with resources, accessibility, and respect, the disability would no longer exist. This is simply not true. Overall, the social model is one that is embraced, celebrated, and typically preferred by the disabled community; however, its limitations cannot be ignored (Slayter et al., 2023).

Disability Culture

Culture describes the customs, values, symbols, beliefs, and way of life groups and individuals possess (Riddell & Watson, 2014). Disability culture is the shared customs, values, symbols, and beliefs of disabled individuals (Slayter et al., 2023). Disability pride is a component of the cultural aspect of disability, and it describes the unapologetic ownership and connectedness with the identity (Mattlin, 2023). Not everyone in the disabled community has or exhibits disability pride because, not everyone identifies with the culture. For those that do, the importance of disability pride and how it influences disability culture and identity must be considered. Through engaging with disability culture, disabled individuals can form positive connections with their identity, other disabled individuals, and the art, poetry, and language created by the community (Slayter et al., 2023). Not all disabled people share disability culture or identify with the label of disabled (Riddell & Watson, 2014). Disability culture cannot be generally applied to the disabled identity because it is not a homogenous lived experience.

One example of a topic in the disability community where there are strong differing opinions is the use of person-first language. Person-first language places the person/persons before the disability they possess (Gernsbacher, 2017). A prime example of this is within the title of “The Americans with Disabilities Act”. This contrasts with identify-first language, which places one’s identity first as a way of recognizing its presence. Other examples of this could include the difference between calling someone a gay man versus a man who is gay, a Black woman versus a woman who is Black. Using identity-first language, this would be called “The Disabled Americans Act”.

Famous disabled advocate and writer Ben Mattlin (2023) wrote about the differing preferences of disabled individuals. He explained that there are disabled people who do not want anyone to mention their disability first when describing them, or even at all. On the other hand, disabled people like himself take pride in their identity and prefer for the disability to not only be recognized but placed first when describing them. For instance, Ben would introduce himself as a disabled person, while others would say they are a person with a disability or, a person who uses a wheelchair. Much like the other aspects of disability culture, this is not universally applicable and disabled people have differing perspectives on person-first language (Mattlin, 2023).

Ableism

Ableism is the mistreatment, discrimination, and oppression of those with disabilities (Bogart, 2019). Ableism impacts the disabled community daily. Throughout the history of disability in the United States of America, ableism has always been present. This is demonstrated in policies, institutions, and attitudes that do and did not allow the disabled community access to self-determination and opportunities in the way able-bodied individuals do (Slayter et al., 2023). Despite the fact that disability has always existed, multiple aspects of the identity have been socially constructed. Similar to the application of the medical and social models that frame disability in two different ways, certain groups made their own definitions of what disability meant. Before Europeans came to America, Indigenous communities had their own notions about disabilities. Upon European settlement and the creation of the United States, ableism was built into the systems the country still abides by today (Nielson, 2013).

Although laws protect the disabled population from certain forms of discrimination, such as in the workplace, modern ableism is alive and well. Firstly, inaccessible infrastructure and the lack of accommodations for the disabled population is still a barrier the community faces. Negative attitudes toward those with disabilities are present, and several non-disabled people are uncomfortable interacting with people with disabilities (Berger & Wilbers, 2021). These attitudes typically derive from a concept called “well-meaning ableism,” which stems from pity and the disability as a tragedy framework (Conley & Nadler, 2022). This presents in excluding disabled people from activities on the assumption that they cannot do the same things able-bodied people can. In other words, modern ableism is the assumption that disabled people are not equal and do not have the capacity to perform the same tasks abled people can, which is a dangerous misconception (Conley & Nadler, 2022). Ableism is something that impacts a population that is oppressed in society, which calls for the social work profession to advocate and serve this group.

Disability & Social Work

As a group that faces oppression in the United States, it is social workers responsibility per the *Code of Ethics* to receive knowledge to better understand and serve this population (NASW, 2021). The *National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics* outlines the responsibilities of those in the social work profession. Three values in particular stand out when discussing ableism and its relevance in social work education. Firstly, the principle of social justice states that social workers must strive to empower oppressed individuals and groups of people and aim to ensure access to equality of opportunity, services, and resources (NASW, 2021). Secondly, competence describes the continuous effort to increase professional knowledge to enhance practice (NASW, 2021). Further, the dignity and worth of a person explains that social workers must be mindful of individual needs, capacity, opportunity to change, and ways to address needs. Without the recognition of how disabled people have been treated and continue to be treated in society by the social work profession, the *Code of Ethics* is being violated.

The presence of disability content is so important because of the inevitability of social workers interacting with disabled clients. Over one fourth of the United States population is disabled, and this identity is only one that makes up a person, as human beings are intersectional (Slayter et al., 2023). Meaning, this identity is one that spans across several demographics, including groups that are already facing marginalization and oppression. To ensure clients are recognized and appreciated for all they are, each identity must be considered and understood by social workers.

In a content analysis of disability-specific content in social work programs, Bean & Kreck (2012) examined 1,620 course titles and 25 descriptions from schools in the United States. It found that BSW programs had a small number of disability-related courses, for instance, only 2 of 176 BSW course descriptions mentioned disability (Bean & Kreck, 2012). As for the MSW program, out of 1,444 courses, only 85 mentioned disabilities in course descriptions (Bean & Kreck, 2012). Although the visibility of disability in social work has increased since the Council of Social Work Education accreditation standards mandated disability to be included in the curriculum back in 2001 & 2008 (Bean & Kreck, 2012), review of the curriculum demonstrate that there are still gaps.

Experience of Disabled Students

The discussion of social work and disability should lift the voices of disabled individuals because they are the experts of the lived experience. In the field of social work, we must create space for disabled individuals to lead, learn, and grow (Slayter et al., 2022). Disabled people have perspectives and strengths that contribute heavily to our society. They are leaders, students, educators, friends, and family. It is a grave injustice to exclude them. Disability education is not merely learning facts from a lecture and being able to excel on written exams. Disability education includes fostering an environment for disabled students and staff to feel included, accommodated, and celebrated. Coriale (2012),

A former disabled social work student shared her experiences in the program, critiquing her peers' readiness to work with disabled clients and highlighting her feelings of being invisible in her program:

> If the students have to work with people with disabilities, they shouldn't be afraid to interact with me. I can actually count how many students got to know me ... on half a hand. I felt invisible sometimes. I didn't even know some of the students' names. I thought the students would be more accepting in social work than they actually were … I would like to see disabilities discussed in all courses and not just in one separate disability course. I wish there was a liaison (faculty) available to me. Someone I could talk to about things that were happening with DSO (Disability Services Office) or how I was doing in the BSW program or if I had any issues with my assistant or teachers
> (pp. 427 & 428)

This student's experience highlighted the importance of creating an environment that embraces disabled individuals in social work programs. Although this student expressed her struggles within the program, she also highlighted the strengths she experienced. She emphasized the importance of faculty being supportive and holding her to the same standards as her able-bodied peers (Coriale, 2012). The presence of faculty that believed in, listened to, and encouraged her in her education was a driving force to her success. This study lifted the voice of a disabled student and continues to urge the social work community to reflect on their interactions with disabled individuals.

Building on the existing literature on disability education in social work, this research project explored the preparation to work with disabled clients that social workers received in their BSW or MSW programs. This project included questions about disability status to intentionally include voices of students with lived experience with disability. This study answered the research question: are social work students learning the breadth and depth of disability content needed to prepare them to engage with disabled clients in a way that honors the values of the social work profession?

Methods

Research Design

This study used a mixed-method survey design consisting of closed-ended and open-ended questions to investigate the perspectives and experiences of individuals of current social work students or social work program graduates in disability education. This research study built on previous research to assess whether social work education is preparing social work students to engage with disabled individuals in a way that honors the social work profession's values.

Data Collection

Following IRB approval, the researcher emailed directors/chairs of thirty-five accredited social work programs in New England, asking them to forward the study description and survey link to an online survey using Survey Monkey, an online survey program, to current students. Additionally, the researcher shared the survey via social media, through personal contacts, and in the researcher’s classes. The inclusion criteria were current or previous attendance at an accredited social work program.

Materials

The researcher created the survey questions based on a literature review of the topic of disability education in social work programs. The questions were designed to elicit participants' thoughts and experiences about disability education in their Social Work program(s). There were several types of questions including a survey instrument with Likert-type questions, close-ended multiple-choice questions, and open-ended questions.

Data Analysis Section

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, specifically percentages and frequencies. The qualitative data in the study was analyzed using the six steps of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which is utilized to find common themes in participant responses.

Results

Participants

The sample (N=78) consisted of current or former social work students. Most participants (78.5%) were current social work students with (n=48, 61.5%) BSW students, (n=12, 15.4%) MSW students, and (n=2, 2.6%) Ph.D. students. The rest of the participants were social work graduates: 1.3% (n=1) BSW, 16.7% (n=13) MSW, and 3.8% (n=3) Ph.D./DSW. A little more than one-third of participants (37.2%, n=29) said they had a disability. Most participants (83.1%, n=64) reported knowing someone with a disability. See Table 1.

Disability Education

All participants (100%, n=78) reported that multiple types of disability should be included within social work education. Most participants 67.9% (n=53) agreed or strongly agreed that their social work program curriculum covered a diverse range of disability content. Most

(87.2%, n=68) considered disability education as an important component of a social work program and 92.3% (n=72) believed that a lack of education about disability could negatively impact a social worker's relationship with their client. When asked the inclusion of specific types of disabilities in their education, 92.3% (n=72) reported mental health disabilities, 44.9% (n=35) reported cognitive/intellectual disabilities, 21.8% (n=17) physical disabilities, 17.9% (n=14) hearing disabilities, 14.1% (n=11) visual impairments, and 12.8% (n=10) invisible disabilities. See Table 2. Participants learned additional disability-related content in their social work education program, including disability models (30.8%, n=24), disability culture (21.8%, n= 17), disability history (14.1%, n=11), and ableism (53.8%, n=42). One-third (33.3%, n=26) had been taught to recognize ableism in practice and 32.1% (n=25) believed they were prepared to engage with disabled clients. Many participants (38.5%, n=30) reported their social work program did not offer a course on disability. Almost half (48.7%, n=38) were not sure if their program offered a disability course while 16.7% (n=13) said there was a disability course offered by their social work program.

Person-First Language

In an open-ended question, participants (80.8%, n=63) described their understanding of person-first language. Several participants (21.8%, n=17) did not answer the question the way it was intended, but instead explained their understanding of *what* person-first language is. About one-fifth (21.8%, n=17) did not know when to use person-first language or did not know what it was. Some participants (11.5%, n=9) indicated that person-first language should always be used, while (2.6%, n=2) disliked person-first language and do not use it. Finally, several participants (21.8%, n=17) explained their belief that the decision to use person-first language is based on the preference of the disabled client/individual.

Disability Topics

In an open-ended question, participants described the desire for coverage of the following disability topics. The most common response (44.9%, n=35) was the desire to cover an extensive number of topics to enhance competence, such as culture, ableism, history, and types of disability. Eleven percent (11.5%, n=9) wished they had learned how to engage with and serve disabled clients and 10.3% (n=8) expressed the need for a required course on disability.

Understanding & Addressing Oppression

An open-ended question asked participants to describe examples of ableism that would call for a social worker to utilize their professional role in practice. Seventy-five percent (n=59) responded to this question. Responses included accessibility concerns (30.8%, n=24), which include infrastructure and barriers to receiving services, the treatment towards disabled people (23.1%, n=18), including viewing them as less than/incapable and providing less opportunity, use of ableist slurs (n=2, 2.6%), and not following protocols that protected the disabled community during COVID-19 (n=2, 2.6%).

Experience of Disabled Students

A little more than one-third of participants (37.2%, n=29) had a disability. Of the participants with a disability, 23.1% (n=18) felt supported by their department. In an open-ended question, participants were asked to describe ways in which the department did or did not support them. Sixteen (20.5%) participants described ways the department supported them. Support included providing accommodations that ensure accessibility in the classroom (n=10, 12.8%), forming trusting relationships with professors that create space for disabled students to reach out for help (n=5, 6.4%), and the presence of a liaison to enhance disability pride and the disability community (n=1, 1.3%).

Twelve students (15.4%) described ways the department could have better supported them as a disabled student. These answers included creating a safe space to listen and honor disabled students' experiences and recommendations (n=6, 7.7%), train faculty to be competent and respectful toward disability topics, clients, and students (n=1, 1.3%), and discuss disability pride instead of disability as a tragedy (n=1, 1.3%).

Final Thoughts

Finally, participants shared any additional thoughts regarding disability in their social work programs. Out of the sample, (n=22) responded to this question. Over half (n=13, 16.7%) indicated that there needs to be disability education, 6.4% (n=5) expressed that disability is an important topic, 2.6% (n=2) explained that there are other ways to learn about disability outside of the classroom, 1.3% (n=1) said that disability is not covered as much as other diversity topics, and 1.3% (n=1) said that disability education is dependent on the program one attends.

Discussion

The disabled community is the largest group in the United States, encompassing over a quarter of the population. This group is impacted by ableism, which is the mistreatment, discrimination, and oppression towards those with disabilities (Bogart, 2019). As stated in the *National Association of Social Work Code of Ethics*, the social work profession's primary mission is to "enhance human well-being and help meet the basic needs of all people, with particular attentions to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty" (2021). As a group that faces oppression, it is social workers' responsibility to serve and uplift this community.

Past studies and literature (Bean & Kreck, 2012, Goulden, 2020, Kim & Sellmaier, 2020, Moyle, 2016) argue for the vitality of disability education in the social work profession and the negative impact of a lack of education on disability content. Further, Ben & Kreck's (2012) analysis of disability content in social work programs demonstrated gaps in social workers education, finding that programs had limited disability content or none. This research study aimed to build on past research and understand where disability education is in social work education today.

There was unanimous consensus among participants that disability education is important. While social work students and graduates in this study perceived the relevance of this content, not all participants reported sufficient coverage of the content or felt ready to work with disabled clients in social work practice. Compared to previous research, some of these findings are promising. Although Ben & Kreck (2012) found that most programs had no or very limited disability content, more than half (54%) of the participants in this study had been taught to recognize ableism and 32.1% felt ready to work with disabled clients. However, this appeared to vary significantly by program, as many students had not had access to this content and did not feel ready to work with disabled clients. Clearly there is a need for an increased consistency in this content across programs.

There was one type of disability that contrasted heavily from the others in this survey. While responses about coverage of physical, visual, auditory, and cognitive/intellectual disabilities varied, the responses regarding mental health disabilities were almost unanimous. Almost all the participants (n= 72, 92.3%) agreed or strongly agreed that their program taught about mental health disabilities. This demonstrates that there is an imbalance of types of disabilities being covered in programs. The prevalence of this disability is notable, with 1 in 5 U.S. adults and 1 in 6 young people aged 6 to 17 experiencing mental health conditions (Slayter et al., 2023). Even so, this does not justify the absence of content regarding other types of disabilities.

Finally, past literature (Berger & Wilbers, 2021; Conley & Nadler, 2022; Coriale, 2012; Mattlin, 2023; Slayter et al., 2022) highlights the importance of fostering an environment that creates space for disabled individuals to be included in the community without constantly having to advocate/fight for acceptance. When it comes to disability education in social work, this begins with the action of listening to disabled students and faculty. In relation to this study, it was important to provide the opportunity for disabled students to use their voices to express their opinions about their experiences as disabled social work students. Out of the twenty-nine (37.2%) participants that identified as disabled, 23.1% felt supported by their social work program and 14.1% did not. More students felt they were supported than not in this study, which is a positive finding. When asked how the department supported students, (N=16) responded in the open-ended format. The two primary themes included accommodating students with disabilities without requiring extensive proof of disability (N=10) and forming trusting relationships with faculty (N=5). When asked how the department could have better support students, (N=12) provided responses with the themes of creating a supportive environment (N=5), accommodating students without requiring proof of disability (N=5) , and training faculty to be more competent with disabled students (N=1). It's important to note the emerging theme from both open-ended questions, which is that learning environments should be accommodating and accessible without needing proof of disability. As the literature discusses (Berger & Wilbers, 2021; Nielson, 2013) requiring proof of disability can be an oppressive process. There are lot of disabled individuals that might not have diagnoses for one of two reasons; lack of access to those services or the personal choice of not wanting to disclose disabilities to others or themselves

(Slayter et al., 2023). By listening to the needs of students, whether they can disclose their disability or not, it ensures the classroom is accessible for all. This is easier said than done, however, it’s important to consider the factors that prevent students from obtaining accommodation through disability services. These findings indicate that there is a strong need for the presence or enhancement of disability education in social work programs.

Strengths and Limitations

One strength of this study design is that it provides social work students and graduates, including those with disabilities, the opportunity to share their perspectives and experiences. Through this study, their voices are lifted with the presence of open-ended questions. Another notable strength is the geographic diversity of the sample. Most of the sample came from the New England region, but notably, seventeen participants came from across the country. Finally, an important strength is the anonymity of an online survey tool, which in turn may have enhanced participants’ willingness to participate in the study and share their honest opinions. Like all research studies, this project has some limitations. First, the retrospective study design requires participants to recall curriculums which can be a barrier to accurate responses due to poor memory. Another limitation is the skipping of questions demonstrated in the results of the survey. This can lead to gaps in information and potential bias in responses. However, even with these limitations, these findings provide us with some important exploratory findings on students’ experience with disability education in social work programs, suggesting ways that programs can adjust their curricular content to strengthen this area of education and improve student competence in this area.

Implications

These findings have important implications for social work programs. Firstly, it is evident that disability is a topic that needs more visibility in social work education (Kim & Sellmaier, 2020). Further, this study demonstrated that social work students do recognize that disability education is important, but there are several programs that prevent them from obtaining it. These findings suggest that, at least in this study sample, there are many emerging social work professionals that do not feel prepared to engage with disabled clients. Social work programs should seriously consider the suggestions for how programs could have made them better prepared, including the existence of a disability course, the presence of disabled faculty, and the celebration of disability culture. Social work programs can use these findings to inform decisions about the curriculum, faculty, and ways to enhance the community. Further, this study serves as an example as to why continuous education in social work is vital. For the social workers not being provided with education about disability in their programs, it's crucial that they are obtaining this education though continuing education programs in order to develop the competence to practice in accordance with the *Code of Ethics*.

Social work programs can shift towards more inclusion of disabled students by listening to the voices of disabled students (Coriale, 2012; Slayter et al., 2022). Students with disabilities in this study provided ways in which the department supported them and what departments could do to uplift students that don't feel supported. Similarly to nondisabled students, disabled students emphasized visibility as a necessary component. Creating space for disabled students to share their experiences and be accommodated is vital in ensuring equality and competence amongst social work students. Students provided ways to foster this sort of environment, which also included the presence of disabled faculty and celebration of disability culture.

Another important implication is that the level of disability education one receives is dependent on the program and/or focus of study. This is important to note because social workers that have a particular interest in disability will be more informed on the topic (Goulden, 2020). On top of that, as Bean & Krecks (2012) curriculum review demonstrated, certain programs offer courses on disability, and some do not. This research aligns with the findings of this study, where participants indicated whether a disability course was mandatory (N=3), offered as an elective (N=7), identified that no course on disability was offered at all (N=30), or was unsure if a course was offered (N=38). With that said, this demonstrates inconsistency in levels of competence amongst emerging social work professionals, which calls for the curriculum to be reviewed and corrected on a need's basis.

Conclusion

The disabled population consists of over a quarter of the United States population, and it is growing every day. As a group that faces oppression in society, it is necessary for the field of social work to empower disabled clients and advocate for better treatment, services, and policies. To do this, social work students need a strong education and background in disability identity, culture, history, and pride. It is time for schools of social work to incorporate disability into their curriculum and culture.

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Appendix A

Table 1.
Sample (N=78)

	f	%
Current Students		
BSW	48	61.5
MSW	12	15.4
Ph.D.	2	2.6
Previous Students		
BSW	1	1.3
MSW	12	15.4
Ph.D./DSW	3	3.8
Person in life with disability		
Yes	64	82.1
No	9	11.5
Unsure	4	5.1
Prefer not to answer	1	1.3
Identify as disabled		
Yes	29	37.2
No	40	51.3
Unsure	2	2.6
Prefer not to answer	7	9.0
Felt supported by department		
Yes	18	23.1
No	11	14.1
Skipped	49	62.8

Table 2.
Social Work Curriculum (N=78)

	f	%
Education about types of disability should be included in disability education		
Yes	78	100
No	0	0
Unsure	0	0
My social work program's curriculum covered a diverse range of social work content		
Strongly Agree	22	28.2
Agree	31	39.7
Neutral	12	15.4

Disagree	8	10.3
Strongly Disagree	5	6.4
Disability education is an important component of a social work program		
Strongly Agree	48	61.5
Agree	20	25.6
Neutral	6	7.7
Disagree	2	2.6
Strongly Disagree	2	2.6
A lack of education about disability could negatively impact a social worker's relationships with clients		
Strongly Agree	49	62.8
Agree	23	29.5
Neutral	4	5.1
Disagree	1	1.3
Strongly Disagree	1	1.3
My social work program taught about mental health disabilities		
Strongly Agree	31	39.7
Agree	41	52.6
Neutral	5	6.4
Disagree	1	1.3
Strongly Disagree	0	0
My social work program taught about cognitive/intellectual disabilities		
Strongly Agree	8	10.3
Agree	27	34.6
Neutral	16	20.5
Disagree	21	26.9
Strongly Disagree	6	7.7
My social work program taught me about physical disabilities		
Strongly Agree	3	3.8
Agree	14	17.9
Neutral	15	19.2
Disagree	29	37.2
Strongly Disagree	15	19.2
My social work program taught me about hearing disabilities		
Strongly Agree	3	3.8
Agree	11	14.1
Neutral	16	20.5
Disagree	29	37.2
Strongly Disagree	19	24.4

My social work program taught me about visual impairments		
Strongly Agree	2	2.6
Agree	9	11.5
Neutral	18	23.1
Disagree	31	39.7
Strongly Disagree	17	21.8
My social work program taught me about invisible disabilities		
Strongly Agree	1	1.3
Agree	9	11.5
Neutral	18	23.1
Disagree	32	41.0
Strongly Disagree	18	23.1
My social work program taught me about disability models		
Strongly Agree	8	10.3
Agree	16	20.5
Neutral	15	19.2
Disagree	24	30.8
Strongly Disagree	15	19.2
My social work program taught me about disability culture		
Strongly Agree	6	7.7
Agree	11	14.1
Neutral	15	19.2
Disagree	27	34.6
Strongly Disagree	19	24.4
My social work program taught me about disability history		
Strongly Agree	1	1.3
Agree	10	12.8
Neutral	17	21.8
Disagree	25	32.1
Strongly Disagree	25	32.1
My social work program taught me about ableism		
Strongly Agree	15	19.2
Agree	27	34.6
Neutral	15	19.2
Disagree	13	16.7
Strongly Disagree	8	10.3
My social work program taught me how to recognize ableism in my practice		
Strongly Agree	9	11.5
Agree	17	21.8
Neutral	22	28.2
Disagree	21	26.9

Strongly Disagree	9	11.5
I feel prepared to work with disabled clients		
Strongly Agree	11	14.1
Agree	14	17.9
Neutral	25	31.1
Disagree	23	29.5
Strongly Disagree	5	6.4
My social work program had a course on disability		
Yes, a required course	3	3.8
Yes, an elective course	7	9.0
No, no course on disability	30	38.5
Unsure if a course was offered	38	48.7

Table 3.
Person-First Language (N=78)

	f	%
Explained Person-First Language	17	21.8
Do not know when to use it/what it was	17	21.8
Person-First Language should always be used	9	11.5
Dislike Person-First Language	2	2.6
Skipped	33	42.3

Table 4.
Wished for Disability Topics in Program (N=78)

	f	%
Coverage of all disability topics	35	44.9
Skills to engage with and serve disabled clients	9	11.5
A required course on disability	8	10.3
Skipped	26	33.3

Table 5.
Examples of Types of Ableism Social Workers Should Address in Practice (N=78)

Variable	*f*	%
Accessibility concerns	24	30.8
Negative treatment towards disabled people	18	23.1
Use of ableist slurs	2	3.6
Not following COVID-19 protocols	2	3.6
Skipped	32	41.0

Table 6.
Disabled Students Examples of Departmental Support (N=78)

Theme	*f*	%
Forming trusting relationships with professors	5	6.4
Providing accommodations that ensure accessibility	10	12.8
Presence of disabled liaison	1	1.3
Create an environment where disabled students feel comfortable using their voice	5	6.4
Validate disabled student's lived experiences	5	6.4
Training faculty to be competent towards disability topics	56	71.8
Avoid seeing disability as a tragedy	1	1.3
Skipped	28	35.9

Table 7.
Open-ended Responses About Disability Education in Social Work (n=22)

Theme	*f*	%
More education on disability	13	16.7
This topic is important	5	6.4
Disability education occurs outside the classroom	2	2.6
Not discussed as much as other diversity topics	1	1.3
Disability education is dependent on the program	1	1.3
Skipped	56	71.8