Ecologically Calibrated Checklist: Reflecting on Teacher Preparation as Socialization

The questions below are not an accreditation instrument. They will not produce a score, and they are not designed to rank your program against anyone else's. They are designed to help you see the socialization your program is already doing: what it teaches candidates to treat as "how things work" in special education, and which of those lessons were ever chosen on purpose.

Teacher preparation is not outside the ecological system. It sits in the exosystem of every classroom your graduates will enter, and it is itself shaped by macrosystem beliefs about disability, race, families, professional identity, and potential. Socialization is not the problem. It is how every profession passes itself on. The problem is socialization that no one examines, because what goes unexamined in a preparation program gets carried into hundreds of classrooms at once.

Read the questions slowly. Use them with a program faculty team, a university supervisor group, or a trusted colleague. When a question makes you uncomfortable, treat that as information and stay with it rather than moving on. For each question, ask what evidence you actually have, not what you believe should be true.

Part 1: Understanding Your Own Socialization as a Teacher Educator

1. When you picture an excellent special education teacher, what is that teacher doing, and what are the students doing? Where did that image come from: your own K-12 classroom, your doctoral training, a mentor, a standards document? Whose classrooms and whose students were in the room when that image was formed?

2. Think about the last time a candidate challenged something you taught as settled practice. Did you hear the challenge as a misunderstanding to correct or as information about a tension your course had not named? Which response did the candidate see, and what did it teach them about how to treat disagreement in their own professional life?

Part 2: Examining What Your Program Transmits

3. Pull out your dispositions rubric. For each disposition, ask what behavior would earn a candidate a low rating, and whose cultural norms that behavior violates. Is "professionalism" being measured, or is a particular register of speech, dress, punctuality, and deference being measured under that name? Which candidates are most often

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flagged, and what does that pattern tell you about whose socialization your program treats as the standard?

4. Look at the language your program uses most: "evidence-based," "data-driven," "fidelity," "best practice." When candidates hear those words, do they also learn to ask whose evidence, which data, fidelity to what, and best for whom? Or do they learn that a single correct method exists and that a teacher who departs from it is the problem? If a candidate graduated believing every challenge in special education is a problem with one right answer, where in your program would they have learned otherwise?

Part 3: Examining the Forms and Policies Candidates Learn to Use

5. Take one form your candidates learn to complete: an FBA template, a referral form, an eligibility checklist, an IEP present-levels section. What does the form make easy to say, and what does it make hard to say? Is there room on it for the classroom's contribution to a behavior, for the family's interpretation of it, or for the cultural frame the student brings? When you teach candidates to complete the form, do you also teach them to read it as a set of beliefs someone built into a document?

6. When candidates enter their field placements, do they know what the district's disproportionality data look like, and how that district's discipline codes, referral timelines, and accountability pressures shape the decisions they will watch teachers make? If a candidate saw a Black student referred for "defiance" during their placement, would anything in your program have prepared them to see that referral as the product of a system rather than only a judgment about one child?

Part 4: Examining How Candidates Learn About Families

7. In your program, how do candidates first come to know a student: through the cumulative file or through the family? If the file comes first, what has the candidate already decided about that child and that family before they ever hear a parent's voice? What would change if the order were reversed, and what would a candidate learn from the gap between the family's portrait and the file's?

8. When candidates write about families in case studies, field reflections, or IEP simulations, what words do they reach for? "Uninvolved," "hard to reach," "doesn't follow through"? Where did they learn those words, and does your program ever ask them to name what the school did, or failed to do, that made a family look that way? Who in your program, faculty or curriculum, models a family as the holder of knowledge rather than the recipient of decisions?

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Part 5: Examining What Candidates Practice in the Room

9. Your candidates will hear "These parents just don't care" in a staff room long before they sit in an IEP meeting. Have they ever practiced what to say in that moment, out loud, with someone pushing back? Knowing that a disruption is right and being able to make it under social pressure, as the newest adult in the building, are two different skills. Which one does your program actually teach?

10. When your university supervisors observe a lesson, what are they trained to look for? Does the observation protocol ask only whether the candidate delivered the lesson well, or does it also ask what the lesson taught students about who they are: who was called on, who received the simplified version, whose behavior was named aloud, and who learned to be invisible? If your supervisors cannot see socialization in a lesson, how will your candidates learn to see it in their own?

How to Use This Checklist

Read all ten questions with your program faculty at the start of an academic year, before syllabi and field placements are finalized. Pick the two or three that cause the most useful discomfort; those are the ones to stay with. Bring one into a program meeting, one into a supervisor training, and one into your own next course revision.

This checklist is most useful when it produces a specific change: a revised dispositions indicator, a reordered case-study assignment, a rehearsal added to a methods course, a new question on the observation protocol. General commitments to equity are easy to make and hard to keep. Specific changes are harder to make and easier to see.

The referral that followed Marcus through this session was written by a teacher. Someone prepared that teacher. Somewhere in a program like yours, that teacher learned what "defiance" looks like, what a parent's unanswered voicemail means, and that "avoid task" is a complete explanation of a third grader putting his head down. None of it was taught on purpose. All of it was taught. The question this checklist asks is not whether your program socializes its candidates. It does. The question is whether you can see what it is teaching, and whether you would choose to teach it again.

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