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Disability Accommodations in Field Education: Exploring the MSW Student Perspective

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Health

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Alicia Melnick

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

Disability Accommodations in Field Education: Exploring the MSW Student Perspective

by

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MSW, University of Pittsburgh, 2009

BA, Mount Union College, 2006

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Social Work

Walden University

November 2025

Abstract

The number of students with disabilities is increasing, yet little is known about how graduate social work students navigate accommodation during field placements. This study addressed the limited understanding of Master of Social Work (MSW) students' experiences applying Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accommodations in practicum settings. How accommodations are managed can determine whether disabled students gain equitable access to training and the profession. The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study was to examine how MSW students with disabilities describe their experiences with applying ADA accommodations during field placements. Critical disability theory guided the study, emphasizing ableism and structural barriers within accommodation processes. Ten current or recently graduated MSW students with disabilities participated in semi-structured interviews. Data, including transcripts and field notes, were analyzed using thematic analysis. Five themes emerged: (a) the nature of disability, (b) field placement as a critical challenge, (c) institutional barriers and bureaucracy, (d) exhausted self-advocacy, and (e) recommendations for change. Findings indicate that disability is dynamic and deeply intertwined with academic and institutional contexts, while accommodation processes often place the burden on students. Recommendations include proactive field placement practices and curricula that anticipate accommodation needs. The implications for positive social change include the potential for educators, administrators, and policymakers to create more inclusive structures, reduce barriers, and support the success of disabled students in social work.

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Dedication

This project and work are dedicated to my mother Sue, grandmother Hazel, and Aunt Debbie. These women were strong, smart women who inspired me to do more with my life. I know that they have been watching and supporting me through this entire process.

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I would like to thank my husband, Jesse, and children, Abby and Jacob, for their love and patience while I completed this degree. It has been a balance for our family, but I appreciate your support.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review

Social work is a field that serves diverse individuals from all walks of life. In order to strengthen the profession of social work, the profession must include individuals from diverse backgrounds. One diverse background currently under-researched and underrepresented in the field is individuals with disabilities. This study explored social work students with disabilities' experiences through the field education portion of their social work education. Understanding and exploring these students' experiences may allow social work educators to create policies and programs that accommodate them and support their successful completion of social work programs.

Field education is considered the signature pedagogy of social work education and is often referred to as the heart of social work programs (Robertson, 2013). Due to the significant field component, social work is considered an academic and professional degree (Todd et al., 2019). Field coordinators are often viewed as gatekeepers to the profession, monitoring students' ability to apply coursework in real-life practice (Street, 2021). Universities are required to provide students with disabilities with appropriate accommodations across all curriculum areas, which includes field education (ADA National Network, 2019). Despite this, field education is consistently rated as the most challenging component of this professional educational program (Cox et al., 2022), particularly for equity-seeking groups (Bie et al., 2021).

This exploratory qualitative study attempted to understand students' experiences so that their voices were represented when best practice solutions are developed. All

students deserve the opportunity to have equitable access to education and be supported appropriately to be successful (Altes et al., 2024; NASW, 2021). Individuals living with disabilities understand their needs far better than anyone else, and their ideas should be central to creating accommodation and recommending sustainable changes (Coriale et al., 2012). When individuals with disabilities are empowered, there is recognition of the value of their contribution to the social work profession (Jones et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2021).

Problem Statement

Current statistics show that approximately 19% of college students report having a disability (Sellmair & Kim, 2021), and research indicates this number is continuing to rise (Ozelie et al., 2019). Disability is defined as a mental or physical impairment that limits an individual in one or more areas of their life (ADA, n.d.). The estimates among social work students are much higher, with an estimated 50% of social work students having some disability (Sellmair & Kim, 2021). Despite the data showing significant numbers of social work students with disabilities, it is unknown how many of these students need or could benefit from additional support to be successful in their studies. A recent study showed that of social work students who receive accommodations, only 14.8% receive accommodations in field placements (McGinley et al., 2024). Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), passed in 1990, all higher education institutions must have formal avenues for students to apply for disability accommodations (ADA, n.d.).

The systems for the accommodations are typically rooted in the medical model approach and require students to have proof of their disability to receive accommodations (Ozelie et al., 2019; Sellmaier & Kim, 2021). For some students, this formal route can create significant barriers related to cost, documentation, and inadequate knowledge or resources to navigate the system (Ozelie et al., 2019; Sellmaier & Kim, 2021; Smith et al., 2019). Students must often show formal documentation of their disability and current treatment plans. Students who are transitioning to college may lack current documentation or be transitioning between care providers. It is estimated that only 55% of students who are eligible for disability services receive them during college (Sellmaier & Kim, 2021; Smith et al., 2019). Nondisclosure of a disability places students at a disadvantage and can remove access to critical support services that students need to adequately navigate higher education (Morina, 2022). Students report that repeatedly needing to advocate for their needs and accommodations with each instructor and class feels like a burden (Osborne, 2019; Toutain, 2019). Additionally, once obtained, accommodations may be insufficient or difficult to translate into field education within social work education (Cox et al., 2022; Kiesel et al., 2018; Sellmaier & Kim, 2021).

Students with disabilities are underrepresented in higher education, particularly in health professional programs with practicum or field education requirements (Dhillon et al., 2024). Practicum experience is critical for many professional educational programs to integrate classroom knowledge with hands-on experience to prepare students for the workforce (Rillotta et al., 2024). Field education is noted as the most challenging

component when examining the challenges reported by students enrolled in a social work program (Cox et al., 2022). When students with disabilities are not accommodated, they can face challenges such as physical and mental exhaustion, communication, social interactions, pain management, and mobility (Ozelie et al., 2019). Students with disabilities report feeling isolated, misunderstood, or having to work harder than their peers (Morina, 2022; Osborne, 2018). Students have also expressed a conflict between their identities as both client and professional, feeling pressure to conform to traditional standards of competence (Edelist et al., 2024).

Field education is the signature pedagogy of social work education and allows students to connect coursework with practical experiences (CSWE, 2022). This training is critical to creating competent social workers. By understanding the experiences of students with disabilities, changes can be recommended that create equitable and accessible experiences for all students. Previous research supports the need for students with disabilities to have targeted support and assistance during transitions into practicum (Ozelie et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2019). This study allowed a deeper understanding of why field education has been found to be the most challenging component (Cox et al., 2022) of social work education for students with disabilities. The specific research problem that was addressed through this study is the lack of understanding of the experiences of MSW students with disabilities as they apply disability accommodations during their field practicum placements at Council on Social Work Education (CSWE)-approved schools of social work.

Purpose Statement and Research Question

Although researchers have examined social work students' use of ADA accommodations in general and from a quantitative perspective, limited qualitative research explores the detailed experiences of Master of Social Work (MSW) students with disabilities applying ADA accommodations during their field practicum placements at CSWE-approved schools of social work. Comprehensive research on field education has not been largely updated since the 1980s, prior to the passage of the ADA (Kiesel et al., 2018).

The research question that guided this study is: How do MSW students with disabilities describe their experiences with applying ADA accommodations during their field practicum placements at CSWE-accredited schools of social work?

Nature of the Doctoral Project

I used a qualitative method emphasizing a constructionist approach to understanding the experiences of students with disabilities and how disability accommodations were applied during their field placements. A generic qualitative design with semi-structured interviews allowed insight into how students understand their realities and navigate their experiences (Ellis & Hart, 2023). This design fits well with this research topic because the gap is significant, and this study was exploratory (Kahlke, 2018).

To implement this research design, I used a demographic survey and an interview guide developed by me based on the literature review and theory, with questions that

supported the research question. I also accessed the Zoom platform so that I could conduct semi-structured interviews with qualified participants to produce interview transcripts and field notes. Participants were eligible for the study if they identified as having a disability and applied for ADA accommodations during their MSW degree. Participants were current students who had completed at least one field placement or had graduated in the last three years.

I conducted in-depth qualitative interviews. In-depth qualitative interviews allow researchers to understand how participants apply meaning and examine nuanced differences in experiences (Ellis & Hart, 2023). The demographic questionnaire captured age, race, public or private college, online or in-person education, and the highest degree earned so that I can describe specific characteristics of study participants. I developed an interview guide with prompts to guide the interview process. This guide was based on best practices suggested from the literature, and further, based on the literature review and theory, with questions that supported my research question. I used thematic analysis to review the interview transcripts and field notes and analyze and code my data. I sought themes that described the participants' experiences with applying disability accommodations during their field placements.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant in that it contributes to a large gap in the literature and practice regarding MSW students with disabilities and how ADA accommodations can be applied during field education. Research around this topic is critical to help social work

faculty understand the value and contributions of students to the classroom and profession. Additionally, this research explored how field education faculty can support the success of these students during their field placements. This research focused on the students' perspectives to share their stories and experiences with individuals designing higher education social work programs, managing existing programs, and creating updates to field education guidelines.

This study has a strong impetus for social change because programmatic changes and support systems can allow individuals to feel empowered and supported to seek social work education. Research supports that students with disabilities are underrepresented and hidden within higher education and social work education due to stigma, fear, and discrimination (Grimes et al., 2019; Plotner & May, 2019). This current research could potentially impact the landscape of social work education for students with disabilities by allowing field education faculty to create inclusive and proactive programs to meet all students' needs. Additionally, the underlying theme of this research is focused on eliminating barriers and the deficit view of disability while supporting student success and equitable opportunities. There is also a potential benefit to the field of social work because supporting social workers with disabilities creates representation across the profession (Fuld, 2020). Post-secondary education is an important gateway to increase the earning and employment opportunities for individuals in the United States (Mamboleo et al., 2020).

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

This study was grounded in critical disability theory (CDT). CDT emerged from critical social theory, which was developed in the 1930s by Frankfurt School theorists, particularly Max Horkheimer (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). While encompassing multiple perspectives, CDT centers on how social oppression, stigma, and systemic barriers shape the experiences of people with disabilities (Fuld, 2020). Its roots draw from critical social theory, feminist theory, disability rights, and disability studies (Arstein-Kerslake & Black, 2020; Hall, 2019; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). CDT is widely utilized because of its interdisciplinary focus on the interaction between individual abilities and inflexible societal norms (Arstein-Kerslake & Black, 2020). It challenges institutions that fail to accommodate difference and instead reinforce rigid definitions of normal (Fuld, 2020).

CDT aims to describe the experiences of marginalized individuals in order to critique and transform the systems that oppress them, drawing upon critical and intersectional analysis (Hall, 2019). Hall (2019) identified four primary principles of CDT:

- Disability cannot be reduced to facts or adequately captured through quantitative research, as science alone cannot fully describe social phenomena
- Autonomy is not about independence but rather emancipation from oppressive systems

- Reflexive to history and how disability and oppressive systems have evolved over time
- Encouraging dialogue focused on human rights among cultures

CDT was particularly relevant to this study, which explored the experiences of MSW students with disabilities during their field placements. Students frequently described the high expectations placed upon them in field education as a significant challenge to completing their MSW programs (Goulden, 2020). CDT provided a framework for analyzing these accounts by situating disability not as an individual deficit but within the broader context of social oppression, disadvantage, and health disparities. It promotes independence and agency while rejecting deficit-based views that disability must be cured (Arstein-Kerslake & Black, 2020). Instead, CDT emphasizes exposing and analyzing ableism as a structural force (Hall, 2019).

Existing evidence highlights the relevance of this framework. Students often face barriers to implementing ADA accommodations due to stigma, limited knowledge, and scarce resources (Sellmaier & Kim, 2021). Disability service professionals, constrained by the medicalized model of ADA compliance and federal regulations, may unintentionally reinforce barriers (Strimel et al., 2023). CDT's focus on dialogue and the lived experience of disability creates space for participants to share their narratives directly, making it an effective framework for addressing the research question.

In addition, CDT aligns closely with social work values and a strengths-based perspective, emphasizing the contributions of disabled people rather than their

limitations. Historically, disabled individuals have been framed as dependent on charity or aid, rather than valued for their strengths and unique perspectives (Burghardt et al., 2021). Inclusion for people with disabilities is often based on assimilation, meaning supports are acceptable as long as an individual can align with societal standards (Titchkosky, 2020). CDT counters this narrative by affirming the knowledge and capacities of disabled people and positioning them as central to advancing equity. Within higher education, CDT has been applied to support a social justice orientation toward widening participation and access (Liasidou, 2014).

From a constructionist perspective, CDT asserts that the environment should be the primary target of intervention (Hiranandani, 2019). This stance supports a shift away from individualized models of disability accommodation and toward systemic reform that prioritizes accessibility. As Fuld (2020) notes, such an approach is consistent with strengths-based practices that recognize and build upon students' existing knowledge and self-advocacy. CDT directly critiques the individualist language of disability by exposing how social and cultural norms define and enforce "deficit." In doing so, CDT offers a social justice framework that calls for structural change to achieve equity (Van Aswegen, 2019), aligning closely with the purpose of this study.

Values and Ethics

This qualitative research study aligned with the National Association of Social Work's (NASW) code of ethics. This code was updated in 2021 and is used as a guide for

social work practice within the United States. The core values most closely related to this study are social justice, dignity and worth of the person, and competence (NASW, 2021).

The value of social justice tasks social workers with pursuing change for vulnerable and oppressed individuals. Disabled individuals within the United States are an oppressed and vulnerable population (Grimes et al., 2019; Plotner & May, 2019; Rillotta et al., 2024) that have faced historical social exclusion from society (Ricciardelli & Laws, 2019). Disability has been viewed through a deficit framework that sees individuals with disabilities as impaired or limited by their differing abilities (Sellmaier & Kim, 2021). Through the social justice framework, social workers can advocate for equity for individuals with disabilities.

The findings from this study will be used to provide recommendations to schools of social work about inclusion and support for students with disabilities, which will allow for greater support of the dignity and worth of each social work student. Social workers should respect and accommodate all people's differences, including peer social workers and students. Social work values reflect empowerment for individuals who may face social exclusion, and social workers advocate for their full and meaningful participation in society (Ricciardelli & Laws, 2019).

Lastly, the value of competence is upheld through this study as I am seeking a greater understanding of the experiences of these students. Including diverse voices in research and classrooms leads to richer learning environments and enhanced student academic experiences (Smith et al., 2019). I intend to share the findings of my study so

that I can add to the profession's knowledge and continue to promote change and equity for students with disabilities.

Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

Background literature for this study was gathered from various databases to gain insight and understanding of previous work on this topic. Publications ranging from 2018 to 2024 were reviewed. The keywords searched were *social work education, field placement, practicum, disability, disability accommodation(s), ADA, internship, higher education, social work, critical disability theory, signature pedagogy, disability studies, and disability framework*. Literature was searched from PsychINFO, SocIndex, Thoreau multi-database, Google scholar, ERIC, and Education Source. Additional articles were pulled through citation chaining of recent publications and seminal works.

ADA Accommodations, Higher Education, and Disability

The ADA was passed in 1990 and defined disability as a mental or physical impairment that limits an individual in one or more areas of their life (ADA, n.d.). This act was viewed as a pivotal milestone towards equity for people with disabilities by providing protection from discrimination and requiring public entities to provide reasonable accommodation for equal access to services.

Under the ADA, all higher education institutions must have formal avenues for students to apply for disability accommodations (ADA National Network, 2019). The systems for these accommodations are typically rooted in the medical model approach and require students to have proof of their disability to receive services (Sellmaier &

Kim, 2021). For some students, this formal route can create significant barriers related to cost, documentation, and inadequate knowledge or resources to navigate the system. Additionally, the accommodation may be insufficient or difficult to translate into field education within social work education (Cox et al., 2022; Kiesel et al., 2018; Sellmaier & Kim, 2021). Giful-Freixenset et al. (2017) argued that the documented gap between students with disabilities who start and those who finish their degrees can be attributed to these barriers of our current established model of accommodation.

Model of Accommodation

A significant theme across studies is the underrepresentation and the hidden population of students with disabilities due to non-disclosure, influenced by stigma, fear of discrimination, and lack of awareness about available supports (Grimes et al., 2019; Plotner & May, 2019). Stigma can also impact students' willingness to seek disability-related services (Edelist et al., 2020; Grimes et al., 2020; Morina 2022) as they do not want to be seen as unable to contribute to the professional workplace (Singh & MacDonald, 2022). Students also reported the stark difference between accommodations being automatically applied during high school versus the need to disclose and advocate for themselves with higher education professors (Mamboleo et al., 2019). As students enter higher education, they need training and support in empowerment and self-advocacy (Plotner & May, 2019).

Strimel et al. (2023) conducted a study using a qualitative interpretive design to interview disability resource professionals to understand the application of reflexivity

within their professional decision-making. Many of these professionals discussed the heavy impact of state and federal requirements on their decision-making process. These professionals also reported that their work is unstructured, and they are encouraged to rely on their professional judgment to make accommodation determinations.

Professionals also described that they often require a more in-depth process when accommodation is requested for field or clinical placements. This unstructured process and additional investigation for field accommodation supports the claims that accommodations are difficult to translate into field education (Cox et al., 2022; Kiesel et al., 2018; Sellmaier & Kim, 2021).

McGinley et al. (2024) conducted a systematic review of 50 field education manuals from CSWE-accredited programs in the United States. They examined how disability was represented through policy and process for disclosure and accommodation application. The findings showed a significant gap between education and the application of accommodation from the classroom to the field placement. They also found that while there were statements in most manuals referencing the ADA and anti-discrimination statements, there was little practical guidance for students. Overwhelmingly, manuals framed disclosure as optional and the responsibility of students.

Ableism and Higher Education

Ableism is a well-documented and pervasive issue in higher education that negatively affects students with disabilities (Be, 2019; Brown & Leigh, 2018). Ableism is defined as the systemic devaluing of people with disabilities by creating systems only

accessible to the able-bodied (Be, 2019; Sherwood & Kattari, 2023). From ableist mindsets, disablism can then be described as the exclusionary or discriminatory practices that affect people with disabilities (Be, 2019). Ableism can manifest as systemic barriers in higher education, such as discriminatory assessment practices (Nieminen, 2023), a lack of adequate support structures (Be, 2019), and a performance-driven academic culture (Brown & Leigh, 2018). Ableism is also embedded in the practices and attitudes of higher education, causing students to internalize ableism, which leads to self-exclusion among students with disabilities (Abes & Darkow, 2020; Kattari et al., 2020). Students with disabilities face challenges that affect their academic and social integration, which can create challenges for them during field education (Kiesel et al., 2018).

Assessments are among the most common areas of higher education for which students receive accommodation (Nieminen, 2022). These accommodations are celebrated as creating an equal opportunity for all rather than used as evidence that current assessment procedures are ableist inaccessible practices. Higher education assessments contribute to the performance-driven competitive environment of academia, further exacerbating issues of ableism (Brown & Leigh, 2018).

Students with chronic illnesses and invisible disabilities often face ableist microaggressions (Be, 2019) and educational norms that are inflexible and rigid (Kattari et al., 2020). Be (2019) used a narrative correspondence qualitative research method to engage closely with participants living with chronic illnesses to understand their experiences of ableism and disablism. Be describes the unique experience of students

living with chronic illness because they may face unpredictable symptoms and no reliable cure for their symptoms. The main findings of the study show that ableism and disablism manifest in the daily lives of students who live with chronic illnesses focusing on issues of access, reasonable adjustments, and impact of cultural norms and codes on their educational experiences. One participant described that due to the invisible and fluctuating nature of her illness she is often assumed to be exaggerating her need for accommodation because she did not physically appear disabled.

Students with intellectual and developmental disabilities also face unique barriers, including academic challenges, social and transitional issues, and cultural barriers within the college environment (Plotner & May, 2019). Students with intellectual and developmental disabilities may require additional accommodations that extend beyond the classroom to allow them to fully integrate into campus life. They may also need support in skill building for independent study skills, time management, and test taking. This literature highlights the need for comprehensive social support systems that address both academic and social challenges of students and the need for faculty awareness and training with disability issues.

Changing these experiences for college students will require a multi-faceted approach that includes faculty training in the development of inclusive learning environments (Aguirre et al., 2021), strong support systems for both academic and social needs (Couzens et al., 2015; Davis & Mirick, 2022), and policy implementation and funding for disability research to support inclusive educational systems for all students

(Gow et al., 2020). Abes and Darkow (2020) discussed that the establishment of a student-centered framework rather than a compliance-centered framework would allow students to feel empowered and in control of their education.

Social Work Education and Disability

The experiences of students with disabilities in social work education reveal that about one-third of participants reported experiencing microaggressions from faculty, which can significantly impact their educational experience, and that these microaggressions can stem from faculty members' unconscious biases and assumptions about students with disabilities (Davis & Mirick, 2022). Microaggressions perpetuate the message to disabled people that they are unwelcome in educational settings (Kattari et al., 2018).

In a qualitative study, Crutchfield et al. (2020) interviewed social work students to understand how they negotiate the gap between working with and needing the same services as clients. They found that some social work students were reluctant to seek services they were learning about in class due to feeling undeserving. Students reported they were better at being helpers than being helped. The authors concluded that faculty support and recognition of need can be critical as students navigate the dual role of social work students and individuals needing services.

Gatekeeping

The literature on social work education, particularly concerning students with disabilities and mental health conditions, highlights the complexities and challenges

social work educators face in fulfilling their gatekeeping responsibilities while fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment (Raine, 2022; Robertson, 2013; Street, 2021). The gatekeeping function often occurs during field education (Street, 2021). Field instructors assess the integration of classroom knowledge and practice, and a student's struggle can be considered a failure and lead to gatekeeping conversations (Roulston et al., 2023; Street, 2021). Gatekeeping also includes managing accommodations without lowering academic or professional standards mandated by federal laws such as the ADA (Holley et al., 2022). It will be important to consider how gatekeeping can influence field instructors and school faculty when analyzing the experiences of students with disabilities during their field placement.

Gatekeeping is viewed as a critical function in social work education that protects future clients and upholds the integrity of the profession by ensuring that students demonstrate professional suitability and competence (Holley et al., 2022; Raine, 2022). Social work programs and educators are tasked with navigating a delicate balance between providing necessary support and ensuring that all students meet the professional competencies required for practice. However, this role often puts stress on students who describe high disclosure costs in field education (Charles et al., 2025; Beddoe et al., 2024; Finch & Tadam, 2024). Some educators and field instructors in a survey by Charles et al. (2025) questioned professionalism when disclosing the need for accommodation, some stating it was a liability for students to formally disclose.

Street (2021) conducted a qualitative study guided by stakeholder theory to understand what factors influence field instructors as professional gatekeepers. Thirteen field instructors participated in the study, each with at least three years of experience in the field instructor role. Focus groups and interviews were conducted, and transcripts were analyzed using the constant comparative process. Street found that there were multiple influences on gatekeeping decisions, including identifying roles such as mentor, educator, and professional social worker, ethical obligations, commitment to the student, and the support received from the university.

Roulston et al. (2018) conducted a unique study in Ireland examining the reasons why students failed their field placements. They conducted the study in two phases, first gathering quantitative data from four schools of social work to understand why students were failing their field placements. The second phase consisted of interviews with 10 of the students who had failed. During phase one, they found that the reasons for students failing fell into four major categories: skills, knowledge, values, and personal issues. Most students who failed had multiple reasons cited across these categories. The primary reason for failure was difficulty understanding the social work profession or applying academic and procedural information to their practice. When examining the personal reasons, these ranged from previous experience, trauma, or existing mental health concerns. However, the authors did not find this as a primary reason why students failed their placements.

Students with mental health conditions are a group that poses specific challenges for social work programs. While these students can bring valuable insights and experiences to the profession and their work with clients, they also require specific support and accommodations to succeed (Holley et al., 2022). The literature shows inconsistent methods for meeting these challenges, and many programs rely on a case-by-case decision-making process, which can lead to inconsistencies and potential biases in how students are treated (Robertson, 2013; Street, 2021). Educators are often encouraged to rely on their personal and professional judgments and experiences in gatekeeping, which can be influenced by their values, the perceived potential of the student, and their own comfort with enforcing standards (Raine, 2022). Gatekeeping can be a complex and emotionally challenging issue faced by social work educators as they experience conflicts between their dual roles as mentors and gatekeepers, often feeling ambivalent about assessing students' professional suitability (Holley et al., 2022; Raine, 2022).

Implicit and Explicit Social Work Curriculum

CSWE recognizes the importance of implicit and explicit curricula working together to create an optimal learning environment and experience for social work students. The explicit curriculum is the formal design and delivery of courses and field content to students while the implicit curriculum involves the experience, context, and environment where the student learns (CSWE, 2022). Kim and Sellmair (2020) argued that disability content is under-addressed in both implicit and explicit social work curricula and creates an environment that is not encouraging or supportive of students

with disabilities. Making social work education more inclusive starts with proactively dissecting ableist standards of higher education and incorporating disability content as a priority, not an add-on class. Understanding attitudes in the curriculum is important in this study because it can affect students' comfort in disclosing and sharing about their specific accommodation needs related to their disability.

Explicit Disability Curriculum

Kim and Sellmaier (2020) argued that many schools of social work do not adequately prepare students to work with individuals with disabilities due to limited disability-specific content. Historically, disability has been conceptualized in courses through various models in social work education. The medical model views disability as a condition to be cured or mitigated at the individual level, often leading to practices that focus on individual limitations rather than systemic barriers (Kim & Sellmaier, 2020). In contrast, the social model emerging from disability rights movements emphasizes environmental and societal barriers that restrict individuals with disabilities, advocating for systemic changes to enhance accessibility and inclusion (Council on Social Work Education, Disability-Competent Care Curriculum Workgroup, 2018). New disability rights movements are advocating for a more inclusive approach that goes beyond these traditional models and incorporates critical disability studies.

Goulden (2020) conducted a comprehensive literature review to understand and review disability competency in social work education. Goulden found that competency-based education can limit students' reflection on attitudes and biases toward those with

disabilities. Goulden particularly focuses on the medical model approach taught commonly across social work by highlighting that this approach perpetuates ableism and leads to poorer health outcomes. This paper recommends assessment of students' comfort and skills to work with the disabled population to increase opportunities during field placements.

Implicit Curriculum and Disability

Academia can be a rigid, tradition-based environment that can create challenges for being inclusive (Altes et al., 2024; Jones et al., 2016), negatively impacting the implicit curriculum. Literature about implicit curriculum finds that it encompasses the attitudes, values, and behaviors of faculty and staff, the institutional resources and support available, and the broader campus culture and policies (Grady et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2016; Krase et al., 2022; Wischnewsky et al., 2023). The implicit curriculum affects all parts of the school's experience, including field education. Disabled students often receive hidden messages about assimilation that can affect their feelings of belonging (Altes et al., 2024). Grady et al. 2020 found that relationships with faculty, staff, and classmates play a significant role across all domains of implicit curriculum within MSW programs.

Grady et al. (2020) and Krase et al. (2022) explored the implicit curriculum within MSW programs but approached the topic using different methodologies. Grady et al. (2020) employed a mixed methods design, combining the Implicit Curriculum Survey with inductive coding to identify key themes, including the importance of relationships

among faculty, staff, and students and the challenges students face in balancing fieldwork and coursework. Their findings emphasize the value of fostering relationship-building and providing adequate support to enhance the overall student experience and improve the implicit curriculum for all students. On the other hand, Krase et al. (2022) conducted a quantitative study using a survey administered during students' final semester, revealing that student characteristics such as age, race, gender, and disability status significantly influenced students' evaluations of the implicit curriculum. Their study highlights the importance of acknowledging and supporting students' diverse identities to improve their experiences in social work programs. Together, these studies underscore the need for targeted support and relationship-building to enhance the implicit curriculum in MSW programs, with attention to students' diverse backgrounds and identities.

Field Education as Signature Pedagogy

In 2008, CSWE declared field education the signature pedagogy for social work education. While many other professions use field experiences to engage students in learning, most view field as a culmination of skills before graduation rather than an ongoing longitudinal process like social work does (Olson-Morrison et al., 2019). This elevated importance of field education left some student populations, including those with disabilities, deprioritized and disadvantaged.

Signature pedagogy is a term developed by Shulman and used in professional degrees to describe a form of instruction that connects and integrates practice and theory to socialize students into professionals (Boitel & Fromm, 2014; Olson-Morrison et al.,

2019; Skeen, 2023; Wayne et al., 2010). There are three essential components to signature pedagogy: surface structure, which is the classroom and knowledge component; deep structure, which comprises the beliefs and values of the profession; and implicit structure, encompassing the practice and identity of the profession (Olson-Morrison et al., 2019; Wayne et al., 2010).

Wayne et al. (2010) criticized social work education's adoption of the signature pedagogy terminology without fully implementing Shulman's original concepts. Wayne et al. described the origin of field education in social work as an apprenticeship approach where students learn from real-world experiences. Incorporation of the signature pedagogy promoted the integration of coursework with real-life experience with strategic supervision and evaluation to create real learning opportunities with accountability for students' performance. Olson-Morrison et al. (2019) argued that without a strong field liaison and field seminar course, the full integration of field with classroom learning does not occur.

Skeen (2023) conducted a contextual analysis with inductive and deductive approaches to understand the extent to which undergraduate social work programs' field education programs align with signature pedagogy. The study used publicly available CSWE self-study reports from 16 accredited undergraduate social work programs. They found that eight programs showed evidence of partial integration of field throughout their explicit curriculum and program design through bi-directional learning in coursework. The study also showed that less than half of the programs had field faculty who were

scholars in field education, which showed poor alignment with signature pedagogy. This study aligns with early critiques that social work has not fully embraced Shulman's criteria for signature pedagogy.

Student placements in social work education are managed by field education coordinators, who may be staff, faculty, or even contracted employees at schools of social work (Zuchowski et al., 2019). Field coordinators play a crucial role in managing the many challenges that can arise in field, yet their work is often undervalued and under-resourced. They are responsible for securing placements, supporting students and field instructors, and ensuring the quality of field education (Asakura, 2018; Cleak & Zuchowski, 2020; Walsh et al., 2023). However, field education programs face significant challenges, including the availability of qualified supervisors, increased student numbers, and the impact of neoliberal policies on social services and higher education (Asakura, 2018; Cleak & Zuchowski, 2020; Haralambous et al., 2024; Walsh et al., 2023; Zuchowski et al., 2019).

CSWE Requirements for Field Education

Accreditation for social work programs is managed by CSWE's Commission on Accreditation (COA; CSWE, 2022). COA developed the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS), which lay the foundation for the expectations of all accredited schools of social work. Social work education is competency-based and the EPAS outline the nine social work competencies that each student must meet before graduation. The EPAS also outlines the importance of field education as the "field setting

is where students apply human rights principles from global and national social work ethical codes to advance social, racial, economic, and environmental justice” (p. 20). The EPAS mandates that all MSW students complete a minimum of 900 hours of field education, although some schools require more than this amount.

Accommodation Barriers

As discussed, many barriers prevent students with disabilities from seeking ADA accommodations; however, once ADA accommodations are obtained, MSW students face an additional challenge in determining how those accommodations are translated into field (Cox et al., 2022; Kiesel et al., 2018; Sellmaier & Kim, 2021). Sellmaier and Kim (2021) found that students with mental health disabilities were less likely to receive field accommodations than students with physical disabilities. Students with disabilities also face difficulties securing and succeeding in their field placements due to a lack of understanding and support from field instructors (Coriale, 2012; Kiesel et al., 2018). The complex social problems encountered in social work field placements mean that students may need both physical and social/emotional accommodations to be successful in their placement (Coriale, 2012; Sellmaier & Kim, 2021). In addition, many field settings have strict rules, such as attendance guidelines, hour requirements, and documentation requirements, which can create additional barriers for students with disabilities (Titchkiosky, 2020).

Challenges for students with disabilities are not unique to social work. Nguyen et al. (2024) found that medical students who reported disabilities received fewer residency

match offers than students without disabilities. A similar trend was seen in doctoral psychology programs where applicants with disabilities had lower average match rates than nondisabled applicants (Lund, 2021). Lund (2022) noted that psychology programs have lower numbers of students with disabilities and that psychologists with disabilities are underrepresented in the field. STEM programs noticed that graduates with disabilities had difficulty securing employment post-graduation (Duerstock et al., 2024). The STEM program created an internship program specific for students with disabilities to teach them work and advocacy skills to aid in securing employment post-graduation.

Kiesel et al. (2018) and Sellmaier and Kim (2021) both investigated the experiences of social work students with disabilities, focusing on the challenges they face in securing accommodations in field education. Kiesel et al. conducted a qualitative study, highlighting the need for better guidance and support for students navigating disclosure, accommodations, and field placements. While their study sheds light on the issue, its reliance on secondary data limits its depth. In contrast, Sellmaier and Kim's quantitative study revealed that despite a significant number of students registering with disability resources, many only received classroom accommodations that did not extend to field placements. Both studies underscore the prevalence of challenges in this area. However, my research will build on these findings by using qualitative methods to explore the nuances and specific barriers to implementing accommodations in social work field education.

Summary

ADA accommodations are a right every student with a disability has while pursuing higher education, including MSW degrees (ADA National Network, 2019). Section one provided an overview of the problems social work students face when applying ADA accommodations during field education. This literature review has outlined the historical context of the ADA and discussed the importance of accommodations to combat ableist practices embedded in higher education, gatekeeping, and how disability can place students at higher risk for gatekeeping practices, and field education as a signature pedagogy. A gap in literature was located when looking at the understanding of the experience of students with disabilities as they apply their ADA accommodations within field education. This study will focus on filling this gap by interviewing students about their experiences. In the next section, I will discuss the research design, methodology, data analysis process, and ethical procedures to be used in this study.

Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the detailed experiences of MSW students with disabilities applying ADA accommodations during their field practicum placements at CSWE–approved schools of social work. In this section, I identify the research design, method, and data collection and analysis strategies used in this qualitative research study. The methodology section includes the prospective data, participant inclusion criteria, demographic survey, interview guide, and the process for the study. I also explain the data analysis plan and strategies for ensuring unbiased data. Lastly, I will describe the ethical procedures that ensured all participants were protected during the study.

Social work educators have a responsibility to uphold the profession while mentoring the next generation of social workers. Strengthening the next generation of social workers includes supporting individuals from diverse backgrounds. This work focused on the diverse population of disabled MSW students and explore how their experiences can be used to allow social work educators to create policies and programs that accommodate and support the successful completion of social work degrees. This research can potentially help shape the landscape of social work education for students with disabilities.

Research Design

This study was designed to uncover the experiences of social work students with disabilities as they apply ADA accommodations during their field placements at accredited schools of social work. The research question guiding this study is: How do MSW students with disabilities describe their experiences with applying ADA accommodations during their field practicum placements at CSWE-accredited schools of social work? A generic qualitative approach was used with in-depth qualitative interviews of 10-15 participants who are current MSW students or recent graduates. With in-depth qualitative interviews, I explored how participants apply meaning and examine nuanced differences in experiences (Ellis & Hart, 2023). This approach aligns with the purpose of the study by providing insight into students' experiences to fill the gap of limited qualitative research that explores the detailed experiences of MSW students with disabilities applying ADA accommodations during their field practicum placements at CSWE-approved schools of social work.

Methodology

Data

Data were collected from 12 interviews with current MSW students or recent MSW graduates from CSWE-accredited schools of social work. Each participant completed the informed consent via email and were then scheduled for a 60-minute Zoom call with the researcher. The interview started with the participant answering closed-ended demographic questions (Appendix A). Next, I conducted semi-structured

interviews with focused questions (Appendix B) regarding their experience. Zoom calls were audio recorded, and these recordings were then auto-transcribed. In addition to transcripts, I maintained a reflectivity log and field notes after each interview.

The interview questions focused on each student's unique experience as they navigated the process of applying for accommodations, interviewing, disclosing their accommodations, and ultimately receiving support to complete their field placement. The interview questions were developed using CDT and an understanding of student experiences based on the background literature. Following each interview, I engaged in reflexive journaling. Reflexive journaling included elements about subtle details of the interview so that these can be examined during data analysis (Meyer & Willis, 2019)

Participants

Participants were eligible for the study if they identified as having a disability and applied for ADA accommodations during their MSW degree. Participants were current students who had completed at least one field placement or had graduated in the last three years. Participants were recruited through Facebook, LinkedIn, and Reddit. Each participant who completed the interview process received a \$20 gift card to Amazon as a thank you for participating in the study.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants for this study because they needed to meet the inclusion criteria so that their experience could be discussed during interviews (Ellis, 2020). Data were evaluated for saturation to determine the final number of participants (Naeem et al., 2024). I estimated that there would be 10-15 participants

and ultimately interviewed 12 participants. Data saturation is an essential component of academic rigor in qualitative research and is achieved when new data does not produce additional new findings but rather replicates existing findings (Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024).

Instrumentation

I developed a demographic questionnaire that captured age, race, public or private college, online or in-person education, and the highest degree earned so that I can describe specific characteristics of study participants. I also developed an interview guide to guide the interview process (See Appendix B). This guide was based on best practices suggested from the literature and, further, based on the literature review and theory, with questions that supported my research question.

Data Analysis

I used the interview transcripts and field notes to code my data into themes that described participants' experiences applying disability accommodations during their field placements. The Zoom transcription service was used to obtain initial transcripts from interviews. I reviewed each transcript and recording to correct transcription errors. I used thematic analysis to review the interview transcripts and field notes and analyze and code my data. The coding process occurred using Microsoft Excel. Responses were assigned codes based on content and keywords, which were then refined until themes appeared. I sought themes that described the participant's experiences with applying disability accommodations during their field placements. As themes were revised, I also considered

possible alternatives and examined evidence through the CDT to be sure that the themes are credible and reach full topic saturation (Naeem et al., 2024). During the analysis process, I also examined my reflexive journal entries to monitor nuances and implicit biases that may have affected the data interpretation (Meyer & Willis, 2019).

Trustworthiness in qualitative research can be determined by examining the research's credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). Methods such as member checking can serve as evidence of credible results in qualitative studies focused on uplifting participant voices (Vella, 2024). Robust descriptive data to outline the process and procedures will increase the transferability of this study. Reflexive journaling will increase the dependability of the results by allowing control over research bias when interpreting themes. Results will be presented in a way that balances research interpretation with participant quotes to provide dependable results (Korstjens & Moser, 2017).

Member checking was used to ensure the accuracy of data and themes (Birt et al., 2016; Urry et al., 2024; Vella, 2024). Each participant received their transcript to review for accuracy within a week following the interview. Participation in member checking was voluntary for study participants to respect their time and effort (Vella, 2024). Participant autonomy is important as reading their spoken words in a written format may be difficult for some participants (Birt et al., 2016). A second round of member checking occurred approximately three weeks after the initial interview. Participants who opted into member checking received a summary of the themes and interpretations from their

interviews. Participants had the opportunity to read and comment on the analysis and share if there was anything they would like to change or elaborate on (Birt et al., 2016; Urry et al., 2024).

Ethical Procedures

This study was conducted to understand MSW students' experiences when applying ADA accommodations during their field placements. Participants were given information about the study prior to their interviews. Each participant was given an informed consent form via email, including a statement of confidentiality and privacy. Recruitment and data collection did not occur until approval was received from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Each participant was assigned an alias to protect their confidentiality. The researcher is the only person who has their identifying information. To uphold professional and academic integrity and respect my ethical responsibility to safeguard their confidentiality no names or identifying details will be used in the final study reports or findings. Once IRB approval was received, participants were scheduled for interviews via Zoom. Participants were able to ask questions via email and verbally before the interview started. All data was kept on a secure, password-protected laptop; I am the only person with the password to this laptop. Per Walden University standards, the data will remain saved on a secure computer file and will be deleted after 5 years.

Summary

I used a generic qualitative research design to explore MSW students' experiences applying ADA accommodations during their field placements. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted, coded, and analyzed to understand their experience. I used reflexive journaling and member checking to uphold the rigor and credibility of the results. All interview transcripts, field notes, and journal entries were analyzed, and transcripts were coded into codes, categories, and themes to answer the research question.

Section 3: Presentation of the Findings

This study was designed to examine the experiences of social work students with disabilities as they apply ADA accommodations during their field placements at accredited schools of social work. The research question that guided this study was: How do MSW students with disabilities describe their experiences with applying ADA accommodations during their field practicum placements at CSWE-accredited schools of social work? This section will provide an overview of the data analysis techniques, participants, themes, unexpected findings, and conclusions.

Data Analysis Techniques

After receiving approval from the Walden University IRB (03-12-25-1162736) in March, recruitment started with the posting of flyers on social media and professional networking sites, including LinkedIn, Facebook, and Reddit. Approximately 75 people responded to the advertisements; however, the majority of these did not meet the full inclusion criteria. Each potential participant was screened to make sure they had a disability and had applied for ADA accommodation during their MSW degree. In addition, participants needed to be current MSW students or have graduated in the last 3 years. Ultimately, 12 participants were approved through screening and scheduled for interviews. Recruitment and scheduling of interviews concluded in June 2025. Of the 12 interviews, two were excluded from the final data analysis due to inaccuracies within the answers and suspicion of participants providing false information during the screening process.

During the scheduling process, each participant received a copy of the informed consent form and responded via email, "I agree." Participants were provided with a Zoom link at the time and date of the interview. When participants logged into the Zoom interview, the informed consent form was reviewed again, and any questions from participants were answered. Once consent was obtained, the Zoom audio recording and transcription service were turned on. The demographic questions were asked first, and then the semi-structured interview questions were used to conduct an approximately 60-minute qualitative interview.

After the interview, I made brief field notes about the interview. Most of the interviews felt relaxed and as if the conversation flowed naturally regarding participants' experiences. I noted that in the two interviews that were ultimately excluded, it felt difficult to receive answers to questions, with participants responding with closed responses to open-ended questions. My field notes also indicated that the two excluded participants seemed to lack an understanding of the MSW curriculum. The final section of my field notes for each interview was a notation of important points or themes that emerged during the conversation.

Once interviews were concluded, I downloaded all transcripts from Zoom and listened to the audio while reviewing the transcripts to correct any transcription errors. The transcript was then sent to each participant via email to ensure accuracy. All participants approved their transcripts, and no additional information was added by any participants. The approved transcripts were then loaded into an Excel spreadsheet with

the interviewer responses and questions highlighted to focus on participant responses. I used the field notes and reviewed responses to generate initial codes. I had 436 initial coded segments, which I refined into 38 descriptive codes. These descriptive codes were refined by examining the data until I reached my final five themes. These themes are (a) nature of disability, (b) field placement as a critical challenge, (c) institutional barriers and bureaucracy, (d) exhausted self-advocacy, and (e) recommendations for change.

Table 1*Code Development Examples*

Initial code	Descriptive code	Final theme	
Had to explain disability multiple times Advisor didn't understand condition	Repeated documentation requests Lack of institutional disability structure	Institutional Barriers and Bureaucracy	
Denied accommodations due to vague documentation Felt dismissed by disability office Supervisors didn't follow approved plan Disability symptoms change daily Diagnosis came after starting the program Had to adjust academic life due to flare-ups Symptoms unpredictable day-to-day	Documentation burden and denial Unhelpful disability services Inconsistent implementation of accommodations Evolving disability symptoms Late-onset or evolving disability Impact of fluctuating conditions on participation Fluctuating impact on functioning		
Placement pulled after disclosure Didn't want to disclose on own Not sure what could be disclosed safely No one explained the accommodation process Experienced microaggressions in placement Had to advocate constantly	Field placement barriers Disclosure avoidance Disclosure dilemmas Lack of structured process		Nature and Onset of Disability
Felt ashamed of limitations Cultural expectations around self-reliance Internalized need to push through Wants faculty training	Field placement barriers Disclosure avoidance Disclosure dilemmas Lack of structured process		Field Placement as a Critical Challenge
Recommends planning accommodations early Wants disability discussed in curriculum Suggested creating standard access templates	Ableism and stigma at the placement site Emotional burden of self-advocacy Internalized ableism and shame Intersectional pressures Internalized ableism and shame Need for mandatory disability training Need for proactive planning	Exhausted Self-Advocacy	
	Disability visibility in social work education Proposals for systemic flexibility	Recommendations for Change	

Findings

Participants

The ten participants interviewed for this study were a diverse group in age, gender, race, and ethnicity. They also all attended different MSW programs from across the United States. The demographic information for the participants is included along with their pseudonyms in Table 2.

Table 2

Demographic Characteristics of Student Participants

Name	Age	Disability type	Race/ethnicity	Gender/pronoun	University type	Education type	Specialty area	Graduation
Amanda	36	Physical	White	Female (she/they)	Public	In person	Community Change	2025
Cori	53	Physical	Mestizo	Non-binary (they/them)	Public	Hybrid	Clinical	2023
Sasha	23	Physical	Multiracial White	Female (she/her)	Private	Hybrid	Macro Practice	2025
Sally	25	Physical and Mental	Black Mexican	Non-binary (she/they)	Public	In person	Direct Practice Mental Health	2026
Molly	26	Physical	African American	Female (she/her)	Private	In person	Macro Practice	2023
Ruby	26	Mental	African American	Male (he/his)	Private	Hybrid	Clinical MH	2024
Sandy	25	Mental	African American	Male (he/his)	Public	Online	Family Social Work	2024
Callie	47	Mental	Latina	Female (she/her)	Private	Online	Mental Health	2025
Lucy	29	Mental	Black Hispanic	Female (she/her)	Public	In person	Clinical Social Work	2025
Sam	29	Mental	White and MENA	Non-binary (they/them)	Public	In person	Community Organizing	2024

Note. MENA = Middle Eastern and North African.

Table 3 provides details about participants' disabilities and the accommodations they requested. The final column outlines accommodations that were denied or where only partial or impractical solutions were offered. For example, Cori, a deaf student, was

instructed to use other people's interpreters during field placement meetings. Cori expressed frustration at having to explain to the disability officer that each participant in a dynamic work environment requires their own interpreter to communicate effectively within the group. Similarly, Amanda was granted an accommodation to use a standing desk due to her disability; however, she reported that the desk was not consistently available in all spaces and was often being used by other students.

Table 3*Disabilities, Accommodations, and Accommodation Challenges Reported by Students*

Name	Disability	Disability accommodations	Accommodation challenges
Amanda	Neurogenic thoracic outlet syndrome	Transportation, transcription software, and a standing desk	Standing desk not guaranteed in all spaces; may be used by multiple students
Cori	Deaf	Interpretation services, preferred seating arrangements	Recommended to use someone else's interpreter
Callie	ADHD	Extra time on assignments, tutor	—
Sally	OCD/ADHD/PMDD	Extra time for assignments	Denied flexible attendance
Molly	Non-ambulatory wheelchair user	Seating arrangements, flexible deadlines, transportation	—
Ruby	Autism	Extended testing time, flexible deadlines for assignments	—
Sasha	Lymphoma cancer	Flexible deadlines	Received remote/hybrid classes and field, but had to negotiate herself
Sandy	Depression	Flexible scheduling, assistance with communication	—
Lucy	PTSD/Anxiety	Flexible attendance and deadlines, private study space	—
Sam	ADHD	Quiet study space and testing space, extra time on testing	Denied flexible due dates; denied written assignment instructions

Note. A dash (—) indicates that no specific challenges were reported.

Themes

Nature of Disability

Participants described a wide range of disabilities, differing in onset, diagnosis, and disclosure. Their accounts highlighted that disability is non-linear, complex, and

deeply intertwined with personal, medical, and academic life. While some entered their MSW programs managing long-standing chronic conditions, others experienced new or worsening health challenges during their studies. These narratives demonstrate that disability is not only a medical or diagnostic category but also a lived experience that intersects with identity and institutional processes.

The Person, The Navigator

A consistent sub-theme across many interviews was the presence of a person who helped participants navigate the process of applying for, receiving, and implementing accommodations. In some cases, this individual appeared early in the process, such as during admissions. In other cases, a field instructor stepped in, making phone calls and advocating to ensure the student received equitable treatment and access.

Amanda described that when her illness flared, she contacted the admissions staff, who responded immediately:

She immediately connected me to a bunch of people, and from there, Z|Ssx I got connected to everybody. It was probably the best process of dealing with any kind of healthcare-related thing I've ever gone through in my whole life. Definitely the best thing about the school I go to was how many people were in place to figure something out with me.

Ruby also emphasized how faculty helped guide her toward resources: "I was advised to apply for the other accommodations as the people around me knew the condition I had."

Cori recalled that their undergraduate field instructor's mentorship empowered them to pursue graduate education: "She was my mentor. She's one of the reasons I applied."

Callie identified her faculty liaison as her navigator:

She checks in with me even before we do our formal check-ins with my supervisor. She always asks if there's anything I want to share or anything coming up. She also reminds me to email her if an issue arises—she tells me not to wait until our next check-in.

For Molly, her primary support came from outside the school:

Once I started my placement, I worked closely with my first provider to ensure that everything was in place. It evolved, and I maintained ongoing dialogue with both my supervisor and the placement office. At times, I had to modify my accommodations, but my needs were generally met.

Students often indicated that the support they received depended on who they were working with, indicating a lack of institutional consistency. The inconsistent support created additional emotional burdens for students to carry as they navigated the challenging accommodation process.

Evolving Disabilities and Impact on Functioning

Many participants emphasized the fluid and evolving nature of their disabilities. They shared extensive histories of interactions with healthcare systems and explained the direct impact of ongoing medical involvement during their MSW education. Sasha

recounted, “I was diagnosed with cancer during the second semester, and it pretty much turned everything upside down.” Molly shared, “I had no idea until after my second year that I was actually autistic. Once I realized that, a lot made sense, but I had already been struggling for a long time.”

These evolving conditions meant that the need for accommodations was not static. This was especially true for participants with mental health disabilities. Several explained that while their conditions were invisible to others, they significantly affected field placement, communication, and academic performance. Callie shared, “My anxiety was so high that I couldn’t function in a full-time placement. But nobody saw it. I looked like I was doing okay.” Lucy added, “I had panic attacks before placement interviews. I didn’t even think that counted as a disability until someone at Disability Services told me it did.”

Some participants discussed their struggles within the medical system as well. The participant, Amanda, said, “It took me four different therapists before someone finally believed me about my ADHD.” The invisible nature of these disabilities sometimes made it easier to conceal them, but more difficult to have needs recognized. Several participants acknowledged internalized pressure to push through challenges rather than seek support.

Field Placement as a Critical Challenge

Overall, participants described field placements as sites of tension where their accommodations were frequently tested, denied, or proved insufficient. While classroom

instructors were generally able to adjust to meet students' needs during coursework, field sites offered less flexibility. The awareness, willingness, and ability of field instructors and agencies to provide accommodations varied significantly.

Disclosure Dilemmas

Participants reported differing strategies regarding when to disclose their disability to field sites. Some were disclosed during the interview process, while others waited until after a placement was secured. Many described fear of being judged, misunderstood, or treated differently because of their disability, leading to delayed disclosure. Callie recalled, "I was kind of just like thrown into it... I didn't really have time to fully even like say, like, 'Hey, I have a disability, like I need this.'"

This fear of being perceived as incapable led participants to strategically time their disclosure. Several noted they had fewer placement options compared to their non-disabled peers. Molly stated, "The placement process is competitive, and there were times when there were limited opportunities that might support my academic focus and the support I needed." Similarly, Callie described feeling forced into a specific placement, saying, "I only had one site to choose from."

Student narratives revealed subtle forms of structural exclusion and an underlying expectation that disabled students should conform to available environments rather than being placed in sites aligned with their practice areas. Participants recognized that disclosing their disability often narrowed their placement options. Instead of being

matched with agencies best suited to their academic interests, they were often directed toward sites familiar with accommodating students with disabilities.

Mismatch Between Needs and Expectations: Who is Responsible?

Participants frequently reported a misalignment between their individual needs and the expectations of placement agencies. Common issues included physically inaccessible offices, rigid schedules, and unmanageable caseloads. Even when accommodations were officially approved by the university, they were not always implemented at the placement site. Sasha reflected, “There wasn’t like, a policy. It was just like, ‘Well, we’ll see what your school says.’ And my school was like, ‘We don’t know, we’ll see what the site says.’”

This ambiguity placed the burden of negotiation on students—often without institutional support or clear communication between the university and the field site. The lack of coordination created tension and confusion, frequently leaving students caught in the middle. Although accommodations were technically granted by the university, agencies were often unaware of them or unwilling to implement them. Amanda described, “The agency had no idea that I was coming in with accommodations. Nobody had talked to them. And when I brought it up, they were like, ‘Well, nobody told us.’”

Lack of Structured Process and Communication

There is no process to clearly communicate the accommodations to field placements. While it is viewed as a course in the curriculum, it is not treated the same way in terms of applying the accommodations.

Sally described having to really stand up for herself and advocate to get the right type of accommodation. Her field instructor made a plan based on the communication from the school without the student's input, and she described:

So we kind of had a little bit of back and forth with it. But once I basically told them, hey. These accommodations that you gave to me and the way we went about the conversation was not helpful at all. They all kind of took a step back and were like okay. Sorry, that wasn't our intention. Let's like work it out together so it was rough at first, but we were able to kind of work through it.

Across all accounts, field placements were described not only as practical training experiences but also as sites of systemic failure. Students had to navigate a complex web of informal processes, institutional stigma, and inter-organizational ambiguity. This theme illustrates the persistent gap between written disability policy and the actual implementation of accommodations—particularly in off-campus professional environments.

Institutional Barriers, Bureaucracy

Participants' experiences with requesting, receiving, and using accommodations revealed a complicated and inconsistent process. While some students found their

institutions helpful and supportive, most described barriers related to documentation and communication. The process was rarely smooth, and accommodations were not always granted or implemented. Students invested significant emotional energy, labor, and persistence to have their rights upheld.

The Burden of Documentation

Participants often described the system as rigid, placing the burden on them to prove their needs. Institutions required repeated documentation and navigation of multiple approval layers. Sasha explained, “Every semester I had to re-prove that I had cancer. Like it was going to go away between August and December.” Others encountered strict deadlines. Sandy shared, “They said I needed official documentation. I had a letter from my therapist, but that wasn’t enough. I missed a deadline and had to wait another term.”

Ruby described the process as “very complicated and very technical... I had to provide recent medical documentation, attend a formal intake meeting, and convince a panel that accommodations were necessary. It felt investigative.” Similarly, Sam explained that their institution relied heavily on impersonal online systems: “I filled out a form online. And I never talked to anyone... it was all virtual.” This depersonalized approach created feelings of isolation and discouragement, compounding the emotional burden of bureaucracy.

These accounts revealed that disability is not a clear-cut category but shaped by access to diagnosis, trust in medical professionals, and the logistics of documentation.

For many, documentation itself became a barrier. Sandy noted, “I had to get paperwork from three different doctors. It was humiliating, honestly.” Ruby added, “The process took over a month, mainly due to delays in obtaining and approving the medical documentation.”

Supportive vs. Unhelpful Disability Services

Participants described mixed experiences with disability services. Positive accounts involved staff who were responsive, validating, and solution-focused. Lucy shared, “The Director of Disability Services was amazing. She actually listened to me and came up with ideas I hadn’t even thought of.” Negative experiences, however, reflected dismissiveness and suspicion. Amanda recalled, “It felt like I was being interrogated, like I was trying to cheat the system by asking for help.”

Overall, students felt that accommodations were treated less as rights and more as something to be earned. The process was inconsistent, shaped by institutional attitudes, procedural hurdles, and students’ persistence.

Exhausted Self-Advocacy

Even when accommodations were approved, participants often had to continually self-advocate, especially in field placements. Molly stated, “It wasn’t like you just get the accommodations and you’re good. I had to keep explaining to every single person what I needed and why.”

This ongoing advocacy became an emotional and intellectual burden, particularly for students already managing health challenges. Ruby admitted, “I almost gave up. I

didn't want to be the difficult student. But if I didn't speak up, nothing was going to happen." Students repeatedly emphasized frustration that responsibility for accommodations was placed on them rather than being embedded within program structures.

Intersectionality

Participant narratives highlighted that disability does not exist in isolation but intersects with race, gender, and cultural identity. Ableism is often compounded other forms of oppression. Molly reflected, "I'm nonbinary, and I already feel out of place in a lot of spaces. Adding disability on top of that just makes me want to stay quiet." Ruby noted, "As a Black woman, I'm already assumed to be strong and resilient. Saying I need help feels like I'm breaking some unspoken rule."

Cultural norms also influenced disclosure. Sally shared, "In my family, you don't talk about mental illness. You just push through. So asking for accommodations felt like admitting weakness." Participants with mental health challenges struggled with disclosure due to privacy concerns, while those with visible disabilities described stigma shaping daily interactions.

Internalized Ableism and Shame

Beyond external barriers, participants described internal struggles with shame and self-blame that delayed their pursuit of accommodations. Sam reflected, "I thought I had to just deal with it. Everyone else was coping, and I didn't want to make excuses." Cori

added, “It took me so long to ask for help because I didn’t want to be seen as incapable. I’ve always been the overachiever.”

These experiences underscore the need for intersectional, holistic support that affirms all aspects of student identity. Inclusive responses must recognize the influence of both past and present marginalization on how students interact with academic systems.

Recommendations for Change

Nearly all participants offered specific and thoughtful recommendations on how MSW programs could better support disabled students across both field placements and the broader curriculum. These suggestions, grounded in personal experiences and frustrations, reflected a desire for more equitable, flexible, and student-centered systems. Importantly, participants emphasized the need for structural change, not simply additional layers of support.

Systemic Flexibility and Trust

Participants expressed a strong desire for institutional systems that trust students’ self-knowledge and minimize gatekeeping. Recommendations included reducing documentation barriers, offering flexibility without stigma, and allowing individualized solutions rather than enforcing rigid protocols. Sasha explained, “They need to stop making us prove our disability over and over. It’s exhausting and it makes you feel like a fraud.” Amanda added, “Trust that we know what we need. I’ve been living with this disability for years, and I don’t need another assessment to tell me that.”

Participants advocated for a shift away from medical and compliance-based models toward collaborative approaches that validate lived experience. Students emphasized that they do not want to be seen as exploiting the system but as partners in creating solutions.

Proactive Planning and Communication

Participants stressed the importance of proactive planning in the field placement process. They noted that early communication could prevent delays, miscommunication, and last-minute crises that increase student stress. Lucy advised, “Start the process early. Talk to the students before they get placed, not after there’s a problem.” Similarly, Molly shared, “They need a clear plan. Who talks to the site? Who makes sure accommodations actually happen? Right now it’s a guessing game.”

Students emphasized that responsibility for initiating and coordinating accommodations should not fall solely on them. Instead, programs should foster collaborative and proactive planning.

Mandatory Training

Participants consistently highlighted the significant role faculty and staff play in shaping their experience—both positively and negatively. Cori reflected, “I was lucky, my advisor was amazing. But if she hadn’t been, I don’t know how I would’ve made it.” By contrast, Sam described, “Some professors just don’t get it. They roll their eyes when you ask for extra time or make a comment in class that makes you feel small.”

To address these disparities, participants recommended mandatory training for all faculty, staff, and field instructors. They emphasized that training should extend beyond legal compliance to include education on ableism, invisible disabilities, and best practices for creating supportive environments.

Students with disabilities are not only aware of the systemic barriers they face but are also uniquely positioned to propose meaningful and realistic solutions. Their recommendations reflect a shift from viewing disability as a deficit to be overcome toward recognizing it as an integral part of a student's identity. Furthermore, these recommendations reinforce social work's ethical and professional commitment to equity and inclusion.

Unexpected Findings

Several unexpected findings emerged in this study. Many participants described the emotional burden of self-advocacy in greater depth than anticipated. These burdens included fear of being perceived as difficult, unprofessional, or undeserving of services. While it was expected that students would carry some emotional strain, the intensity of their exhaustion was unanticipated.

Participants' experiences also revealed the interconnectedness of disability with other aspects of identity. Their reflections underscored the need to view disability as an intersectional form of marginalization that can compound with other identities, such as race, gender, or cultural background.

Another unexpected finding concerned the inconsistency and failures of institutional systems to provide meaningful support. Many students reported feeling discouraged from disclosing their disability and, in some cases, feared retaliation despite having significant needs.

Finally, during the recruitment screening process, I discovered that many potential participants were ineligible for the study because they had been denied ADA accommodations. Several participants further explained that many of the accommodations they requested were ultimately denied. These observations highlight critical gaps in access and suggest areas that warrant further exploration to deepen understanding of this issue.

Summary

This study explored how MSW students with disabilities described their experiences applying ADA accommodations during field practicum placements at CSWE-accredited schools of social work. The findings provide deeply personal accounts of navigating a system that was not designed for them, characterized by bureaucratic, inconsistent, and emotionally taxing barriers. While supportive individuals offered guidance and encouragement, their presence was overshadowed by significant challenges. Unclear communication between schools and placement sites, delays and denials of accommodations, and a lack of understanding from faculty and field instructors left many students feeling overwhelmed and exhausted. These narratives reveal not only

the mechanics of applying for accommodations but also the emotional, social, and structural complexities encountered in the process.

This study was grounded in CDT, which emphasizes that disability is not a personal defect or medical issue to be corrected but a social category shaped by systems of power, exclusion, and control (Arstein-Kerslake & Black, 2020). Participants' accounts exposed institutional ableism, as they were repeatedly forced to prove their disability and engage in relentless self-advocacy. The accommodation system described by students appeared focused more on protecting institutions than supporting individuals. Rigid protocols positioned faculty, field offices, and disability services as gatekeepers. Inaccessible environments fostered exclusion and institutional failure, failures that could be addressed by designing and implementing equitable, accessible educational services.

The findings call for a shift away from reactive, compliance-based medical models toward proactive, collaborative frameworks. This vision of inclusion aligns with CDT's emphasis on structural rather than individual transformation.

Section 4: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change

This study examined how MSW students with disabilities describe their experiences applying ADA accommodations during field placements at CSWE-accredited schools of social work. The purpose was to identify the barriers, strategies, and institutional dynamics that shape access to and use of accommodations during placements. Despite social work's commitment to equity and inclusion, this issue has received limited attention in research and practice. Grounded in CDT, the study centered on the direct experiences of disabled students to generate recommendations for accessibility, institutional responsibility, and reform in field education.

Discussion

Theme 1 – Nature of Disability

The first theme pulled from the data addressed the nature of participants' disabilities as deeply personal and complex. Stories highlighted students' evolving self-understanding as well as the long-term impact of navigating medical and institutional systems. Consistent with earlier scholarship on stigma (Grimes et al., 2020; Morina, 2022), the findings demonstrate how stigma and ableism shaped participants' placement experiences. This finding echoes Grady et al. (2020), who discussed the significant role of relationships with faculty, staff, and classmates in implicit curriculum. This was validated in this research with the critical component of support in students having positive experiences. Amanda reflected, "feeling seen" by a field coordinator made the difference between continuing in the program or considering withdrawal, further

validating Grady et al.'s assertions. Participants expressed fear of being viewed as unprofessional, which aligns with Singh and MacDonald's (2022) research about students with disabilities internalizing ableist professional norms. Cori described this tension as "always needing to prove that my disability doesn't make me less capable," while Molly shared that she "hid" aspects of her condition during fieldwork to avoid judgment. This theme underscores the complexity of disability when negotiated with internalized ableism and professional identity.

Theme 2 – Field Placement as a Critical Challenge

The second theme, field placement as a critical challenge, revealed that unstructured communication, reactive planning, and inconsistent accommodation processes created barriers. This finding echoes prior research noting that field education is often the most difficult component of the MSW curriculum for students with disabilities, as accommodations may not easily translate to practicum settings (Cox et al., 2022; Kiesel et al., 2018; Sellmaier & Kim, 2021). Cox et al. (2022) argued that the lack of consistency in how placements address disability contributes to confusion, stigma, and delayed access to support. In this study, Sasha described "feeling like the middle person between offices that didn't talk to each other." Sasha's experience describes the observation by Kiesel et al. (2018), who assert that institutional silos exacerbate fieldwork barriers. Similarly, Ruby described being "told to contact three different people before anyone would actually confirm what my accommodation even meant for field,"

highlighting how the burden for communication and coordination is placed on the student rather than owned by the institution.

Additionally, disclosure dilemmas were a prominent discussion from participants like Sally, who described “strategically deciding who to tell about but my disability”. Their experience is similar to Sellmaier and Kim’s (2021) research on selective disclosure, where students described a need to weigh trust, timing, and professional consequences against their fear of reprisal. The participant voices validate and extend prior research by illustrating how the unstructured process and unclear communication intensify student anxiety and create disclosure dilemmas for students.

Theme 3 – Institutional Barriers and Bureaucracy

The third theme focused on institutional barriers and bureaucratic obstacles, such as burdensome documentation requirements, delayed approvals, and inconsistent disability services. These barriers hindered participants from having equitable access to field placements. This theme builds upon Strimel et al. (2023), who observed that lengthy processes often follow disclosure of accommodation needs. However, this study adds nuance by showing that such processes are not always beneficial and often further replicate ableist standards. Participants reported fewer placement options and reduced personalization in the placement process after disclosure. For example, Amanda shared that “every office needed a different form, and by the time I got approved, the placement I wanted was gone.” Amanda’s experience illustrates Titchkosky’s (2020) argument that bureaucracy showcases disability as noncompliance or rule-breaking. Similarly, Sandy

reflected, “It feels like the system is designed to exhaust you before you can even get the help.” These stories reveal that institutional procedures, in practice, deny access to disabled students through inflexibility.

Participants also shared that institutional policies prioritized liability and compliance over collaboration, which fits well with Dolmage’s (2017) concept of academic ableism. Cori described, “it’s like the process is there to protect the school, not to actually help the students.” Narratives like this resonate with McGinley et al. (2024), who reported that disability references in field education manuals were predominantly legalistic rather than supportive. When examined together, these stories highlight how bureaucratic structures continue the cycle of inequality by framing disability as an administrative problem, rather than a form of diversity.

Theme 4 – Exhausted Self-Advocacy

The fourth theme emphasized the emotional and psychological toll of self-advocacy, shaped by intersectionality and ableism. Participants described exhaustion, anxiety, and discouragement as a consistent theme in their educational journey. Their descriptions are consistent with Abes and Darkow (2020), who documented how disabled students internalize ableist norms within higher education, and with Kattari et al. (2020), who found that self-exclusion often traces back to the chronic emotional burden of advocacy. Sally expressed that “by the time I got my accommodation approved, I didn’t have the energy left to advocate for myself in the field.”

Participant stories, such as Ruby, who described “always being the one to explain disability to others,” and how this caused her to feel “invisible until something went wrong,” mirror Beddoe et al. (2023), who found that placement-related stress and stigma intensify disabled students’ sense of isolation. Participant reflections revealed that emotional fatigue is not an individual failing but a response to ableist environments that privilege normative functioning. This is supported by Nieminen and Pesonen’s (2022) argument for anti-ableist pedagogy that reduces the emotional labor of disabled students. Like participants in More (2023), the participants in this study described moments of resilience, but those moments emerged in spite of systemic conditions, not because of institutional support.

Theme 5 – Recommendations for Change

The final theme presented participants’ visions for creating more inclusive and equitable field education. Their recommendations included increased flexibility, institutional trust, early planning, and faculty and field staff training. These recommendations support prior scholarship on the need for multi-faceted approaches to inclusive learning environments and systemic reform (Aguirre et al., 2021; Dhilon et al., 2023; Gross, 2025; McGinley et al., 2024). Many participants called for institutional trust, which echoes Aguirre et al. (2021), who argued that meaningful inclusion requires multi-level cultural, structural, and curricular change. Ruby captured this well by stating, “I don’t need special treatment, I need people who understand disability.” Goulden

(2020) emphasized this point by arguing that disability competence is an ethical imperative in social work education.

Amanda suggested that “flexibility needs to be built in from the start; students shouldn’t have to fight for it.” This aligns with Dhillon et al.’s (2023) findings that proactive, collaborative planning among coordinators, disability offices, and placement sites enhances equity. Participants also emphasized appropriate support for intersectionality, which is consistent with Hogan (2024) and Beddoe et al. (2023), who highlighted the compounding barriers experienced by students whose marginalized identities intersected with their disability. These participant-led recommendations extend the literature by offering practice-based insight into what anti-ableist field education could look like. Rather than continuing the tradition of reactive accommodation, these participants envisioned field systems that were built on trust, open communication, and structural flexibility.

Together, these findings affirm and extend existing scholarship by highlighting the systemic and emotional dimensions of disability accommodation in social work field education. They call for social work programs to move toward inclusive and equitable curricular practices that align with social work ethics and CDT. This discussion interprets these findings into best practice recommendations and concludes with implications for advancing equity in social work education.

Alignment With Critical Disability Theory (CDT)

The findings of this study are strongly aligned with the central assumptions of CDT, which reframes disability not as a deficit within the individual but as a socially, culturally, and politically constructed experience shaped by ableist norms (Hiranandani, 2019; Van Aswegen, 2019). In contrast to medical or deficit models that locate the problem within the body or mind of the individual, CDT asserts that disability emerges from environments, policies, and institutions that privilege normative, able-bodied functioning (Liasidou, 2014). This theoretical orientation is crucial for understanding the experiences of MSW students with disabilities because it shifts responsibility from the individual student to the systems and structures that create or exacerbate barriers.

Participants in this study consistently described barriers that did not arise from their impairments themselves but from how institutions responded, or rather failed to respond, to their needs. For example, inaccessible field placements, bureaucratic delays, and repeated documentation requirements were not consequences of students' conditions but of systems designed without their participation. This distinction illustrates a central tenet of CDT: that exclusion, stigma, and inaccessibility are products of social and institutional design, not inevitable outcomes of a disability (Meekosha & Shuttleworth).

Benevolent Bureaucracy and Institutional Gatekeeping

The findings strongly support Strimel et al. (2023), who argue that ableism in higher education is maintained through benevolent bureaucracy. Benevolent bureaucracy is demonstrated when institutions claim to support students through formal

accommodation systems, yet in practice, they reinforce distrust, gatekeeping, and invisibility (Ho, 2021; Strimel et al., 2023). This study's participants echoed this dynamic by describing how they were required to repeatedly prove the legitimacy of their disabilities, provide updated medical documentation each term, or navigate multiple layers of approval before receiving even basic accommodations. These were not isolated oversights but systemic practices that positioned disabled students as exceptions to be managed, rather than integral members of the academic community.

From a CDT perspective, such practices illustrate how ableism operates through procedural norms and institutional culture. Bureaucratic requirements appear neutral on the surface, but in practice signal distrust of disabled students and delegitimize their lived expertise (Titchkosky, 2020). Participants' experiences with delayed or denied accommodations, inconsistent communication, and depersonalized online systems reveal how institutions enact exclusion while claiming compliance. This illustrates CDT's critique that systems often protect institutional interests rather than promoting equity and inclusion (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009).

Reactive vs Proactive Approaches

The study also affirms the call by Sellmaier and Kim (2021) to move beyond reactive, compliance-driven accommodation models toward proactive, disability-affirming approaches. Participants consistently emphasized the need for early planning, proactive communication, and structural flexibility. Their accounts make clear that

barriers arise not from disability itself but from institutional inaction and resistance to adaptation.

For example, students described being left to initiate accommodations, clarify responsibilities, and coordinate across multiple stakeholders, a process that often led to delays, miscommunication, and exhaustion. Rather than waiting for students to request help, CDT suggests that institutions should anticipate diverse needs and design systems that are accessible from the outset (Hiranandani, 2019).

This also resonates with Arstein-Kerslake and Black's (2020) discussion of supported decision-making, which challenges the presumption that professionals or administrators know best. Participants described wanting to be recognized as the experts of their own lives, capable of articulating their access needs. Yet, their requests were frequently scrutinized, delayed, or second-guessed. CDT's framework provides a lens to critique these practices as forms of epistemic injustice, where disabled people's knowledge of their own experiences is devalued (Van Aswegen, 2019).

Impact of Intersectionality

One of the ways this study extends CDT is by documenting how ableism intersects with other forms of marginalization. Participants described how race, gender identity, and cultural expectations compounded their experiences of disability. For example, Black participants reported that cultural stereotypes of strength and resilience heightened feelings of shame when seeking support. Nonbinary participants expressed concerns that their identities already placed them at risk of exclusion, and by adding

disability, the risk grew exponentially. Others noted that cultural norms against discussing mental illness made disclosure particularly difficult.

These findings resonate with Burghardt et al. (2021), who argue that disability cannot be understood in isolation but must be analyzed as one component within a broader viewpoint of oppression. Similarly, Hiranandani (2019) emphasizes that CDT must take an explicitly intersectional approach to remain relevant and effective. The participants' stories demonstrate how internalized ableism was often compounded by racism, sexism, or cultural stigma, resulting in layered barriers to accessing accommodations.

By situating disability within a broader web of identity and oppression, this study reinforces CDT's intersectional turn and highlights the need for holistic institutional responses. Disability support cannot be divided from other equity efforts; instead, institutions must recognize how multiple forms of marginalization come together to shape student experiences.

Extending CDT in Social Work Education

The findings of this study confirm CDT's critique of ableism while also extending its insights in meaningful ways for social work education. First, they demonstrate how field education operates as a critical site of exclusion. While previous CDT applications have often focused on higher education broadly, this study shows how the unique structures of field placements, external sites, multiple stakeholders, and professional expectations magnify existing barriers. Second, the findings illustrate the emotional and

psychological consequences of bureaucratic ableism, particularly the exhaustion of self-advocacy. By documenting the toll of repeated justification and systemic distrust, the study extends CDT's focus on structural exclusion to include the internalized effects of ableism on students' sense of self and belonging.

Finally, this study highlights the potential of CDT as a framework for institutional change. By centering disabled students' expertise, the findings move beyond critique to generate concrete recommendations for practice. These include reducing documentation burdens, implementing proactive planning processes, training faculty and field staff in disability inclusion, and reframing accommodations as rights rather than exceptions. In doing so, this study underscores CDT's value not only as a theoretical lens but also as a practical guide for creating equitable social work education.

These implications point to the importance of applying CDT more fully within social work education, not only as a theoretical framework for research but as a practical guide for program design, policy development, and faculty training. By embracing CDT, social work programs can move toward proactive, inclusive, and equity-driven approaches that model the very principles of justice and dignity the profession seeks to advance.

Application to Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice

This study has direct relevance to the ethical foundations of social work, particularly as described in the NASW Code of Ethics (2021). The Code emphasizes the central role of values such as dignity and worth of the person, self-determination, and

commitment to social justice. The findings from this study reveal ways in which these principles are both affirmed and undermined within higher education and field education settings. By examining participants' narratives through the lens of professional ethics, this section highlights the urgent need for systemic reform in social work education and provides direction for educators, administrators, and field instructors.

Two principles are particularly salient in relation to the findings of this study: (a) respecting the right to self-determination, and (b) social justice. The participants' stories bring these ethical commitments to life and expose gaps between social work's professional ideals and the current realities of field education.

Respecting the Right to Self-Determination

The NASW Code of Ethics obligates social workers to respect and promote individuals' right to self-determination, which includes the right to make choices about their own lives and circumstances (NASW, 2021). Within the context of disability, self-determination requires institutions to recognize students as experts on their own needs and to create systems that honor personal experiences rather than requiring repeated justification. Strong accommodations require trust and communication between students, field sites, and educators (Dhillon et al., 2024).

The findings of this study, however, revealed that institutional processes often undermined students' self-determination. Participants described bureaucratic structures that imposed rigid documentation requirements, doubted the legitimacy of their disabilities, or restricted their choices in field placement options once they disclosed

accommodation needs. For example, one participant described the exhaustion of repeatedly having to “prove” a disability every semester, while another reported delays and denials due to narrowly defined documentation policies. These practices implicitly framed disability as something to be proved and placed students in the position of defending their legitimacy, directly contradicting the ethical obligation to affirm autonomy.

Respecting self-determination in practice would require a shift in how accommodations are conceptualized and implemented, and their impact on student learning plans and outcomes (More, 2025). Rather than positioning accommodations as something to be earned, institutions should view them as essential rights. Participants’ recommendations, such as reducing documentation barriers, creating flexible processes, and trusting students’ self-knowledge, echo this ethical imperative. By centering students’ voices and acknowledging them as collaborative partners in shaping their educational environment, programs would align more fully with both CDT and professional ethics (Abes & Darkow, 2020; Nieminen, 2022).

Challenging Institutional Barriers and Promoting Equity

A second principle highlighted by this study is the ethical responsibility for social justice by challenging social injustice and actively working to dismantle conditions that create or perpetuate oppression (NASW, 2021). Participants’ narratives illustrated how ableism is embedded within higher education policies and practices, particularly in field education, where accommodations were found to be inconsistent or unavailable. The

bureaucratic hurdles participants encountered, including burdensome documentation, unclear communication, and inconsistent faculty support, functioned as systemic barriers that limited access and equity (Titchkosky, 2020).

The NASW Code of Ethics requires social workers to recognize and challenge such institutional inequities (NASW, 2021). For educators and administrators, this involves critically examining policies and practices that disadvantage students with disabilities and adopting proactive measures to ensure accessibility (McGinley et al., 2024). For example, programs might create standardized processes for communicating accommodation needs to field sites, provide training for field instructors, and anticipate common challenges rather than leaving responsibility for resolution to students.

The findings of this study extend the ethical conversation by showing that inequitable systems not only deny students resources but also inflict psychological and emotional harm. Participants described feelings of shame, frustration, and isolation as they navigated hostile or dismissive systems. Such harm underscores the profession's responsibility to advocate for systemic change rather than placing the burden of adaptation solely on students (Goulden, 2020).

Relevance to Ethical Practice in Social Work Education

Social work education carries the dual responsibility of teaching ethical principles and modeling them in practice. When institutions fail to provide equitable accommodations, they not only harm individual students but also compromise the integrity of social work education as a professional training ground (Dhillon et al., 2024;

Dolmage, 2017). As several participants observed, faculty attitudes and responses significantly shaped their experiences, sometimes offering critical support, but often undermining inclusion. This inconsistency reflects a broader lack of accountability in higher education systems and highlights the need for structural reform.

Faculty and field educators in particular hold ethical obligations to advocate for accessible, inclusive systems (Gross, 2025). The findings from this study suggest that ethical practice requires moving beyond minimal legal compliance to embrace the spirit of equity and justice (Dolmage, 2017). This includes ensuring that field placement processes, communication protocols, and supervision structures actively work to support student success rather than creating additional obstacles (Van Aswegen, 2019).

Moreover, ethical practice extends beyond explicit accommodations to the implicit curriculum, the cultural and relational dynamics that shape students' experiences. As participants described, ableism manifested not only in policies but also in microaggressions, stigma, and assumptions about disability. Addressing these dynamics requires cultivating an inclusive culture, challenging ableist assumptions, and fostering environments where students feel respected and supported in all aspects of their identity.

Implications for Professional Ethics

Taken together, these findings reinforce the alignment between CDT and social work ethics. Both frameworks emphasize the need to dismantle oppressive systems, affirm individual autonomy, and create structures that promote equity and access. More (2023) argues that social work pedagogy must move beyond an accommodation mindset

to one where we actively challenge ableist systems that exclude disabled students.

Nieminen and Pesonen (2022) highlight that anti-ableist pedagogy requires educators to transform institutional practices rather than expect students to adapt to inaccessible environments. For social work educators, this means not only responding to student accommodation requests but also proactively reimagining systems of support to ensure accessibility is embedded within the fabric of education.

Dhillon et al. (2023) found that field educators often feel constrained by rigid institutional policies, which suggest that ethical practice requires organizational change, not individual adjustment. McGinley et al. (2024) demonstrated that field education manuals tend to frame disability through a compliance or risk management lens, rather than through inclusion or trust. This study extends that conversation by showing that students are calling for reform that aligns with social work ethical principles.

Ethical practice in social work education requires moving from reactive, compliance-based approaches toward proactive, collaborative frameworks. This approach is supported by Goulden (2020), who identified disability competence as a professional and ethical responsibility for educators. This includes trusting students as experts of their own needs, creating flexible and responsive systems, and embedding accessibility into the design of field education. By doing so, programs can model the profession's commitment to equity and justice, preparing future social workers to carry these values into their practice.

In summary, this study highlights how ethical principles are not abstract ideals but lived realities that shape students' experiences in profound ways. The findings challenge social work educators to embody the values of their profession by ensuring that field education is inclusive, equitable, and consistent with the ethical commitments of social work.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice

Drawing directly from participant experiences and supported by existing literature, this section presents best practice recommendations grounded in the thematic findings and informed by CDT. These are intended for schools of social work, field placement coordinators, and disability support services. They reflect participants' calls for institutional reform and align with social work's ethical commitments to social justice, dignity, self-determination, and competence. Rather than a focus on reactive compliance, these recommendations emphasize proactive, inclusive practices that value disabled students' expertise to collaboratively create conditions for student success.

Trust Students' Self-Knowledge

Participants consistently emphasized that they are the experts in their own access needs. Their accounts align with literature that critiques the medical model and bureaucratic practices that force students to repeatedly prove and disclose their disability (Gross, 2025; Titchosky, 2020). Honoring students' self-knowledge builds on the knowledge and strength of their lived experience and affirms dignity, ultimately reflecting disability justice principles (Abes & Darkow, 2020; More, 2025). Disability

services can move towards collaborative practices such as accepting prior documentation and minimizing reassessment. These practices affirm trust and build relationships, rather than build barriers and mistrust (McGinley et al., 2024).

Integrate Disability Access Early in Field Placement Planning

Students describe the challenges of navigating late or reactive accommodation processes. They called for accessibility to be embedded at the very start of field placement planning, before placements were finalized. This aligns with findings that early, proactive planning reduces barriers and supports equity in field education (Dhillon et al., 2023; Gross, 2025). Establishing structured coordination among disability services, field staff, and placement sites, without placing the burden of coordination on students, creates a more consistent and supportive system (Hogan, 2024; McGinley et al., 2024).

Provide Mandatory Training on Disability Inclusion and Anti-Ableism

Participants described inconsistent and sometimes even harmful responses from faculty and field instructors. The literature supports that inconsistent preparation leads to exclusionary or even harmful practices (Beddoe et al., 2023; Charles et al., 2025). Mandatory triaging on disability inclusion, anti-ableism, and anti-oppressive practice promotes more effective responses (Goulden, 2020; Nieminen, 2022). To support the wide range of disabilities, these trainings should include content on invisible disabilities, fluctuating conditions, and internalized ableism to enhance understanding and ensure that placements promote belonging rather than exclusion (Wischnewksy et al., 2023).

Offer Flexible, Individualized Accommodation Options

Models that take a one-size-fits-all approach do not meet the diverse needs of disabled students, especially in field settings. Participants highlighted flexible placement structures such as part-time models, remote or hybrid options, and non-traditional hours as particularly supportive. This is consistent with research on individualized accommodations in professional training programs (Dhillon et al., 2024; Gross, 2025). Field instructors can also reduce barriers by utilizing practices such as flexible caseload assignments, adaptive supervision strategies, and ongoing conversations to evolving accommodation needs (Be, 2019; Edelist et al., 2024). These strategies not only respond to barriers but also recognize flexibility as a professional strength (Dolmage, 2017).

Ensure Clear, Consistent Communication Between All Stakeholders

A recurring theme in participants' accounts was confusion over who was responsible for communication between disability services, field offices, and placement sites. This uncertainty led to students carrying the burden of communication coordination. The literature also documents that communication gaps create barriers and delays (McGinley et al., 2024). Establishing transparent and proactive communication procedures with clearly defined roles and responsibilities reduces this burden and fosters accountability in the process (Charles et al., 2025). Consistent processes and information-sharing agreements or templates can ensure that communication is consistent, student-centered, and responsive (Altes et al., 2020).

Acknowledge and Address Intersectionality in Disability Support

Lastly, it is important to understand the complexity of intersectionality and how all aspects of identity impact student experiences. The participants' stories confirm scholarship that critiques bureaucratic and universal approaches to disability support (Beddoe et al., 2023; Hogan, 2024). Embracing trauma informed, culturally responsive practice invites students to bring their full identities into the learning environment. These approaches affirm intersectionality and support multi-dimensional approaches to disability support (Cox et al., 2022; Van Aswegen & Shevlin, 2019).

These recommendations offer a way forward to more ethical, inclusive, and effective support for disabled students in social work education. These guidelines not only reflect what students need, but what they deserve. They create a system that honors their knowledge, respects their identities, and removes institutional barriers to their success.

Implications for Personal Practice

As a social work practitioner and an educator, these findings will have significant implications for my practice and engagement with students, colleagues, and clients. Through this research, I have deepened my understanding of how institutional systems can unintentionally reproduce ableism, even under the guise of providing support. As Titchkosky (2020) critiqued the bureaucratic systems that position disabled individuals as noncompliant, I must also examine these ableist policies and procedures to determine if rigid procedures are required to meet educational goals and outcomes. I must examine

these institutional barriers to understand that standard processes are excluding students who are already marginalized (Dolmage, 2017).

This research has made me more attuned to the emotional labor of self-advocacy, which Beddoe et al. (2023) described as an invisible burden. I intend to approach accommodation processes with greater empathy, flexibility, and trust. Student disclosures can create vulnerability (Abes & Darkow, 2020), and I must approach conversations with increased empathy and flexibility to build trust. I plan to use these findings to support ongoing advocacy efforts for students with disabilities and the creation of more inclusive policies within social work education. I plan to implement proactive planning strategies when I am working and supporting students by ensuring that communication is transparent, collaborative, and student-centered. I recognize that I cannot do this work alone, but rather, as Dhillon et al. (2023) emphasized, to create equitable field education, I will need to collaborate with my students, other educators, disability services, and agencies.

Transferability and Usefulness

While the focus of this study was disabled MSW students navigating field placements, its findings may be transferable across a wide range of social work and professional educational contexts. The barriers and emotional toll that participants described reflect the experiences faced by disabled clients, professionals, and community members across service and educational systems. Themes such as the burden of documentation, lack of systemic coordination, and the invisibility of fluctuating

disabilities are not unique to academia. Social workers in policy, clinical, and organizational settings can apply insights from this research to enhance accessibility and inclusion. The emphasis on institutional accountability, proactive support, and trust in self-determination has relevance not only in social work practice but in other professional educational areas as well.

This study offers practical, research-informed insights that can benefit the broader field of social work across several key areas, including practice, research, and policy. This study highlights the importance of inclusive supervision, disability informed training for educators, and a student-centered accommodations model. All of these can be translated into clinical and field-based practice within social work education, but also within other professional degree programs. This study also encourages further scholarship and research that centers the voices of disabled individuals and critically examines systemic structures, rather than focusing on individual deficits.

The findings from this study also highlight the need for clearer, more consistent policies around disability disclosure and field placement accommodations. They also support the inclusion of disability as a form of diversity. When brought together, these insights can help social workers challenge ableism within their own institutions and advocate for broader change within professional systems.

Limitations

The findings of this study are context-specific and are not intended to be generalized to all disabled MSW students. The sample, while rich in detail, included

participants from a limited number of schools. Additionally, participants self-selected to be in this study, potentially skewing the sample towards those with more challenging or significant experiences. Despite these limitations, the study's trustworthiness is supported by the depth of the data, the use of participant quotes throughout the analysis, and a documented coding process that included the use of field notes in the development of themes. I also allowed participants to review transcripts and provide edits to increase the reliability of the data.

Recommendations for Future Research

This research was exploratory in nature and creates many avenues for future research. I recommend exploring the perspectives of field instructors, disability services staff, and field placement advisors to deepen the understanding of systemic gaps from multiple vantage points. I also recommend a thorough investigation of the experiences of disabled students with intersecting marginalized identities. In addition, I believe that to gather a full picture, the experiences of students who apply for and are denied, and students with disabilities who choose not to apply for accommodations, should be explored. Lastly, I recommend that follow-up studies on the implementation and impact of recommended changes should be conducted. These recommendations build upon the strengths of this study and explore areas that were acknowledged but not addressed within this study.

Dissemination of Findings

The impact of this research should extend beyond academic settings. As such, I recommend a dual approach to dissemination of this work. To start this research can be presented at national conferences such as the National Association of Social Workers, Council of Social Work Education, or Society for Social Work and Research. These venues would ensure that results reach educators, practitioners, and policy influencers. Secondly, articles can be developed for publication to allow accessible and actionable versions of the recommendations to reach field supervisors, educators, and program administrators. The dissemination of the voices and insights of this study is central to promoting institutional learning and advancing inclusive social work practice.

Implications for Social Change

The findings of this study carry important implications for broader social change, particularly in how disability is understood, accommodated, and supported within systems of professional education. This research centers the voices of disabled MSW students in order to challenge dominant narratives that treat disability as a private and individual problem. Instead, this work highlights accessibility as a collective and institutional responsibility.

This study contributes to ongoing efforts to shift social work education, and higher education more broadly, towards models that are proactive, inclusive, and justice oriented. Disabled students deserve to be trusted, supported, and fully included in field placements. When this happens, the profession benefits from their critical insights, lived

experiences, and resilience. In contrast, when institutions maintain ableist structures and place the burden of access on the individual, they reinforce social exclusion and perpetuate inequality.

The implications of this work overall extend beyond higher education accommodation policies. They showcase a need for a cultural shift in how disability is perceived and pushing from deficit to diversity, from risk to strength. Disability should be integrated as a core component of diversity, equity, and inclusion work within social work programs. This would help dismantle the deeply embedded stigma and silence that many students described. This requires not only changes in practice, but also in institutional values, messaging, and leadership.

In addition, the CDT framework of this study invites schools of social work to critically examine their role in upholding ableist systems. Rather than waiting for legal mandates or isolated complaints, institutions can take leadership by being proactive in creating environments that center justice, anticipate access needs, and encourage a sense of belonging. These steps reflect the broader social work mission to challenge oppression and promote human dignity.

Ultimately, improving how disabled students are supported in field education is not only about meeting compliance standards. It is a significant and powerful way to model the kind of inclusive, equity-driven practice that social workers are expected to bring into the world. The transformation must start in the profession itself, and this study sheds light on one possible path forward.

Summary

This section examined the experiences of disabled MSW students navigating ADA accommodations in field education, interpreted through five key themes and grounded in CDT. The discussion highlighted how institutional ableism, communication breakdowns, and the emotional toll of self-advocacy shape students' access to equitable learning environments—while also underscoring how their insights provide powerful directions for systemic change.

The study contributes to existing literature by centering disabled student voices, extending theoretical frameworks into applied education settings, and generating ethically aligned, actionable recommendations. These findings not only affirm social work's professional values of equity, inclusion, and self-determination but also call for a deeper transformation in how disability is conceptualized and addressed in social work education.

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Appendix A: Demographic Survey

Age

Disability (Mental / Physical / Both)

Race

Ethnicity

Gender

Pronouns

Public or Private University (MSW degree)

Online or In Person Education (MSW degree)

Specialization (Macro/Micro/Generalist)

Field Placement Category (Child Welfare, Mental Health, Hospital, etc.)

Graduation Year (MSW degree)

Highest Degree Attained

Appendix B: Interview Guide

- 1) Please tell me about your disability.
 - a) Probe – When were you diagnosed?
 - b) Probe – If you had your disability in high school and during undergraduate did you use accommodations then?
 - i) Probe – IEP or 504
- 2) Please describe your experience going to the Office of Disability Services to apply for disability accommodation.
 - a) Probe – Time Frames (how long did the process take)
 - b) Probe – Classes (did they automatically accept field placement as a class?)
 - c) Probe – How were the actual accommodations determined?
 - d) Probe – Obstacles or challenges to receiving accommodations.
 - e) Probe – Did the disability officer remain engaged in your education? Did they check in with you frequently?
- 3) What was your relationship with your field advisor (individual who helped you find a placement) at your school?
 - a) Probe - Did they discuss your field placement accommodations with you?
 - i) Probe - If so, what was that conversation like?
 - b) Probe – Did you feel comfortable discussing your disability and field-related needs with them?

- 4) Tell me about the process of getting a field placement during your social work education.
 - a) Probe – Interview Process (How many interviews, type of interview, things discussed during interview)
- 5) Do you feel like your disability affected the process of finding a field placement?
 - a) Probe – If yes, please describe how.
 - b) Probe – Did you feel like your choices were limited or different compared to other students?
- 6) Please describe any concerns you had about working at the agency that came to mind during the interview process and describe how these concerns were linked to your disability.
- 7) Tell me about the agency where you completed your field placement during your social work education.
 - a) Probe – Service setting/ population served/ role and responsibilities
- 8) Please describe the conversation when you disclosed your accommodations to the field site.
 - a) Probe – Did you feel supported in this conversation? If so, how? If not -Why not?
 - b) Probe – Time Frame
 - c) Probe – Did your field site or field advisor follow up with you after the discussion?

- 9) Please describe any obstacles or challenges you encountered during your field placement related to your disability.
 - a) Probe – Support in overcoming the challenges (from whom)
- 10) Were there any instances where your field placement attempted to provide help that you did not need or ask for?
 - a) Probe - If so, can you please provide an example?
- 11) Do you have any recommendations about what support for students applying for accommodation in field placements should look like?
 - a) Probe – Who should be involved?
- 12) Is there anything else you want to share related to this topic?