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Naming and claiming: The tension between institutional and self-identification of disability

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Abstract

The relationship between the social construction and self-identification of disability is complex and has been integral to the work of critical disability scholars (Ben-Moshe, Chapman & Carey, 2014; Davis, 2013; Erevelles, 2011; Yergeau, 2018). In 2006-07 and 2016-17, the Toronto District School Board conducted a student census and asked students to identify whether they had a disability that was assessed by either their doctor or school. Interestingly, the proportion of students who self-identified as having a disability was only a fraction of those who had been institutionally identified (formally and informally) through special education. Additionally, among students within special education, distinct trends emerged around who was likely to self-identify across class, income, gender and racial categories.

Keywords

Disability, Disability Identity, Special Education, Institutional Practices, Schools, Quantitative Analysis

Introduction

Disability identity, like all individual identities, is a challenging construct to disentangle (Samuels, 2014). Disability identity formation is often constructed through social processes involving various identity resources (Forber-Pratt et al., 2017). What leads someone to identify as disabled[1] or as having a disability is highly individual. To some, a self-identification of disability can enable community membership, activism, and alignment with political movements. To others, identifying as disabled can further exacerbate experiences of oppression through historical, and often medicalized, connotations around capacity, evoking stigma and a diminished social perception of value. The role disability identification plays in interaction with other constructed forms of identity is complex. For some, disability identification may be perceived as critical to ensuring access and accommodations. While, for others, disability identification may be seen as yet another barrier through which they will be further marginalized.

The degree to which innate and external factors converge to shape individuals' identities is not always evident. However, there are many ways in which an individual can be 'identified' institutionally. Institutional identification can happen in medical settings, such as hospitals, medical or psychiatric clinics, and schools. Within education systems, there are established institutional processes, namely within special education, that are charged with assigning identities to students, primarily identities in relation to student ability. Colloquially, identities ascribed through special education are often referred to as "labels" which suggests that perhaps they remain attached to, but are not necessarily embodied by, the individual student. For

[1] This paper largely uses the term disability in place of the vernacular generated through special education (e.g. exceptionality, special education needs, etc.) to address, politically, the very real social and material consequences of labelling based on the perception of disability and difference.

example, earlier data from Canada's largest public board of education, the Toronto District School Board's 2006-07 Student Census, demonstrated a disconnect between special education identification and students' self-identity of disability; the evidence being that the rate of students identified and placed in special education had a notable disparity when compared to students who self-identified as having a disability (Yau & O'Reilly, 2007). Further, research that explores students' experiences with special education and identification suggests that while educators may assume insignificance in the ascription of a disability identification, the institutional identification and subsequent school-based response to such identification, can be deeply embedded within student identity and school experiences (Parekh, 2019). In fact, in a recent qualitative study, students described how being associated with special education influenced not only how they felt about their own academic competence, but influenced their social relations in school (Parekh, 2019).

Disability is now commonly considered to emerge through the interactions between individuals and their environments (Underwood, 2013). These interactional relations can be clearly documented through special education procedures and identification processes (Brantlinger, 2006). Often initiated or supported through the employment of psycho-educational assessments—assessments long-mired in ableist, racist and classist histories (Gould, 1996; Ellis, 2013; Ellis & Axelrod, 2016)—processes of identification continue to reveal disproportionate incidences of disability identification across racial, cultural, class, and immigrant groups (Brown & Parekh, 2010; De Valenzuela, Copeland et al., 2006; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Mitchell, 2010, 2015). Connor (2013) describes how identification processes within special education mimic medical terminology and procedures as a way to harness "the authority of pseudo-science" (p. 497) and legitimize subsequent institutional responses of identification and segregation.

The goal of seeking out and, ultimately, eliminating disability is deeply embedded within educational practice and immediately places certain groups at risk for special education identification and segregation (Reid & Knight, 2006). Consensus among disability scholars is that identity labels, intended to refer to student ability, are socially constructed and can be heavily influenced by students' other identity factors such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation, etc. (Ben-Moshe et al., 2014; Davis, 2013; Erevelles et al., 2006). In this regard, evidence supports that bias can play a role in how educators assess student ability in relation to students' racial, gender, parental education and disability status (Parekh et al., 2018). Complicating matters, research has shown that educators often share similar conceptions of ability, although disparately constructed across students demonstrating low and high achievement (Ladwig & McPherson, 2017). In their article, *The Anatomy of Ability*, Ladwig and McPherson (2017) demonstrate how notions of ability include a fixedness when conceptualized for low-performing students, but a malleability for high-performing students. How educators conceptualize ability is critical as it can shift not only their academic expectations, but also the pedagogical approaches they employ in their classrooms, potentially shaping students' experiences in school. Complementing Connor's (2013) theorization on the pathologization of ability, Ladwig and McPherson (2017) point to how shared constructions of ability can be used to justify institutional responses to disability.

> The importance of recognizing the anatomy of ability, as it is used in schooling, lies in its capacity to survive within a broader ecology of schooling designed to limit learning and legitimate its consequent social exclusions – at least as much as that system is designed to promote learning and social inclusion. (Ladwig & McPherson, 2017, p. 345)

It is understood that constructs of and identifications related to ability serve a larger institutional purpose, but to what extent do students embrace the labels they are ascribed? If institutionally identified through special education, are students more likely to self-identify as disabled? As constructs and consequences of disability identification can be heavily influenced by racial, gender, class and program factors, might observed trends in self-identification be consistent across students' socio-demographic characteristics and program placements?

To better understand the relation between institutional and self-identity of disability, we turned to the extensive student demographic, program and experiential information collected by the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) is Canada's largest school district and is one its most diverse serving just under a quarter of a million students (TDSB, 2018). We approach our investigations through a Critical Disability Studies framework. As such, our focus is largely on how systems construct and respond to disability, particularly the implications related to institutional identification and placement into special education or ability-based programs. In particular, the goal of this study was to explore whether a more in-depth analysis of the disparity between students' self-identification and institutional identification of disability would enable a better understanding of what elements play the largest role in shaping students' self-identity. Ascribing to any form of identity is personal and can be motivated by a number of intangible factors. Which is, in part, why we are awed that there continue to be institutional processes that overtly determine and assign identities to children, often without their participation or consent.

An additional goal from this research was to complicate the notion that while institutions may assign identities to students, these perceptions may not be shared by the students themselves and, conversely, that there are many students who identify as disabled whose identities are not

institutionally recognized. We wanted to explore these disconnects and query what the disconnects might mean. Another problem that complicates this research is that disability in schools is often constructed through a deficit model. Through our work in schools, we have rarely come across a disability positive environment. Our qualitative work has highlighted how students often reject the notion of disability as it is constructed through special education (ongoing research, see Parekh, 2019). Students often disclosed their sentiments of embarrassment as they are called to leave their class to attend special education programs. They spoke about the names they heard and were called on the school yard and in their classes. They spoke about how if only their teachers would allow them to use different strategies in the classroom, they know they would not be struggling academically (ongoing research, see Parekh, 2019). While there are many spaces in which the identity of disability is celebrated, much work is needed to ensure schools embrace accessible education and implement disability positive school climates (OHRC, 2018).

Our interest in the potential tension between self and institutional identification of disability emerged from repeated feedback on the 2006-07 TDSB Student Census related around the issue of disability identification. Students who had been institutionally identified through special education were often unlikely to self-identify as disabled (see Table 2 for a detailed analysis). At the time, when the data was shared publicly, assumptions emerged that if students are being identified institutionally as disabled, then they would, therefore, also ascribe to a similar self-identify. In several consultations, audiences and researchers suggested that perhaps the disconnect between institutional and self-identity of disability was due to students misunderstanding or being uncomfortable with the question. Queries also emerged as to whether students' responses around self-identity should be considered valid, since, after all, special

education identification information was determined and collected by professionals. The assumption that students were unable to report on disability identity, coupled with the idea that disability identity was assumed to be only in the purview of professionals, raised questions for us around the perceived supremacy of institutional identification and its impact on shaping students' self-concept.

Context and Research Questions

Based on several earlier studies that highlight the implications of institutional identification, we arrive to the question of not only the perceived supremacy of institutional identification of disability, but also its consequences. We believe the pursuit of this investigation will extend our understanding of the inter-relationships between self and institutional identity.

A quick note on terminology as it relates to institutional and self-identification of disability: Schools and schooling practices have long been central to the identification of exceptionality or impairment in students (Brantlinger, 2006). As an example, in Ontario, the education system has an embedded process known as the Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) through which students enter 'un-identified' and often leave with an identification of 'exceptionality' (OME, 1990). Exceptionalities can include learning disability, autism, mild intellectual or developmental disability, behavior disorder, and so forth (see OME, current website, for a full list).

As mentioned earlier, there is significant socio-demographic disproportionality across special education placements and identifications (Brown & Parekh, 2010). Two recent studies, demonstrated how the negative implications of special education placements (e.g. barriers to academic programming and post-secondary pathways) were experienced more acutely by

students who also self-identified as Black, were from lower income households, and/or whose parents had not had the opportunity to attend post-secondary education (Parekh & Brown, 2019). Additionally, it was revealed that educators often assigned lower grades for students' 'Learning Skills' assessments, particularly for students identified through special education or placed in special education programs, despite students demonstrating similar achievement to their peers (Parekh et al., 2018). Therefore we query to what extent socio-demographic identity and placement characteristics relate to students' self- or institutional identification of disability and might these patterns be consistent over time. Finally, further related work on students' experiences of belonging demonstrated that students identified through special education reported significantly higher rates of exclusion in school (Parekh 2014). Therefore, we also wondered whether school climate/experiential factors might demonstrate a relation with self-identification of disability.

Theoretical Framework

This paper employs critical disability theory as the basis of its theoretical framework. Critical disability theory challenges a binary notion of ability and disability arguing that a variation in biological functioning is a natural part of human existence (Davis, 2013). Additionally, many critical disability studies scholars resist the individual or medically-based constructions of disability and urge others to consider the social, environmental, and historical materialist disablement of people with impairments (Erevelles, 2000; Oliver, 1990). In the field of education, critical disability studies has made key contributions to the analysis of structural discrimination of racialized or minoritized students who are disproportionality segregated into low ability groups and programs (Artiles et al., 2010; Connor, 2017; De Valenzuela et al., 2006).

As a field of study founded in activism, critical disability studies investigates the role of disability identity, self-identity, and the celebration of disability culture (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). Through our intersectional approach to critical disability theory, we feel our work will contribute to earlier theorization that situates disability as socially constructed (Annamma et al., 2013; Oliver, 1990) and that students who are institutionally identified are often further disabled through their encounters and engagement with school systems and special education policies (Brantlinger, 2006; Connor, 2017; Reid & Knight, 2006). We recognize that special education practices can be mechanisms through which racism and discrimination are enacted (Connor, 2013; Erevelles et al., 2006; Ferri & Connor, 2005) and that policy must address the social and emotional impact of special education practices, particularly identification and placement, on children/youth. Although institutional identification is often positioned as an example or mechanism of social control, we also hope to explore how self-identification can be emancipatory and an embrace of disability pride (Erevelles, 2011).

A final theoretical frame we will draw on for this work is the framework of Categorical Inequality as described by (Domina et al., 2017). When applied to the field of education, this theoretical frame examines how the creation and response to ability-based categories produce institutional inequality. Categorical inequality merges concepts drawn from the social construction of capacity, conflated with racist and classist notions of ability, and explores how programming reifies difference and produces immediate and long-term stratification of opportunities for students (Domina et al., 2017).

Methods

For this paper, we analyzed the TDSB's secondary student demographic, program and

administrative data for the years 2006-07 and 2016-17 to examine the relation between special education identification, students' racial, gender, and class demographics, and students' self-identification of disability. Student demographic data is collected by the TDSB every five years through the board's Student Census. The Student Census asks students to self-identify across a number of socio-demographic characteristics as well as asks students to respond to questions involving students' experiences both inside and outside of school. As an exploratory study, crosstabulations and Pearson correlations were performed to determine statistical trends and significance.

Following the descriptive statistical analysis, we employed a binary logistic regression analysis. Regression analyses are helpful in that they can identify, when all variables are accounted for together, which variables emerge as most significantly predictive of students' self-identification of disability.

Students included in the descriptive analysis were secondary school students who had been institutionally identified as having a disability and who also completed the question on disability self-identification in the first 2006-07 Student Census or the 2016-17 Census.

Students included in the logistic regression were students who had been institutionally identified as having a disability and who also completed the question on disability self-identification in the most recent 2016-17 Census.

Descriptive Analysis : Special Education Identification in the TDSB 2006-07 and 2016-17

Given the changes in the TDSB population over ten years, it is best to clearly show how we ended up with 6,975 institutionally identified students in 2006-07, and 9,713 identified students in 2016-17.

In 2006-07, there were 83,883 secondary students (Grades 9-12) as of June 30, 2007. Of those students, 11,548 (14%) were institutionally identified as disabled. Of secondary students involved in special education, 8,142 (71%) completed the TDSB Student Census in 2006-07. Note that the response rate of each question in the Student Census will differ slightly. In 2006-07, 6,975 of 11,548 of Grade 9-12 institutionally identified students (60%) completed the specific demographic question on the self-identification of disability in the Student Census. In comparison, in 2016-17, there were 71,478 secondary students (Grades 9-12) as of June 30, 2017. Of those students, 14,198 (20%) were institutionally identified as disabled. Of secondary students involved in special education, 10,081 (71%) completed the TDSB Student Census in 2016-17 with 9,713 of 14,198 Grade 9-12 institutionally identified students (68%) completing the demographic question on the self-identification of disability.

Institutional Identification of Disability

Students who have been institutionally identified as disabled consist of two broad groups. The first group includes students who have formally gone through the Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) process and have subsequently been given a formal identification of exceptionality (e.g. learning disability, mild intellectual disability, physical disability, etc.). In Ontario, the IPRC is responsible for not only assigning identification of exceptionality or disability, but also for assigning placement .

The second group includes students who have been placed on an Individual Education Plan (IEP) with no formal identification of exceptionality. While it can be argued that being placed on an IEP is not the same as being identified with a disability, we argue that to be

assigned an IEP, similar processes in relation to the collection of assessment and perceptual data, and determination of 'need' can lead to further disabling experiences in school.

Of the 6,975 Grade 9-12 students in the 2006-07 Census with a special identification who completed the question on self-identification of disability, 4,115 or 59% had been identified with an exceptionality, while 2,860, or 41%, only had an IEP. In contrast, of the 9,713 Grade 9-12 students in the 2016-17 Census with a special education identification who also completed the question on self-identification of disability, 4,342 or 45% had an exceptionality, while 5,371, or 55%, only had an IEP. Thus, over the decade, the number of self-identified students who only had an IEP, who also completed the question of disability, almost doubled- reflecting general TDSB trends on the increase of students who only receive an IEP as opposed to pursuing a formal identification/placement through the IPRC.

There are also notable socio-demographic differences between these groups, with students accessing the formal identification process being a more privileged group overall (Brown & Parekh, 2010, 2013). As a note, achievement patterns between students identified with learning disabilities and students placed on an IEP without identification are almost identical. Students who have not been formally identified can still be placed in some separate special education programs for over 50% of their school day.

Self-Identification of Disability

Compared to institutional identification, the self-identification of disability is a far more simplistic category. Students included in this category are students who indicated "yes" to the Student Census question asking whether they identify as a person with a disability. In the 2006-07 Student Census, the response options to this question were "yes" and "no". In the 2016-17,

the responses expanded to include "maybe". For our analysis, we wanted to compare across years, so only included students who indicated "yes" on both surveys.

Results

1. Descriptive Statistics

Interestingly, the relation between self-identification of disability and institutional identification is far more disparate than one might imagine. Of students involved in special education in 2006-07, only 27.7% self-identified as having a having a disability. A decade later, in 2016-17, the proportion of students in special education self-identifying as having a disability remained less than a third and only rose to 31.7%. Results, therefore, indicate that a large majority of students who were institutionally identified through school do not self-identify as having a disability. Across the decade, the rate was relatively stable despite other changes in the TDSB population such as a decline in population and increase in the proportion and number of students institutionally identified.

To investigate further, we ran a series of descriptive cross-tabulations exploring students' self-identification of race, gender and sexuality, as well as their self-reporting of parents' employment status and parental income (as reported through the federal database). For students institutionally identified as having a disability, the following data trends emerged, with chi-square significance of 0.01, and were consistent across both years 2006-07 and 2017-16 (see Table 1).

Overall trends include: (1) Female students were more likely to self-identify as having a disability (30.2% & 37.1% female vs 26.3% & 27.7% male); (2) Students from lower income households were less likely to self-identify as having a disability than students coming from

higher income households (17.2% & 25.5% low income compared to 40.3% & 45.1 % highest income), (3) Students who self-identified as White (38.0% & 44.2%) were far more likely to self-identify as having a disability than students who self-identified as Black (16.2% & 19.5%), South Asian (18.5% & 21.3%) or East Asian (21.0% & 30.6%); (4) Students whose parents were employed in professional positions (39.3% & 41.7%) were far more likely to self-identify than students whose parents worked in unskilled/clerical positions (24.5% & 27.8%) or were non-remunerative (26.5% & 28.6%); and, (5) Students who also self-identified as LGBTQ (45.8% & 55.2%) were more likely to self-identify as having a disability than students who identified as heterosexual/straight (26.4% & 28.9%).

Table 1

Self-identification of disability across student demographic characteristics, 2006-07 & 2016-17

	Student demographic variables	Proportion of students who self-identify as having a disability	
		Year 2006-07 (N= 6,958)	Year 2016-17 (N = 9,713)
Gender	Female	30.2% **	37.1%***
	Male	26.3%	27.7%
		17.2%***	25.5%***
Income	Lowest income decile		
	Mid Income Decile (fifth)	25.9%	32.0%
	Highest income decile	40.1%	45.1%
		38.0%***	44.2%***
Self-Identified Race	White		
	Black	16.2%	19.5%
	South Asian	18.5%	21.3%
	East Asian	21.0%	30.6%
		39.3%***	41.7%***

Parent Occupation	High professional & senior management		
	Semi-professional & middle-management	32.6%	35.8%
	Skilled semi-skilled clerical & trades	27.4%	31.9%
	Unskilled clerical & trades	24.5%	27.8%
	Non-remunerative	26.5%	28.6%
		26.4%***	28.9%***
Sexuality	Heterosexual		
	LGBTQ	45.8%	55.2%
		27.7%***	31.7%***
Total	Overall Proportion of students in special education		

** = significant at .01 using X^2
*** = significant at .001 using X^2

The examination of institutional factors also demonstrated significant data trends. We ran an additional chi-square analysis to explore the relationship between students' institutional identification of disability, whether students only had an Individual Education Plan (IEP only), and whether students were placed within either a self-contained or regular class. Again, with a chi-square significance of 0.01, the following trends were consistent across years 2006-07 and 2016-17 (see Table 2).

Of students who were formally identified with an exceptionality, students identified with physical (90.5% & 100.0%) or developmental disabilities (87.1% & 81.7%) were far more likely to self-identify as having a disability than students who were identified with learning disabilities (37.8% & 40.5%), mild intellectual disabilities (30.1% & 48.4%), language impairments (30.4% & 39.5%) or behavior disorders (25.5% & 26.5%). Less than a fifth of students informally identified through special education (students who only had an Individual Education Plan) self-identified as having a disability (12.7% & 20.3%). Despite formal institutional identification of

disability, students placed in self-contained special education programs (44.2% & 58.5%) were more likely to self-identify with a disability than students taught in regular classes (35.4% & 40.5%).

Table 2

Self-identification of disability across institutional characteristics, 2006-07 & 2016-17

	Institutional Variables	Proportion of students who self-identify as having a disability	
		Year 2006-07 (N= 6,958)	Year 2016-17 (N = 9,713)
Formal Exceptionality	Blind/Low Vision	100.0%***	90.0%***
	Deaf/Hard of Hearing	97.0%	94.5%
	Physical disability	90.5%	100.0%
	Developmental disability	87.1%	81.7%
	Autism	60.3%	60.5%
	Learning disability	37.7%	40.5%
	Language impairment	30.4%	39.5%
	Mild intellectual disability	30.1%	48.4%
	Behaviour	25.5%	26.5%
	IEP only	12.7%	20.3%
Class Placement	Self-contained special education classes	44.2%***	58.5%***
	Formal identification - Regular classes	35.4%	40.5%
Total	Overall Proportion of students in special education	27.7%	31.7%

*** = significant at .001 using X^2

2. Logistic Regression Analysis

Using the TDSB Student Census (2017), a binary logistic regression was used to see the impact of socio-economic, demographic and school factors on whether secondary students who were institutionally identified also self-identify as having a disability. There were nine

independent variables entered into the regression model (listed below). Note for interpretation, selected reference categories are typically the largest category within the variable and are the categories against which all other variables are measured in the model.

Racial identity. Student Race was divided into nine categories—Black, East Asian, Indigenous-Aboriginal, Latin American, Middle Eastern, Mixed, South Asian, South-east Asian, and White.

Parental Education. Education looked at the educational level of student parents: University, College, or Secondary school-lower education.

Gender. This variable includes Nonbinary, Male and Female (nonbinary was first provided in the 2017 Student Census).

Sexual orientation. Students' self-identification of sexual orientation includes LGBTQ+, Questioning, and Straight.

Partially integrated special education placement (more than 50%). Partially Integrated looked at students who were placed in a Home School Program, partially-integrated special education classes where students spend at least 50% of their classes in a special education program.

Full time special education program. Fully self-contained classes, or Intensive Support Programs, included students who were entirely taught within the special education system (100%). Note that the vast majority of secondary students identified through special education were enrolled in Regular classes. In the TDSB, elementary students taking partially-integrated programming are generally classified as HSP (Home School Program) and students in fully self-contained programs are generally classified as ISP (Intensive Support Program), but these terms exist only in the TDSB.

Non-Academic or Academic courses. Ontario students in Grade 9 and 10 take courses in Academic, Applied or Locally-developed Programs of Study. According to whether students take Academic versus non-Academic courses, they are much more likely to attend post-secondary (both college and university) and to complete post-secondary (e.g. Brown & Parekh, 2013; Parekh et al., 2016; Parekh & Brown, 2019; Parekh et al., 2020).

Income. High income refers to students who lived in the top 30% of neighbourhood income areas of TDSB students (that is, with a median income of more than $80,000, based on 2018 dollars).

Family structure. This variable (note change from earlier variable label of 'parental presence') refers to whether students have access to one or both parents, or in some other family arrangement.

Results from logistic regression

The full model (N = 9,713) was significant with an X^2 of 1,264.627 ($p < .001$) showing that the model could differentiate those reporting a self-identification of disability. The Hosmer-Nemeshow Goodness-of-fit test is not significant at .233, showing support for the model. The model correctly classified 72% of cases and explained between 14% and 20% of variance.

Regression analyses are helpful as they provide a clearer picture of the relations between variables when all variables are accounted for together. Regression results are seen in Table 3. In relation to gender, female students were significantly more likely to identify as having a disability, however, students who also identified as nonbinary were over twice as likely to self-

Table 3

Results from logistic regression analysis

Variable Categories	Variable Names	Significance	Exp(B)
Program (Academic ref)	Non-Academic	0.703	1.023
Gender (Male ref)	Nonbinary	0	2.133
	Female	0	1.575
Income (Medium-lower income ref)	Top Three Deciles of Income	0.001	1.217
Race (White ref)	Black	0	0.305
	East Asian	0	0.541
	Indigenous	0.014	0.437
	Latin American	0	0.332
	Middle Eastern	0	0.223
	Mixed	0.025	0.845
	South Asian	0	0.335
	Southeast Asian	0	0.407
Family Structure	Family Structure	0.83	1.008
Parent Education (high school ref)	Parents with College Education	0.658	1.033
	Parents with University Education	0	1.425
Sexuality (Straight ref)	LGBTQ+	0	2.107
	Questioning	0.005	1.619
Program – Full-time special education	(100%) Special Ed (ISP)	0	12.87
Program – Part-time special education	(> 50% but less than 100%)	0	3.66

identify as disabled. High income and parental education also resulted in a higher likelihood to self-identify. Most racial identities had significant relationships to disability identity

with students who self-identified as Black, Latin American and Middle Eastern being the least likely to self-identify as disabled. Students who identified as LGBTQ+ were over twice as likely to self-identify as having a disability. Of all variables from within the regression analysis, the variable that had the most significant relationship to the self-identification of disability was placement in special education programming. Students in part-time special education programming were over 3.5 times as likely to self-identify as having a disability and almost 13 times as likely if they were placed in a full-time special education program. Thus, we query the extent to which the identity of students enrolled in special education is shaped in part by their experience in special education.

3. Experiential data

Lastly, we explored a series of in-school experiential factors to better understand whether there was any relationship between institutional and self-identification of disability and students' experiences in school. From a previous study, a composite measure of belonging (Parekh, 2014) was employed to explore the extent to which the institutional identification of disability related to students' experiences of well-being and safety at school. Results determined that students who were institutionally identified as disabled were far more likely to report experiences of exclusion than students who were not involved in special education. With this analysis, we further explored the difference in students' attitudes towards school and schooling between students who were institutionally identified as disabled who also self-identified as having a disability, versus those who did not self-identify.

Results were interestingly mixed. Students who were both institutionally and self-identified as disabled were somewhat more likely to enjoy school, and to think that their school is a friendly and welcoming place. They felt they belonged to their school at about the same rate

as those who were institutionally identified, but who did not self- identify as having a disability. However, compared to those who did not self-identify as having a disability, students who were both institutionally and self-identified as having a disability were somewhat less likely to feel good about themselves, and less likely to be hopeful about the future. Additionally, they were also more likely to report being worried about bullying in school.

Table 4

Students' experiences in school across institutional and self-identification of disability

a) My school is a friendly and welcoming place:***

	1 All the time	2 Often	3 Sometimes	4 Rarely	5 Never	Total
Yes (Disability)	27.6%	39.2%	23.8%	6.5%	3.0%	100.0%
No (Disability)	23.5%	38.7%	27.1%	7.3%	3.4%	100.0%
All identified students	24.8%	38.8%	26.1%	7.0%	3.3%	100.0%

b) I enjoy school:**

	1 All the time	2 Often	3 Sometimes	4 Rarely	5 Never	Total
Yes (Disability)	15.0%	30.6%	34.3%	13.3%	6.8%	100.0%
No (Disability)	12.6%	29.8%	37.5%	13.6%	6.5%	100.0%
All identified students	13.3%	30.0%	36.5%	13.5%	6.6%	100.0%

c) I feel I belong in this school:

	1 All the time	2 Often	3 Sometimes	4 Rarely	5 Never	Total
Yes (Disability)	25.7%	30.8%	26.0%	10.3%	7.1%	100.0%
No (Disability)	24.2%	31.8%	26.7%	10.7%	6.6%	100.0%
All identified students	24.7%	31.5%	26.5%	10.6%	6.7%	100.0%

d) Feel Good about yourself:***

	1 All the time	2 Often	3 Sometimes	4 Rarely	5 Never	Total
Yes (Disability)	21.2%	33.9%	30.5%	11.1%	3.3%	100.0%
No (Disability)	26.4%	37.8%	24.7%	8.6%	2.5%	100.0%
All identified students	24.7%	36.6%	26.5%	9.4%	2.7%	100.0%

e) Hopeful about the future:***

	1 All the time	2 Often	3 Sometimes	4 Rarely	5 Never	Total
Yes (Disability)	22.4%	32.0%	28.2%	13.0%	4.5%	100.0%
No (Disability)	29.2%	32.1%	25.8%	9.6%	3.2%	100.0%
All identified students	27.1%	32.1%	26.6%	10.7%	3.6%	100.0%

f) At your school during the school year, how often have you: Worried about being bullied:***

	1 All the time	2 Often	3 Sometimes	4 Rarely	5 Never	Total
Yes (Disability)	7.5%	9.2%	17.1%	28.6%	37.7%	100.0%
No (Disability)	4.7%	6.5%	13.0%	25.4%	50.4%	100.0%
All identified students	5.6%	7.3%	14.3%	26.4%	46.5%	100.0%

*** = significant at .001 using X^2

All of these findings lead us to query the degree to which the factors that shape students' experiences in school are related to institutional identification. And we can theorize that, perhaps, once institutionally identified, processes are then set in place that further stratify students through practices of segregation, isolation, and differentiation from their peers and that play a bigger role in students' navigation of school cultures. These results also query whether the mirroring of identities that puts students in greater alignment with school expectations may enhance their experiences of belonging. However, it also causes us pause to consider how the

adoption of disability identity as constructed through a deficit model may lead to lowered self-esteem and aspirations for the future as well as raise concern around difference and bullying.

Discussion

Overall, the relationship between institutional and self-identification of disability is limited and largely incomplete. In either TDSB Census year, less than a third of students who are institutionally identified through special education actually self-identified as having a disability. Therefore, it is critical that we recognize that, despite being assigned an institutional category, students, themselves, are unlikely to ascribe to the labels they have been given through special education processes. Furthermore, educators and school personnel who evaluate and monitor student achievement, behavior, and well-being must consider how their evaluations may be, to some degree, responding to a perceived identity factor that students, themselves, reject.

While the rate of self-identification of disability has slightly increased over the last ten years of data collection, there remains tremendous consistency over time regarding the proportion of students who self-identify as disabled across the various socio-demographic groups. This finding suggests to us that the special education system and how disability is constructed within schooling has remained largely static.

How disability is constructed in relation to other socio-demographic characteristics (as theorized by a number of noted critical disability scholars including Erevelles, 2000; Annama et al., 2013; etc.) has changed little over time. Although various groups, both historically and currently, are more apt to embrace or reject particular notions of disability, the trend patterns have remained largely the same between 2006-07 and 2016-17.

Gender results are interesting as there is a distinct, disparate and consistent pattern between students' gender and disability identities. Male students identified through special education are far less likely to self-identify as disabled compared to their female counterparts. This may have to do, in part, with the notion that disability is often conceptualized as 'in conflict' with constructs of masculinity and power (Shuttleworth et al., 2012). Male students are over-represented across each special education identification category and within special education enrolment (Brown & Parekh, 2010, 2013). Yet, to preserve identities of masculinity, many male students may actively reject the identity of disability. We query the potential 'conflict' cisgender male students may face within the construction of masculinity and disability, and how notions of power may be circulating through discourses around disability.

Results from the regression analysis support many theories around disproportionate representation of racialized and minoritized students in special education. For decades, research has pointed to long-standing trends and patterns that show the disproportionate referral and placement of minoritized students into special education programs (Annamma et al., 2013; Connor, 2017; Gaymes San Vicente, 2016; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011; O'Connor & Fernandez, 2006; Skiba et al., 2006; Voulgarides & Tefera, 2017). Scholars in critical disability studies have pointed to how bias, including racism and classism, are enacted through special education practices resulting in the disproportionate removal and segregation of students who identify as male, racialized, and/or are students living in poverty. Although students who identify as Black, Indigenous, and Latinx, and students who have less economic advantage are more likely to be identified through special education and placed in special education programs (Brown & Parekh, 2010), they are far less likely than their White peers to self-identify as having a disability. In fact, when compared to White students, all other racial groups were notably less

likely to self-identify as disabled. This may reflect, in part, the recognition of many racialized students that their involvement in special education is not a result of impairment, but rather due to biased perceptions of their capacity. In our ongoing qualitative work, many students perceived their placement into special education and/or non-Academic programming as a result of discrimination. The reduced likelihood of male students, racialized students and lower income students to self-identify as disabled is in stark contrast between the adoption of disability identity of their White, female and wealthier peers. These results lead us to wonder whether, for already institutionally advantaged groups, disability identity may play a neutral or positive role in the lives of students.

For some students, disability identity may be associated with opportunities for greater access and accommodations, particularly those available to students who themselves, or their families, have had positive experiences with schooling. From earlier data, we know that female students, students whose parents have accessed university and who come from more economically privileged homes, tend to fare well across schooling activities and achievement milestones (TDSB, 2015). Therefore, the self-identity of disability may be more welcomed for students who are in a position to exercise particular forms of privilege.

Students who identify as non-binary and/or identify as LGBTQ+ or who are questioning their sexuality are also more likely to self-identify as having a disability. We cannot explain why there is such a strong relationship between students who self-identify as LGBTQ+ and disability. However, we do hypothesize that the role and discourses around pride, particularly discourses of acceptance and celebration of diverse identity that circulate among LGBTQ+ communities, may make a difference (Stagg, 2019).

Placement appears to be the most predictive factor in students' self-identification of disability. The more removed and restrictive the program, the more likely students will self-identify as having a disability. One could argue that there are plenty of 'identity resources' (Forber-Pratt et al., 2017) available to students within restrictive special education programs that reify notions of disability. However, in special education, chances are that the identity resources available to students are ones steeped in a deficit model of capacity. As discussed, the construct of disability in special education is largely medically or individually oriented, where students' capacity is addressed through curative-focused programming (Mitchell, 2010, 2015). Students' embodiment of 'disability as deficit' may be observed in the experiential data where students who self-identify as having a disability report not feeling as "good about themselves" as compared to their peers. Students who identify as disabled also reported having greater fears of bullying and were less likely to have positive aspirations for the future.

More broadly, the theory of categorical inequality offers important insight into the relationship between identity and programming. It has long been established that schools produce social and cultural inequality (Bourdieu, 1973). However, it is often assumed that students are unaware of the forces ultimately shaping their trajectories through school. But perhaps this study reveals that students are well aware and that many are actively rejecting an identity too often associated with negative institutional implications, such as limited social and programmatic opportunities. Students may be fully aware that adopting an institutionally constructed identity of disability could tie them to less favourable academic outcomes. Self-identifying as disabled may be a significant risk for students who already face systemic discrimination and have to work harder to maintain academic favour within their schools (Parekh et al., 2019).

Current approaches to disability in schools require immediate address. The institutional identification of disability, and responses to disability within education, continue to embrace a deficit conceptualization. So long as disability continues to be linked to a penalizing and stigmatizing process of identification and segregation, how can we begin to support positive disability identity formation and disability positive spaces in schools? Here, we draw on the contributions from McRuer (2006) and Erevelles (2011) where they examine what it would be like to welcome disability. The work of Yergeau (2018) and Wong (2020) centre positive disability identity and celebrate disabled lives. Re-orienting disability identity in schools towards a disability rights and justice approach could transform classrooms, schools, and special education practices. However, to reach all students, further commitment is needed to ensure that approaches to disability work and disability pride are generated by and in solidarity with cross-racial and cultural identities.

Conclusion

The results of the regression analysis confirm the complexity of the tension between institutional and self-identification of disability. The analysis reveals a two-pronged outcome, where not only structural factors such as placement appear to be a strong influence in shaping disability identity, but also individual factors, such as identity characteristics, like race, gender, and sexuality. Structurally, we query to what extent the enacted processes connected to special education themselves shape students' conceptions of disability. For example, is the act of placing students in a self-contained, special education program, itself, an established or known indicator of disability? Might placement be a strong identity resource (see Forber-Pratt et al., 2017)? We also recognize that for many students, our data shows that separate special education programs

further disable students' access to rigorous academic programming. The minimal self-identification of disability amongst institutionally identified students may be evidence that students are perceiving, as Domina, et al. (2017) describe, the very real consequences in ascribing to how ability is institutionally constructed.

On an individual level, we also understand that students who enter school with a certain degree of socio-demographic advantage, tend to encounter more positive school-based opportunities. Students with privilege are more likely to be included in the classroom with accommodations, and less likely to be removed and placed in isolated special education programs (Brown & Parekh, 2010). We also know that educators are more likely to privilege the learning approaches attributed to female students, children who are White, and whose parents have attended university, so perhaps the implications of disability identity are different. To this end, we see that male students, students who are racialized, and students from lower socio-demographic households, are least likely to self-identify as having a disability. Perhaps this data points to a refusal or resistance to the institutional construction of disability that is frequently produced and circulated in schools. We also see a significant connection between gender and sexual diversity and we wonder if the uptick in disability identity among this particular group speaks to the committed work queer and trans communities have historically undertaken on issues of identity and pride. We believe schools can play a significant role in challenging deficit understandings of disability and fostering disability pride. As this is an exploratory study, we hope to further extend these analyses in the future and continue to examine the role of institutional identification practices in the lives of children.

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