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Self-Advocacy as Precariousness in University Education

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Abstract

Self-advocacy has arguably become one of the most centrally positioned priorities in Canadian post-secondary disability service-provision frameworks. It is widely understood to be an indispensable skill for disabled students working to implement academic accommodations at university, and it has become the focus of numerous efforts to prepare them for transition from high school settings. This article draws on findings from a doctoral study that explored the self-advocacy experiences of disabled students and their professors in three small liberal arts universities in Nova Scotia, Canada in order to theorize self-advocacy as precariousness. Detailed research findings are reported elsewhere, but this account offers a theoretical analysis of participant experiences in order to broaden understandings of self-advocacy as a relational access requirement that generates persistent uncertainty for disabled learners.

Keywords

Self-Advocacy, Precariousness, Academic Accommodations, Ableism

Introduction

Self-advocacy has arguably become one of the most central priorities in Canadian post-secondary disability service-provision frameworks. It is inextricably connected to constructions of disability as “an individual ‘problem to be fixed,’ rather than an opportunity to reconceive what inclusion ‘means’ in higher education” (Cox, 2017, p. 559). As a result, it figures prominently in bureaucratic approaches to disability support that work toward university inclusion by promoting individual skill enhancement over substantive systemic reform (Titchkosky, 2011; Titchkosky & Michalko, 2012).

All publicly funded post-secondary institutions in Canada have centres for accessible learning where professionals coordinate academic support for students with documented disabilities. Regulations based on medicalized understandings of disability as deficit or lack (Oliver, 2009) stipulate who is eligible for adjustments and outline acceptable proof of a legitimate claim to support. Individual colleges and universities have guidelines for students to follow when requesting academic accommodations, and they commonly specify timelines that must be met for individual arrangements to be realized. Formal procedures often vary among individual institutions. However, they generally require disabled students to engage in multiple interpersonal exchanges with faculty and staff related to providing proof of disability and developing a plan to address student accommodation needs.

Disabled students organizing individualized learning support are usually taught they must be able to discuss their disabilities and to assert their disability-specific learning needs and rights, a specific skill-set most often discussed in the literature as self-advocacy (Holsberg et al., 2019; Kimball et al., 2016; Shaw et al., 2010; Walker & Test, 2011). However, Holsberg et al. (2019) explicitly acknowledge the interpersonal conflict such requirements can produce by

incorporating conflict resolution in self-advocacy training. Their findings suggest that this positions students more strongly as they make academic arrangements with faculty and staff.

The disturbing move to centre conflict resolution as a necessary skill underscores the doctoral research findings that inform self-advocacy theorizing in this article (Bruce, 2017). My critical qualitative study clarifies how self-advocacy has regularly been understood and enacted within post-secondary disability services at three Nova Scotia liberal arts Universities. It also explicates the complex contexts related to academic accommodation implementation experienced by disabled students and individual professors.

Participants included 30 disabled students registered to receive accessible learning services and 17 instructors recommended by student participants as educators who had effectively supported their learning. Data analysis was informed by a post-structural reading of ableism linking educational belonging to neoliberal preferences for normalcy expressed as the desired demonstration of ability, individual productivity, and a willingness to be malleable and compliant (Campbell, 2009; Goodley, 2014, 2016). Findings exposed participant understandings of self-advocacy and accommodation as domains of student and faculty individual responsibility that were inextricably intertwined by the necessities of negotiation. Accordingly, an ever-changing socially mediated access space was repeatedly generated, and it produced a persistent sense of uncertainty for disabled students as they worked to engage in learning (Titchkosky, 2011).

Uncertainty was experienced within relational spaces where the right to academic modification was positioned as provisional and where significant additional work for disabled students was required to implement support. Unpredictable attention was given to physical and environmental accessibility, and pressure to conform to normative expectations was commonly

experienced by student participants. Lastly, variable faculty capacity for teaching and willingness to accommodate disability was exposed. Regrettably, this pedagogic and environmental variability told disabled students their capacity to participate in learning was dependent in multiple ways on factors beyond their control.

It was notable that participating faculty seemed to understand and believe in the value of student diversity. They appeared thoughtfully focussed on teaching and assessment practices and on providing equitable opportunities for disabled students to engage in and authentically express their learning. However, participating students found the unpredictable appearance of these individual convictions disconcerting, an experience that tended to deepen their reticence to engage. They knew those commitments to diversity were often an individual faculty attribute or belief rather than a systemic commitment to equity.

University texts and participant stories also exposed the centrality of a formal self-advocacy curriculum that prioritized skill-development for disabled students. The goal was to strengthen their ability to articulate their disability-related needs so they could confidently request implementation of individual accommodations from instructors or staff. Yet perhaps more disturbing was the emergence from the data of a more informal curriculum that worked, often covertly, to shape specific disabled student behaviours.

Institutional expectations that students would repeatedly seek out, from both faculty and accessible learning services staff, the recognition and protection of the right to learn under equitable conditions were discussed by students as demeaning, irritating, and exhausting. They were similarly frustrated by the necessity to understand and manage multiple procedural details and demands. These behavioural requirements were highlighted as constitutive of a system that

claims to recognize differing ways of learning and working while concurrently calling for their remediation or disappearance to perform obligatory tasks.

Student participants also critiqued the implication that self-knowledge would be valued by faculty and service-providers. They said such acceptance was implied by recognized self-advocacy definitions centring the ability to articulate disability-related support requirements. Yet the depth of self-understanding required was often perceived by study participants as unreasonable or described as a reductive attempt to gather information that would never substantively inform any student learning plans.

The complications of rights, the particulars of process, and the nuances or subtleties of self-understanding were worryingly intertwined within mandated accessibility procedures that positioned disabled students as individually responsible for the protection of their accommodation rights. The obligation to engage in accommodation-related negotiation exposed them to the relentless risk of interpersonal tension and the associated recurring rejection of their disabled ways of being and doing. Normative preferences tended to infiltrate their sense of self in impalpable ways and consequently co-opted their participation in an ableist project aimed at securing the unquestioned status of normal as the desirable university standard. This article centres findings from my doctoral study to theorize self-advocacy as an uncertain relational access space that calls for increased critical engagement with accepted understandings of self-advocacy as an indispensable set of disabled student skills. While it can, in contexts of post-secondary disability support, foster positive and empowering faculty/student relationships, it more frequently generates pervasive academic and interpersonal uncertainty for disabled learners. Consequently, disabled students are left to live out their learning lives in a continuous state of precariousness.

Post-Secondary Precariousness

Precarity in Canadian higher education is hardly a new topic of discussion. It is central in the activism of faculty unions working to centre the experiences of precariously-employed academics whose numbers have increased more than 100% since 2007 (CAUT, 2017). They work within a model that separates knowledge production, discussion, and dissemination into discrete tasks for faculty to perform as a way of hiring fewer full-time professors and saving money for academic institutions (Shaker, 2018). Precariousness is accordingly experienced as instructors wait on the fiscal and academic planning decisions of others to know whether they have work in any given semester. It is similarly lived through the significant additional workload associated with applying for and preparing courses every term without any guarantee of employment.

Disability and precarity are likewise connected in contexts of labour. In times of austerity most notably, uncertainty is experienced because of funding cuts, workplace reorganization, and job or support instability (Bates et al., 2017). It may seem like a stretch to theorize self-advocacy in the same way as we think about the precariousness generated by labour uncertainty. Yet it is a theoretical frame that arguably compels researchers to take up the necessary work of engaging more critically with experiences of self-advocacy in higher education and the uncertainty they generate for disabled learners. It allows consideration of the ways that institutions reduce the protection of the right to accommodated learning to a set of institutionally-sanctioned tasks that a student must perform in order to claim that right and be known as a capable and valued learner. It also makes space for analysis of the ways self-advocacy as a social phenomenon works to invest discretionary power in others, known or unknown to the student, who make vital decisions about students' learning lives. As Judith Butler usefully notes,

Precariousness implies living socially, that is, the fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other. It implies exposure both to those we know and to those we do not know; a dependency on people we know, or barely know, or know not at all (Butler, 2016, p. 14).

As a general concept, precariousness engenders thoughts of being tremulously perched on the precipice of something, and it forces consideration of uncertain, and often worrisome outcomes. For disabled people, this precipice is phenomenologically produced and reproduced by the necessities of conforming to neoliberal-ableist norms. Neoliberal-ableism is connected to, "A contemporary society that increasingly seeks to promote the species typical individual citizen: a citizen that is ready and able to work, productively contribute, an atomistic phenomenon bounded and cut off from others, capable, malleable and compliant" (Goodley & Lawthom, 2019, p. 235).

Self-advocacy can be understood then as a power-laden relational element of post-secondary disability service structures where those desirable norms are produced and reproduced. It generates precariousness as it draws on procedural and task requirements to shape expected student attributes and behaviours, and it significantly influences a student's sense of themselves as a valued university learner (Titchkosky, 2011). Precariousness is lived daily by individuals and is linked to the political demands and principles of contemporary social conditions. It makes visible those demands and principles as constitutive of certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human and who is not (Butler, 2006, 2016), expressed in neoliberal-ableist terms as demonstrated independence, productivity, self-sufficiency, and compliance. These desirable individual traits ultimately define who belongs in university and

who does not (Goodley, 2014, 2016), and they mark out the tasks associated with accessibility on university campuses.

Student self-advocacy requires repeated additional labour that effectively makes disabled learners responsible for arranging their own access by requesting something that should be a right. They are regrettably reliant on the unpredictable receipt of a favourable response from others (Kioko & Makoelle, 2014; Mullins & Preyde, 2013), and that favourable response is all too often tied to the existence of sufficient resources for the accommodation of difference (Mallett et al., 2016). Decisions are mediated by the myriad ways people attend to and confer meaning upon embodied difference, meanings that situate specific disabled learners as less capable and therefore less desirable than their ‘normal’ peers. Access, in turn, becomes more than a thing to be granted or refused (Titchkosky, 2011), and precariousness is lived in the ever-present reality that the unpredictable decisions of powerful others can prevent disabled students from taking up their rightful place in institutions of higher education.

Those institutions, according to many participants, are rife with contradictions that naturalize the marginal status of disability. They often articulate a commitment to equity and diversity while simultaneously making infrastructure decisions that fail to attend to or prioritize physical accessibility. Commitments to inclusive teaching and learning are discussed, but instructors are empowered to make choices about the extent to which they will include diverse ways of engaging and evaluating learning in course design (Baglieri et al., 2011). Many professors choose to support disabled learners, but participants observed that others have been emboldened by structural and service provider responses that effectively convey to faculty their right to refuse accommodation requests. Normative presentation can increase a professor’s

confidence in a student's capacity to learn, but it can also lead some to question the legitimacy of disability and the associated need for accommodation.

The ensuing sections take up and further explicate specific appearances of precariousness as they are lived and generated within the access spaces produced by post-secondary disability support structures. Academic modification is often positioned as provisional, so students can find themselves seeking permission to learn from faculty who are variably amenable to approving their requests. Behavioural expectations aim to shape how they interact as they work to ensure their support requirements are respected, and their capacity to align themselves with desirable student attributes determines their positioning as good, or even troublesome, disabled learners. Even accommodated learning experiences are determined by normative expectations, and repercussions are frequently experienced as their ways of working are subjugated to and marginalized by specific ability preferences (Wolbring, 2008). There is good news that emerges from within positive and supportive faculty/student relationships though, and they constitute a hopeful space wherein disability and disabled sensibilities are valued.

Seeking Permission to Learn

Precariousness is a profoundly oppressive experience of ableism. It is produced and reproduced within compensatory post-secondary disability support systems that continually invest power in the normate to make decisions about who will and will not be permitted to engage in higher learning.

The normate is the figure outlined by an array of deviant others whose marked bodies sure up the norm's boundaries. It is a fabricated identity category of those who, by virtue

of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into positions of authority and wield the power it grants them (Garland-Thomson, 1997, pp. 8-9).

Compensatory approaches are rooted in ableist assumptions of and preferences for normalcy (Campbell, 2008). They are intended to promote remedial responses to disability in order to aid disabled students who are expected to draw on supports to compensate for what is generally understood as the disabling impact of their specific individual impairments (Oliver, 2009).

Decisions about appropriate strategies are generally made by non-disabled service providers, and they are typically intended to support student performance consistent with normative expectations. This is ableism at its most powerful. It enlists disabled individuals into the perpetuation of normative preferences, and it produces precariousness as it invests power in others who conscript disabled student complicity through the unwavering privileging of these tactics.

My study evidenced the systemic necessity for individual disabled students to request permission to learn. This was repeatedly required through the performance of institutionally constructed self-advocacy tasks aimed at gaining authorization for the implementation of teaching and learning modifications. Lamentably, the protection of rights to academic adjustments was mediated by students' knowledge of the existence of those rights and their willingness to claim disability status. It was similarly reliant on medical professionals and disability service providers who make decisions about the eligibility of adaptations, and on faculty who are given ultimate authority over course-specific implementation. This creates an ever-changing social reality that can empower professors to question the legitimacy of disability (Marshak et al., 2010; Olney & Brockelman, 2003), to query the necessity for and integrity of particular accommodations (Fuller et al., 2004; Reed & Curtis, 2012), and to ultimately refuse to

allow requested classroom and exam arrangements perceived to jeopardize principles of “fairness for all” (Marshak et al., 2010; Mullins & Preyde, 2013).

This is an unsettling reality to say the least. There are institutional guidelines and procedures that ostensibly work to recognize and protect the rights of disabled students who are individually responsible for task completion and procedural compliance. They are directly tied to getting in - to organizing and implementing effective academic adjustments. So, the pragmatic reality is that the recognition of disability rights in the post-secondary setting is unpredictably contingent on multiple factors that are typically linked to a student’s ability to self-advocate and the unpredictable decisions and actions of others.

Procedures have been articulated by offices for accessible learning so students will have appropriate information to guide them through the required steps. Yet some participants said those procedures sometimes prevent students from obtaining needed adaptations because they are restrictive, regimented, and often require the demonstration of ability in areas documented as legitimately necessitating adaptation. Organization and time management skills were necessary if students were to comply with test and exam accommodation request procedures, and some student participants were clearly fearful of the consequences associated with missing prescribed deadlines.

Service providers make decisions about exam accommodation provision based on a student’s ability to meet posted deadlines. However, faculty sometimes change previously made decisions about test and exam dates, leaving students trying to adjust their plans in order to meet those cut off dates. Increasing unknowns are consequently produced by the necessity of reorganizing already organized tasks, a potentially unreasonable expectation of a student who required and utilized disability support to create that schedule in the first place.

Many participants found that claiming their rights was unnecessarily complicated by particular knowledge requirements, and they recognized that obtaining pertinent information was significantly easier for those who had easy access to acceptable documentation by regulated professionals because they had the financial means or necessary social and cultural connections to obtain it. This reality, however, did not appear to be acknowledged in any meaningful way by those with decision making power within the service-provision structures in place. Mature student status, non-European cultural location, and poverty arose as significant identity and life experience categories that negatively mediated disabled students' capacity to seek out and secure accommodations. This highlighted the multiple intersecting forces that influence constructions of disabled student identity through the myriad interpretations of difference that shape conventional responses to disability (Liasidou, 2012).

All participants shed light on the intricate necessities related to procedural knowledge. They similarly highlighted the extent to which successful navigation of disability services was problematically dependent on the acquisition and mobilization of that information. Both students and faculty were key to exposing the nuanced positioning of student self-knowledge. They also brought focus to the uncomfortable circumstances created by explicit and implicit self-identification requirements. Those requirements forced students to embrace a disability identity and to reveal that identity to others through substantially separate exam arrangements consistent with special education hierarchical ideologies (Dudley-Marling & Gurn, 2010; Gallagher, 2006). Students were not always comfortable with or ready to openly embrace a disability identity within this special education paradigm, but they had little choice if they were to successfully realize accommodated learning and assessment arrangements.

More disquieting than any of these disturbing sets of circumstances is the ever-growing trend toward the systemic development of student self-advocacy as the primary mechanism of support implementation. Participants left no room for doubt; self-advocacy has become the cornerstone of post-secondary disability service structures. All study participants expressed an understanding of self-advocacy as an expected set of knowledge and abilities students must skillfully and strategically mobilize in order to receive modifications. In this way, it serves, at least initially, as an entrance requirement for those students who are seeking adjustments to teaching and learning environments. Their accounts of public and post-secondary schooling brought focus to the existence of a formal curriculum intended to foster the development of these skills. They also made it alarmingly clear that there is an unarticulated agenda rooted in the primacy of normalcy that works insidiously to shape certain desirable disabled student behaviours and attributes – an agenda that positions students precariously within a liminal space that is neither fully marginal nor completely mainstream (Murphy et al., 1988; Titchkosky, 2011).

The Good Disabled Student

The official self-advocacy curriculum appeared as a pillar of participating university accessibility programs and services (Acadia University, 2015; Mount Saint Vincent University, 2014; St. Francis Xavier University, 2016). Yet there were other instances of formal self-advocacy teaching and learning that had facilitated students' transition to university and variable degrees of success obtaining recommended academic modifications. Receiving accommodations during public school, being connected to disability programs in other university or government environments, parental backing, and credited courses offered in specialized schools for learning

disabled students were key mechanisms for the delivery of the formal curriculum. All participants agreed that disabled students benefited from knowing their rights, understanding and being able to talk about their disabilities, and developing the capacity to explain the necessity for and efficacy of specific adaptations. However, the stories of disabled learners extended discussions of these aspects and asserted the importance of being willing and able to fight for accommodations. They also brought sharp focus to the necessary willingness and ability to hold faculty to their legislative and policy obligations. It was noteworthy that both participant groups acknowledged the desirability of developing self-advocacy strengths. However, they were not uniformly content with the material implications of a post-secondary environment that claims a mission of inclusion and yet works to achieve that goal by prioritizing the enhancement of individual student skills over substantive systemic change (Titchkosky, 2011; Titchkosky & Michalko, 2012).

Participant stories also demonstrated the existence of a more covert self-advocacy effort. Its aim was to shape specific student attributes and behaviours such as politeness, time management, organization, and compliance—expected student behaviours consistent with neoliberal ableist ideals typically named as independence and autonomy (Goodley, 2014). Its intent is to assimilate disabled students by subtly shaping their behaviour in accordance with normative standards. Essentially, self-advocacy works within a model of support claiming to center student voice and empower individual learners through formal curricular goals and strategies. Yet all the while, it imperceptibly draws that voice into the perpetuation of the ableist norms that produce and sustain precariousness.

Universities have arguably adopted a limited and limiting orientation to self-advocacy. They have positioned it as an individualized responsibility intended to mitigate medically

produced disability-related student deficits. It figures centrally in a compensatory approach to post-secondary disability service that consigns institutional responsibility for equity to faculty/student relationships. In this way, self-advocacy becomes an indispensable condition of participation in university learning, and the precariousness experienced as a result of its essential relational role works to diminish any activist capacity that might be derived from the broader disability movement.

The appropriation of self-advocacy by non-disabled professionals endangers its anti-oppressive potential and evidences the risk that it can all too easily be co-opted to the agendas of others (Aspis, 1997; Buchanan & Walmsley, 2006; Dowse, 2001; Goodley, 1997). This danger manifests when self-advocacy is taken up within institutional structures as a means of maintaining the marginal or liminal status of disabled university learners (Murphy et al., 1988). It surfaced in the stories of participants who discussed self-advocacy as social control and explicitly exposed the precariousness they live within a process that only appears to consult with disabled people. They described a reality that privileges the design and delivery perspectives of non-disabled professionals over the self-knowledge of disabled students - one that mandates acceptance of the minimal services on offer. Essentially, it reduces self-advocacy to acts of speaking up for what the university is willing to make available, so realistic individual change is accomplished without challenging the status or power of service-providers and faculty (Aspis, 1997). Plainly stated, self-advocacy was framed as a service provision requirement intended to make students feel they had power when they actually had none.

It is profoundly concerning that disabled students are encouraged to develop institutionally-defined behaviours and attributes in order to demonstrate self-improvement that is inextricably entangled with dominant conceptions of successful post-secondary inclusion

(Titchkosky, 2011; Titchkosky & Michalko, 2012). The molding of student behaviour through required activities in the name of self-advocacy reveals the systemic entrenchment of neoliberal-ableist preferences for normal students (Goodley, 2014, 2016). The disabled students in my study found themselves confronted daily by this predominant and marginalizing sense of normalcy when engaging with faculty who often scrutinized, resisted, and rejected their disability and accommodation claims (Madriaga et al., 2011; Radcliffe, 2016). They were implicitly taught to emulate normal and to exhibit confidence in the organization and implementation of learning adjustments as a way of demonstrating the interpersonal and academic skills valued by faculty and service providers. Yet they continued to live precariousness in these uncertain relational spaces, and they were unwittingly being conscripted by an ableist project seeking to establish a hierarchical category of acceptable disabled students.

‘Good disabled students’ possess the knowledge to navigate the system. They likewise demonstrate the wherewithal to ensure their accommodations are implemented without causing systemic disruption or individual discomfort. They willingly accept their provisional status by agreeing to acquiesce at the slightest indication of resistance, and they gratefully affirm the university’s generosity by minimizing modification requests.

This disturbing student category deepens the already alarming nature of self-advocacy as a required individual skill set. The curriculum, while purporting to empower, insidiously assimilates disabled students into normative institutional ideals. It works to shape behaviour, both explicitly and implicitly, according to institutional preferences for the unmarked, and thus less troublesome, body. An ableist agenda is undoubtedly hidden from many involved, but it works effortlessly to affirm the already existing division between normal and abnormal, or desirable and undesirable students. It also sets up another constitutional division that generates

persistent uncertainty and exposes the precariousness that disabled students live in everyday teaching and learning situations.

‘Normal’ Repercussions

Accommodations were discussed by all participants as an additional and often burdensome workload that generated precariousness as they worked to manage multiple and sometimes competing demands. Students encountered uncertainty as they confronted the reality that this workload was being perpetually produced by the normative expectations that make ‘special’ arrangements necessary in the first place. This extra workload was particularly difficult for some students who said it was a daily challenge to juggle and prioritize their academic and accommodation-related tasks. It was created, they said, by people who did not understand the sometimes-devastating impact of the additional labour.

Ubiquitous preferences for normalcy surfaced substantively, albeit infrequently, in the learning circumstances produced by pervasively insufficient levels of physical accessibility (Holloway, 2001; Tinklin & Hall, 1999). Inaccessible classrooms and faculty offices were raised as problematic and as illustrative of confused institutional priorities. Normative expectations also constituted some disabled student participants as less capable, and consequently less welcome, than their non-disabled peers. Their disabled bodies and ways of doing were often construed as troublesome, and they were perceived to bring about the individually and systemically onerous necessity of having their individual needs met (Madriaga et al., 2011; Titchkosky, 2011). Omnipresent preferences for normal caused a number of disabled students to seek out or highlight the parts of themselves conforming most closely to normative expectations, and many

felt specific pressure to shape themselves into the kind of student they had learned university faculty valued.

Disabled students often struggled under the weight of ableist preferences for particular abilities (Wolbring, 2008). In many instances, this could be traced to the variable capacity of faculty to engage in effective teaching for diverse learners, but it was also connected to the beliefs of instructors who communicated to students that they simply did not belong. This served as a daily reminder to disabled learners that their disabilities were ultimately their own problem. It also reiterated the lack of institutional commitment to inclusive teaching.

Understanding disability as an individual body gone wrong (Michalko, 2009, p. 65) problematically privileges normalcy. It similarly locates disability on the undesirable side of multiple ableist binary relations—abnormal/normal, disabled/non-disabled, special/regular, anxious/confident, and struggling/competent. Participant stories powerfully exposed this predilection, and they highlighted how universities subtly and openly pronounce their preference for typical students.

Typical learners are expected to come to university because they have demonstrated an ability to perform academically within traditional teaching and assessment approaches. Essentially, they have been able to conform to and achieve within the normative standards customarily used to sort students into categories of “regular” and “special” (Dudley-Marling & Gurn, 2010). This has powerful material implications for disabled students because conventional responses to disability rely on comparisons to the norm alongside interpretations of bodily difference to make decisions about accommodation eligibility.

The inherent difficulty in this reality for disabled students lies in the power and authority granted to varying disability services professionals and instructors. They inevitably interpret

student differences differently, and they often fail to recognize the multiple forces that intersect to influence readings of and responses to disabled student identities (Liasidou, 2012; Titchkosky, 2007). This generates significant experiences of precariousness for disabled students who are often subjected to unpredictable, and often contradictory, interpretations of disability that challenge their right to claim their place in university learning contexts. Yet some of these interpretations are positive, and student and faculty experiences revealed the good that can arise within these unpredictable settings.

The Good News

This positive closing focus constitutes a hopeful space generated by disabled students and their professors within an otherwise volatile university context. It also grounds a discussion of transgressive possibilities that enable consideration of future directions. Precariousness is about lived uncertainty that so often leads to undesirable outcomes. Yet uncertainty can resolve in multiple ways and can therefore elucidate possibilities for change.

The precariousness experienced in daily acts of self-advocacy certainly brought focus to how ableism works to shape student experience in overt and covert ways. It also revealed important transgressive possibilities—opportunities to disrupt the disabling circumstances that position disability as undesirable. An important transgressive finding was that student/faculty exchanges could expose inherent inequities and could generate collaboratively derived solutions to mitigate student precariousness.

Participants spoke of the strength and positivity they experienced when teaching and learning relationships were built on genuine appreciation of diversity in the classroom. Some faculty participants spoke passionately about their commitment to inclusive pedagogy and to

pushing their institutions to be more substantively committed to systemic change. Importantly, they articulated their role in creating that change as an obligation to design equitable spaces for meaningful teaching and learning to occur. This was profoundly meaningful to the disabled students who offered their professors' names as potential study participants, and the opportunities these relationships present to recast normative constructions of who belongs at university cannot be underestimated.

Transgressive possibilities make it conceivable to consider what it might mean to make a place for disability at university. Modified learning and assessment conditions make it possible for disabled students to complete a university degree, but they do not necessarily open for analysis the myriad ways formal accommodation procedures work to strengthen constitutional divisions between disability and ability. They do not offer any substantive challenge to the status quo, and they do very little to center or legitimate disabled ways of knowing and doing.

Being truly transgressive necessitates perceiving access as a social space that makes it imaginable to think “with”, rather than “about”, disability (Michalko, 2002, Chapter 6, Section 6, para. 6). Professors who were referenced and who participated in this study tangibly demonstrated the existence of this potential, often with profoundly meaningful results for students. They were committed to learning about their own teaching by engaging with disabled learners to gain an understanding of how their pedagogical practices facilitated or hindered participation, and they made changes to the design of their courses based on that learning. Such reciprocity suggests that it is conceivable to think through and disturb the ableist places most often created by non-disabled people—sites that so regularly compel disabled learners to emulate normal as a strategy for success (Campbell, 2008).

These relationships also made it possible to imagine the reclaiming of self-advocacy as an anti-oppressive or anti-ableist endeavor. Students who spoke openly with faculty about how disability and course requirements intersect to create inequitable learning conditions were able to push back against university norms (Gabel & Peters, 2004), especially when their professors responded by examining and changing course elements for all students, not just for disabled learners. It is plausible for disabled students to do things—not to prove that they can, and not to pass as normal. They can do things, like everyone else, because they are disabled students (Michalko, 2002, Chapter 6, Section 6, para. 16)—not because they have successfully approximated normate status. In doing things because of disability, the possibility of disabled lives being meaningful because of disability rather than in spite of it is exposed (Campbell, 2008, p.160), and it is made clear to the university-at-large that disabled people bring valuable lived knowledge to diverse scholarly and learning communities.

Conclusion

Self-advocacy daily propels disabled students and faculty into relational access environments. It produces the necessity to negotiate accommodations and generates uncertainty experienced as precariousness. For disabled learners, precariousness constitutes a dynamic social space that exposes the ableist nature of learning environments and clarifies their tendency to repeatedly affirm the primacy of normalcy.

Students and professors may work collaboratively to achieve effective learning support, but instructors are equally likely to question the legitimacy of disability and accommodation claims. This reality places disabled students in the unenviable position of having to ask permission to learn, and all too often that permission is denied. Even when professors are

agreeable, positive outcomes seem linked to a student's ability to exhibit valued behaviours consistent with constructions of the good disabled student. Students who earn this designation have learned to be polite, independent, organized, and compliant—to accept whatever faculty response comes their way. They have apprehended the necessity of drawing minimally on available adaptations to refrain from becoming a burden, and they have taken up the responsibility of ensuring the maintenance of principals of “fairness for all” and academic integrity.

This exposes the material implications of normate culture, or the power that ableist normativity has garnered to shape disabled student identities. It has revealed a worrying ableist project that seems to seek, in addition to the stability of normal, to construct a category of good disabled learners as a means of further entrenching the dominance of normalcy in university learning environments. Yet, all is not lost. As much as self-advocacy has been disturbingly co-opted to the ableist agenda of privileging normal ways of being and doing, opportunities do exist to wrest self-advocacy from this oppressive agenda. Study participants highlighted the reciprocal learning opportunities emerging from meaningful student/faculty exchanges. These relations have the potential to expose inequity and generate pedagogical transformation that can work against normative standards positioning disability as marginal and unwelcome. They similarly demonstrate the potential for those connections to fashion genuine spaces of belonging that value and legitimate disabled ways of knowing and doing.

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