Disability & Pedagogical Insights Exploratory Study Synopsis

Introduction

In order to better understand how disability is experienced in an academic context and gain insight into the ways such experiences affect working, teaching and learning at a university, Dr. Randy Johner and Jenn deLugt, researchers from the University of Regina (U of R) conducted a series of one-on-one interviews with students, teachers, and staff identified as individuals that experience academic settings differently based on their extenuating circumstances. A total of 13 interviews were conducted at the U of R over a year’s time. Participants included U of R students (n=6), faculty (n=3) and staff (n=4). The types of disabilities varied greatly among participants. The conditions expressed ranged from “visible” ailments that could be presumed based on appearance or physical behaviours such as a stutter, to “invisible” disabilities that bystanders would not be able to identify unless they had one-on-one interaction with that person, such as deafness in one ear. In addition to the extensive list of disabling conditions mentioned, four individuals also expressed having “secondary” diagnoses in addition to their primary condition.

In coordination with the Qualitative Research Laboratory within the Social Sciences Research Laboratories (SSRL) at the University of Saskatchewan (U of S), the interview transcripts were analyzed from a phenomenological standpoint in order to extract the essence of what it is like to navigate campus life with a disability. Using NVivo software, significant and meaningful statements were identified in order to develop codes that would later be organized into broader themes describing the experience of disability in an academic context. It should be noted that it took over a year to gather the interview data as individuals were reluctant to share this type of information for a number of reasons. Specifically the results are organized into three main themes: overall experience of disability in an academic environment, barriers to success, and support systems that foster success in such an environment.

Disability & Academia

Experiences in an Academic Environment

Students expressed both positive and negative lived experiences whilst in the academic environment. There was consistent agreement among the student participants who felt they did not fit in with other students in the university community. Students shared that non-disabled students viewed them differently; in some instances, students were viewed as incapable or less knowledgeable. Despite these negative experiences of being viewed as ‘different’, the student participants felt that as their time increased at the U of R, their experiences with other students became increasingly more positive. Faculty participants described negative experiences similar to those of the student participants. These participants received comments that explicitly and implicitly implied that because they had disabilities they were less capable than faculty who were
non-disabled. Similar to some of the student and faculty participants, some of the staff members also felt that the people they interacted with such as supervisors and colleagues perceived them to be incapable, untrustworthy, and as individuals who did not fit in; sentiments were shared that suggested their colleagues and supervisors also did not feel comfortable around them.

Personal Nature of Disability: One Size Does Not Fit All

Students at the U of R were given the impression that being diagnosed with a disability meant that they fell into a single category, which involved needing a short list of accommodations that would be applied to everyone. None of the participants felt that they were treated as an individual person with individual needs; rather, participants felt that they were viewed first in terms of the disability, and second, in terms of being an individual student, thus, only certain options were available to them. Participants indicated that receiving appropriate accommodations and resources were a consistent problem. Not only does a lack of individuality seem present but participants experienced further problems by being placed into a category of ‘one size fits all’.

Barriers to Success

Regardless of the type of disability or health concern, similar barriers emerged for students, faculty and staff alike. As such, this theme is not organized by group type, but rather by type of barrier (social, structural, personal) with sub-categories for each barrier.

Social Barriers

Lack of understanding of disability and what it includes

Participants felt that people without a disability do not understand what it is like to live with disability nor do they not understand why “little” things (i.e. like locating an accessible washroom) can become such a “big” problem, when one has a disability. Not only was the university community perceived to have a general lack of understanding about disabilities but there was also a perception of misunderstanding of behaviours (i.e. that stem from disability) that can lead to the formation of false judgments based on what is actually indicative of disability. Several participants expressed much frustration in dealing with such misguided opinions from others. Participants also described their inability (perceived lack of acceptance from others) to not talk about their disability, nor truly being able to make a choice on whether they should disclose their disability and if to disclose, how much to disclose. Furthermore, some participants explained that even though they may have a disability themselves, they do not feel comfortable with, or have the time to advocate for others with disabilities.

Interaction between Students and Professors

Professors may also unintentionally place unwanted attention on students with disabilities by not maintaining a relationship that includes confidentiality. A number of students provided examples
of professors placing the light on them when it was not wanted (i.e. could I have a note-taker for student x?).

Visible Versus Invisible

Faculty, staff and students expressed the barriers they experienced because their disability is not visible to the naked eye. Participants felt that a lack of others understanding their behaviours and needs flow from the lack of understanding of disability and what constitutes a disability.

Structural Barriers

There are some structural aspects to the University of Regina that made the participants day-to-day lived experiences more difficult that other university members likely take for granted. For example, walking from one classroom to another, or from one building to another, is generally not a large feat. The structural space of the University of Regina impacts aspects of the participants’ lives that other non-disabled university members would take for granted (i.e. entering a bathroom, elevator, or an office or classroom). A few participants’ comments indicated that there was an overall lack of education about disability; in addition, some university members gave the participants the feeling that their lives were sometimes viewed from the perspective of a cost/benefit analysis.

Support Systems

Support systems were found to be unique to each case. Support took shape in different ways depending on group type, and as such, this theme is organized by group type and further subdivided by specific forms of support felt for the three groups of students, faculty and staff.

Students

Peer Relationships

The students who participated in the study described how their peers could hinder or help during their time at the University of Regina. The relationship with their peers overlaps with their overall lived experiences in the university environment.

Peer-Professor Relationships

Professors, like students’ peers, can either help or hinder student’s success at the University of Regina. There was a consensus among the student participants that the awareness of professors with regard to disability is important. Some participants indicated that previous encounters with professors dictated whether they felt those professors were approachable in the future.

University Resources
The majority of the student participants expressed how their university experience and their academic success improved because of the services available.

Faculty

Similar to the students with disabilities, faculty is also provided with services to assist them in their work. However, from the participants’ perceptions, the services for faculty are more limited. Very few faculty members that participated in the study mentioned specific support services. One participant did share her appreciation for IT services.

Staff

Similar to faculty at the University of Regina, other than mentioning the harassment office, participants felt that services for staff with disabilities are very limited. A few participants did share that some of their colleagues were available to provide them with support.

Faculty, staff, and students with disabilities at the University of Regina face challenges that may impede their success in an institutional setting. Barriers that all three groups experienced in similar ways with regard to social, structural, and personal ways include a lack of understanding of disabilities, visible versus invisible disabilities, and one size fits all approach.

Recommendations

1. Institutional Leadership: Campus-wide awareness and implementation of current policies and procedures affecting the experience of disability on campus needs to happen on an institutional level. For example, policies around smoking in properly designated areas and construction crews leaving accessible pathways where possible need to be distributed effectively (perhaps by mass e-mail) and enforced properly (by way of consequence if such procedures are not adhered to).

2. Education/Advocacy: Education is necessary for the entire University of Regina community – construction crews, staff, food service, professors, students, campus police, facilities management and the like—on how disability can surface in a variety of forms, what challenges are unnecessarily created as a result of negligent or inconsiderate etiquette on campus (e.g. smoking in proper areas), and how certain words or actions could be misinterpreted as laziness or rudeness when really they are symptomatic of disability experienced in an academic setting. Such changes could potentially remove some of the stigma associated with the word “disability.” There needs to be more awareness of what supports are available for everyone with disabilities on campus.

3. Communication Supports: It is important for people with disabilities to have a safe space for expression. The current technology and the popularity of social media can be utilized to provide the safe space. There are different forms that the social media may take. One example is the use of an internal blog. The blog would be an anonymous space for people with disabilities to write about their experiences, both positive and negative. For those individuals that prefer face-to-face,
non-anonymous spaces, in order to network, advocate for others, and the like, a room, perhaps through disability services could be provided.

4. Personal Supports: Individualized support is necessary because, as the research shows, disabilities range across a spectrum and everyone needs different supports. It is necessary to go beyond providing the resources. It is also necessary to provide follow-up services.

5. Faculty Support: Professors play an important role in the success of their students. Multiple participants mentioned that knowing someone “cared” or made strong efforts to support them made a positive impact on their well-being. In this sense, a classroom procedure such as guaranteed office hours in which professors are available to speak with students about any inquiry or concern they have, should be offered.

6. Structural and Physical Supports: The structural setting of an institution can help or hinder a person’s ability to move from point a to point b. For example, an internal transportation system such as the option to use or rent a Segway motor scooter would allow those with mobility issues to decrease amount of time spent (sometimes in pain) to reach their destination. The structure and setup of rooms and offices are also pertinent. The setup of classroom and offices need to provide space for wheelchairs. Faculty and staff also require spaces that allow for wheelchair accessible space. Accessible washrooms are required in all buildings on campus. Food services could provide a wider array of culinary options that allow university members with dietary restrictions to select how their meal is prepared. A solution might be to clearly or better articulate on building maps where wheel-chair accessible or disability service rooms are within each building on campus.

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