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Date of publication: February 28th, 2015

Edition period: February 2015–June 2015

To cite this article: Moola, F. J. (2015). The Road to the Ivory Tower: The Learning Experiences of Students with Disabilities at the University of Manitoba. *Qualitative Research in Education*, 4(1), 45-70. doi: 10.4471/qre2015.56

To link this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4471/qre.2015.56>

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The Road to the Ivory Tower: The Learning Experiences of Students with Disabilities at the University of Manitoba

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(Received: 11 September 2014; Accepted: 19 December 2014; Published: 28 February 2015)

Abstract

Although qualitative research on the learning experiences of disabled students at university is burgeoning, either/or, medical or social approaches are most often used to study disablement. In this study, I adopted an interpretive phenomenological analysis — which considers the fundamental imbrication of bodies, identities, and environments — to explore the learning experiences of students with disabilities at the University of Manitoba in Canada. While some students received social support to attend university, other students negotiated a challenging journey to higher education, characterized by low expectations for academic success. At university, the students reported bodily-social challenges to academic achievement that hindered the learning process. Students anticipated an uneasy future upon graduation, characterized by poor job opportunities and economic disparity. The findings suggest that great strides and much advocacy are still required for students with disabilities to be viewed as bodies that bear intellectual value in university settings. Researchers should consider the merits of phenomenological approaches to thinking about the body-social challenges that disabled students still face in the struggle for inclusive higher education.

Keywords: disability, university, education, phenomenology

In contemporary Canadian culture, going to university is regarded as an important “right of passage”. It may be a time of challenge and change, the least of which involves attaining advanced academic training for a future career. Rather, going to university may better be regarded as an arduous journey (Borland & James, 1999) in which students expand their horizons, push past their comfort zones, hone their critical intellectual acumen, and forge life-long relationships.

The empowering potential of higher education, however, is not always achieved (Fuller, Bradley, & Healey, 2004) for students with disabilities. They are vastly under-represented at university, remaining on the outskirts of the “ivory tower”. Disabled students suffer from low academic aspirations, powerful beliefs that are perpetuated by others and themselves. The invisibility of disabled students on university campuses is not surprising when we consider that the academy — as an institution that is century’s years old — has an elite history. Historically, the academy served to educate white males from privileged socio-economic statures (Boursicot & Roberts, 2009). Since the academy may be regarded as a locus for quiet conservatism, rather than transgressive social and political change (Barnes, 2007, p.136), including disabled students as valued members of the university community has been marked by tacit tolerance rather than radical transformation. A dangerous discourse of benevolence (Goode, 2007; Shevlin, Kenny, & Mcneela, 2004; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010) tends to pervade when disabled students are included. In this case, able-bodied individuals “slap themselves on the back for having done a good job”. Such a discourse, however, which includes notions of meritocracy and equality, may better be considered as the “eugenics of everyday life” (Madriaga, 2007). Reeking of academic elitism, it may conceal a more sinister agenda in which disabled students are not regarded as having the same intellectual ability, nor prowess, as their able-bodied peers.

Since disabled students are most often alienated from the research process, it is important for researchers to take the perspective of these students seriously. In this paper, I attempt to address this call (Holloway, 2001) and confirm the sentiments of other scholars who suggest that disabled students have a desire to attend university (Madriaga, 2007). Since there is a lack of qualitative scholarship from the Canadian context, I sought to explore how disability affects learning among students at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, Canada, using an interpretive

phenomenological lens. In doing so, I attempt to ask “what does a socially just pedagogy” (Madriaga, 2007) for disabled students look like?

Review of the Literature: My Desire to Learn and the Barriers I Face

Several scholars have demonstrated that disabled student’s possess a strong desire to attend university. In a qualitative study with 21 disabled students in England, Madriaga, Hanson, Kay, & Walker (2011) found that these students want to attend university as a means of enhancing their financial standing by “getting a real job.” Further, disabled students want to prove their worth by demonstrating to themselves and others that they can attend university (Madriaga, 2007). Despite the desire to study, however, disabled students face numerous challenges in their efforts to attain an education. These learning challenges pertain to teaching, learning and assessment. Fuller et al. (2004) conducted focus groups with 27 disabled students at a university in the United Kingdom regarding experiences of teaching and learning. The students encountered several barriers to teaching, including obtaining note-takers on time and participating in seminar sessions. Students had difficulty accessing information about available disability supports provided by the university. Borland & James (1999) also reported significant barriers to teaching and learning among 22 disabled students at a British university. Although they were provided with academic tutors, they actually had very little contact with these mentors. Access to learning materials was often delayed, resulting in significant learning challenges. In a qualitative study with 16 disabled students in Ireland, Shevlin et al. (2004) also reported barriers to teaching and learning, including difficulty accessing course information and obtaining assistive devices to accommodate learning needs. In a qualitative study that employed a grounded theory methodology with six university students in England, Holloway (2001) found that these students face many barriers to learning and academic accommodation. Specifically, having their learning needs accommodated for takes a significant amount of time, requiring the students to be dependent on university administrators for this support. Students also faced barriers to exam accommodations and adaptations, as well as obtaining access to crucial library information. The lengthy amount of time that students had to wait to obtain accommodations resulted in much frustration. Similarly, Goode (2007) found that there is a double-

edged sword associated with receiving learning accommodations for students with disabilities. While accommodations facilitate learning, they may “mark and stigmatize” disabled students by making them hyper-visible. The difficulty in making accommodations may in part be related to a lack of awareness about disability issues on campus. In a qualitative study that utilized the case study approach with 12 disabled students in Scotland, Tinklin & Hall (1999) reported low levels of staff awareness about disability issues. Lack of knowledge greatly hindered the provision of learning accommodations.

Several authors suggest that disabled students face numerous challenges related to the disclosure of disability on campus. Further, disabled students struggle with identity formation at university. For example, Vickerman & Blundell (2010) employed a mixed methods qualitative research design to examine disabled students’ experience at a university in the United Kingdom. The study involved administering 504 questionnaires to disabled students and conducting interviews. Due to the fear of stigma, the students were reluctant to disclose their disabilities. In an ethnographic study undertaken with nine participants at a Canadian university, Low (1996) found that disabled students struggle to manage both normative and non-normative identities. Although they want to be regarded as “normal” students, the process of getting academic accommodations involves submitting themselves to pejorative medical labels. Goode (2007) conducted a qualitative study with 20 disabled students in the UK. Video footage and fieldwork were some of the methodological tools employed. Attending university is critical to forging an identity for disabled students, and is a part of social and psychological rehabilitation (Goode, 2007). In addition to problems with disclosure, Baron, Phillips, & Stalker (2010) found that access to friendships and optimal social development was stifled for university students with disabilities, who generally had more difficulty participating in the same social opportunities as their peers.

Disabled students appear to face challenges to career development upon graduation from university. In a qualitative study, Vickerman & Blundell (2010) found that most disabled students had not visited the career centre and were generally poorly equipped for the university—career transition. Decision making about future career choices was compromised, suggesting that disabled students require more preparation regarding future career development. Madriaga et al. (2011) also suggest that paying attention to

the postgraduate opportunities for students with disabilities should feature centrally on the agendas of university staff.

Disability type appears to complicate the barriers that students with disabilities face at university. While it is a matter of controversy, in general, most students in this group have invisible disabilities or learning disabilities. In a cross-sectional study at a large university in the United States, Madriaga et al. (2011) found that students with learning disabilities who receive institutional support under-achieve, demonstrating reduced learning outcomes.

The physical space is also a barrier to university participation. For those with mobility impairments in particular, the campus architecture is not inclusive, requiring students to navigate an uncomfortable environment (Low, 1996). In a qualitative study, Holloway found that navigating the built environment at university poses formidable barriers to inclusion. The simple quintessential act of “going to lectures together” was denied to disabled students, largely due to the inaccessibility of the campus. Tinklin & Hall (1999) and Baron et al. (2010) reported similar findings.

While it has not featured as centrally in the literature, a few scholars have examined the lack of disability friendly policies in higher education. Policy development is needed before curriculum changes can occur. In a qualitative study that entailed policy analysis and interviews with students, teachers, and tutors at a university in Scotland, Baron et al. (2010) found that there is a lack of policy documents referring specifically to the learning needs of disabled students. Disability issues may be sidelined by a greater focus on diversifying the curriculum in terms of gender and race.

Summary of the Review

Despite disabled students’ great desire to study at university — including enhanced economic stability in the future and proving their worth — the existing qualitative scholarship shows that these students encounter formidable challenges to learning. Obstacles to teaching, learning and assessment, navigating an environment built for able-bodied people, and a lack of disability friendly policies at university, are just some of these barriers. Negotiating the challenge of disclosing disability at university, developing a student identity, and facing bleak future career prospects, are other challenges. This research illustrates a few other issues that are

pertinent to the learning experiences of disabled students. First, a liberalist, rights-based discourse of accommodation and tacit tolerance tends to characterize the way that disability issues are managed. This liberal, rather than radical approach is deeply problematic because it means that “getting accommodations” are largely regarded as the personal responsibility of the disabled student (Riddell, Tinklin, & Wilson, 2005). In addition to victim blaming, rights-based liberal discourses of accommodation maintain an individualist focus. Encouraging broader systemic and institutional change in the academy is overlooked by this individualist focus that holds the disabled student responsible for learning. Thus, the elite academy (Boursicot & Roberts, 2009) — that has historically closed its doors to the disabled — is exempt from reflecting on its roots. Relatedly, this rights-based rhetoric of inclusion tends to perpetuate a discourse of charity and goodwill amongst university administrators. Rather than making efforts to democratize the academy by reflecting all of humanity’s diversity, there is a tendency to “pat ourselves on the back” when “we” accommodate disabled students (Boursicot & Roberts, 2009). Further, Borland & James (1999) purport that ... “a spurious association is often made between disability, poor performance, and special treatment at university”. As a result of this individualist discourse, disabled students are often regarded as “getting special treatment” when their learning needs are accommodated for. Although disabled students are entering the academy in greater numbers, inclusion may be better regarded as “rhetoric” rather than “reality” (Vickerman & Blundell, 2010).

Further, the existing literature is characterized by a few limitations. First, most studies pertain to students with a specific disability who are pursuing the same degree program at university, such as medicine. By studying the experiences of students with multiple disabilities who are pursuing a wide range of academic disciplines, in this study, I sought to broaden this limited focus. Secondly, with the exception of one Canadian study (Low, 1996), these qualitative investigations have largely been undertaken in the European context. Arguably, Canadian students with disabilities negotiate a different set of health care and educational issues. While some would argue that privatized models are encroaching on the Canadian health care system, in general, Canada still adheres to a universal model of care. Theoretically, this means that all Canadians have free access to health care, likely changing which disability supports are publically

funded. Secondly, in comparison to Europe and the United States, Canadian universities are characterized by less heterogeneity. Canada does not have Ivy League Colleges or private universities. This might allow a broader demographic of diverse students from different socioeconomic brackets to access university. Additionally, Manitoba is a province that is characterized by particular constraints. In the heart of the Canadian prairie, the eight-month winters are arduous. As a medium sized city comprised of multiple demographics — such as First Nations people who have endured a lasting legacy of European colonization, the farming community, and the influx of immigrants from Europe, India, Africa, and the South Pacific — Winnipeg is characterized by the collision of multiple worlds and identities. In comparison to other Canadian provinces, Manitoba may also be considered as less prosperous (Layne, 2000). In particular, the burden of poverty in Manitoba is high among First Nations urban dwellers. For these reasons, studying the university experiences of disabled students in Manitoba was particularly important. Furthermore, while some scholars have employed major qualitative traditions to study disabled university students' experiences, no studies have turned to interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a methodological lens. Disability scholars have tended to rely exclusively on medical or socio-approaches to the study of disablement. In this either/or approach, the complex inter-connection between bodies and the learning environments in which they interact is foreclosed (Allen, 2004). In this study, I turned to IPA to assist me in theorizing the interconnection between disability, the body, identity, learning, and the environment. I attempt to address just some of these lingering questions by asking “how does disability affect learning for disabled students at the University of Manitoba?”

Research Design and Methodology

The Research Ethics Board at the University of Manitoba approved this study in the winter of 2012. I sent a recruitment script for the study through Student Accessibility Services, that is, an on campus organization that is responsible for attending to the academic needs of disabled students. This recruitment script was sent via list serve to the 900 disabled students that are registered with the service. Approximately 15 students contacted me, to

either express interest or request further information. The final sample was comprised of 12 students.

Inviting the body back into scholarship: Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA)

This article was informed by the IPA research tradition. IPA provides a way to circumvent the simplistic socio versus medico-bodily theorization of disability. In thinking about disability, it thus allowed me to consider the fundamental imbrication of the body and society (Smith, 2004). IPA is a derivative of phenomenology. The epistemological roots of IPA are derived from both interpretivism and phenomenology (Smith, 2004). The roots of interpretivism may be traced to Germanic philosopher Emmanuel Kant's seminal work. In the "The Critique of Pure Reason", Kant suggests that human perception is not only derived from the sensory world (Ponterotto, 2005). Rather, mental impressions and cognitive machinery shape humans' perception of the world around them. Informed by this insight, interpretivists adhere to the notion that there are multiple realities and plural identities (Smith, 2004). Thus, disabled students likely negotiate fragmented identities at home, school, and in the community. Knowledge is not regarded as static and unchanging. Rather, it is an interpretive venture that is co-produced in the complex interaction between researchers and participants. Acknowledging how personal values colour the research process is critical to interpretivist thought.

In turn, phenomenology — which forms the other twin pillar of the IPA tradition — is rooted in early 20th century Germanic philosophy (Smith, 2004). Although numerous disciples adopted the phenomenological tradition, such as Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau Ponty, the 20th century German philosopher Edmund Husserl is credited with the development of the phenomenological tradition. Phenomenology is coloured by particular theoretical concepts that are relevant to the current study. First, phenomenology may be regarded as a critique of positivist research traditions in which mechanistic metaphors are applied to study complex human phenomena. However, phenomenologists believe that a human science — which entails understanding the lived experience of particular phenomena — is necessary to capture the complexity of humanity. For example, when trying to understand the experiences of disabled students at university, a scientific, positivist perspective might not

be an appropriate theoretical lens to use (Smith, 2004). Secondly, phenomenologists believe that there is a pre-reflexive world that exists prior to our consciousness of it (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Phenomenologists also believe that human consciousness always has a direction of intentionality. Our consciousness is most often oriented toward a particular object with a distinct intentional pathway. Uncovering humans' direction of intentionality in the worlds that we inhabit is critical to the phenomenological perspective. An emphasis on the body is the final theoretical concept that is relevant to the study discussed here. In Western metaphysics, the body is often regarded as an inert surface rather than an object of theoretical and empirical analysis. Most often, the body is simply regarded as that which bears down heavily on a transcendental mind (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). In current Western metaphysics, the mind is regarded as pure. In stark contrast, the body is often metonymically considered as sinful because of its vulnerability to a range of gluttonous temptations, such as eating and sex. So, in the cognitive intellectual traditions that pervade scholarship today, the body is either foreclosed as a source of inquiry or regarded as a potentially slothful and dangerous "container" for the body. Rather, phenomenologists suggest that the body is the seat of consciousness and a rich source of scholarship. Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau Ponty's phenomenological derivatives in particular consider bodies and their contexts. In doing so, they provide a way to think about how the body and the environment in which it is a part may collide in the experience of disablement (Smith, 2004). In this study, the participants constantly talked about the complex interaction between their bodies, identities, learning practices and broader campus environment. In doing so, they took up a body-society perspective to think about their disabilities at university. When scholars study disablement, medical or socio approaches most often pervade. In addition to allowing me to study the lived experience of attending university with a disability, phenomenology may provide a rich theoretical lens to side step the dualist, either/or approach that continues to shape our understanding of disability today.

Participants

The 12 students who participated were registered as either part-time or full-time students at the University of Manitoba. While 11 participants were

completing undergraduate degrees, one student was registered in a graduate program. The participants were enrolled in a broad range of degree programs, including nursing, business, economics, entry-level courses, and kinesiology. On average, the students were slightly older than their peers (26.4 years). The sample included eight women and four men. While the sample was mainly homogenous with respect to race and culture, three participants immigrated from the Middle East and Europe. The participants had multiple disabilities, including visual impairments, hearing impairments, learning disabilities, mental health conditions, gastrointestinal diseases and disabilities leading to mobility loss. Two participants used wheelchairs and one participant used crutches or knee braces to ambulate. The participants were ambitious and aspired to either further study or job opportunities upon graduation.

Methodological Tools

In-depth semi-structured interviews and field notes were the main methodological tools employed. The interviews were conducted in my office at the University of Manitoba. For participants with visual impairments who requested assistance ambulating to and from my office, hand-over-arm mobility assistance was provided. The interview guide was based on central concepts from the literature and my particular research interests. Although the interview guide contained particular thematic threads, I pursued novel lines of inquiry that the participants' raised. The interviews were between 60-90 minutes. I also documented field notes during the interview process in a research field journal. These contextual observations served as a way to document salient points raised in the interview and to facilitate data analysis.

Data Analysis

The audio taped interviews were transcribed verbatim by a research assistant and subject to IPA. First, the transcribed data was read multiple times to facilitate close familiarization with the data. Second, each individual transcript was read again. Recurring threads of meaning were coded with a label, such as "staircases" or "assistive devices". Then, the entire data set was read with the view to coding all of the transcripts for

recurring threads of meaning. In the fourth step, current threads of meaning across the data corpus were grouped together in a chart under a provisional category name. Interpretive notes about these categories, such as “physical barriers on campus” or “how my disability affects my learning”, were documented. These notes described my interpretation of what the category meant and served as a way to connect the category to the broader phenomena under study – learning at University with a disability. In the next level of analysis, the provisional categories were refined and crystalized into over arching themes. This involved some data sorting and re-organization in which similar categories were collapsed into broader themes. Again, interpretive notes to explain theme names and relevant theoretical concepts and phenomena, were made. The resulting IPA was an interpretive act that speaks to the phenomena “how does having a disability affect learning at the University of Manitoba?”

Findings: the Road to the Ivory Tower

In the findings below, I discuss the central themes resulting from the IPA. First, the journey to university was an arduous one, marked by two sets of experiences. Second, the participants discussed how their disabilities make it challenging to learn at university. Some of these challenges were bodily, while others were social. As a result of these learning challenges, the participants forecasted an uneasy future with limited employment prospects.

The Journey to University

The journey to university for students with disabilities was an arduous one. Some participants faced low academic expectations from others who believed that they were not likely to amount to much in life, let alone become university students. Regardless of when these negative experiences had occurred, they were forever seared in the participants’ memories. In contrast, for other students, important social relationships with parents, peers and mentors helped to instill a belief that they could succeed at university.

Nadiyah is in her early twenties and living with vision loss. She emigrated with her parents and siblings from Afghanistan due to civil war

and political turmoil. Because of her visual impairment, Nadiyah faced low academic expectations from others. She reflects on her childhood in Afghanistan and what it was like to interact with town gossips and elementary school teachers who questioned the point of educating Nadiyah. During childhood, these people always insulted her mother for having bore three disabled daughters who would “never amount to much.”

One of the teachers was like "I can't teach her, she can't see, why do you even bother sending her to school? Like there's no point in her getting an education"... Some people used to say that to my parents and I can imagine how hard it was listening to "why does she even go to school?" Yes I think when I was growing up back home, people would always come to parents, like at that time it was just the three of us (female children with vision loss) and they would always be like "oh I feel so sorry that your daughters disabled, they would never be able to do anything for themselves in their life." They would automatically think "oh they can't see and they can't do much in life". But you know those same people that they hear now that I'm in university or they hear “studying”, they're like shocked.

Josiah is in his early 30s and pursuing entry-level university education. As a result of viral meningitis that resulted in paralysis and some brain damage, Josiah uses a wheelchair to move around the campus. After Josiah's infection, no one expected him to speak, let alone become a university student. He states that... “I didn't think anybody thought that I would be able to string two words together. I remember having to do a bunch of aptitude/psychological tests, because everyone thought that I was going to be like catatonic.”

For other students, the journey to university was not as fraught with roadblocks. Social relationships with parents, peers, and mentors served to pave the way to university and open the doors to the academy. This social support also facilitated students' belief in their ability to succeed at post-secondary education. While these students still encountered derogatory attitudes, the social support they did receive from caring friends and family appeared to mitigate these disabling beliefs.

Jodie has a visual impairment. Jodie did face limited expectations from certain members of the community who believed that only “normal” young

people should attend university. However, she received strong social support from friends and family who had faith in her capacity to succeed in her studies. She credits her success to this sustained social support. Going to university has, in a way, served to prove the limited expectations of others wrong.

My friends, parents and teachers definitely expected me to go to university. However there were a few people in my community that did not expect me to go to university. Some people in my community think that someone with a disability cannot accomplish as much as someone who is "normal". These people who think that are what motivated me to go to university to prove that even if you have a disability you are still able to accomplish things those "normal" people can. The support from my friends, family and teachers is what has kept me going throughout my first year of university and it is what has me going back (for more study).

Vincenzo is a 27-year old student of Italian ancestry who is pursuing a degree in business. He has a visual impairment. Vincenzo received social support from others who believed in his capacity to attend university. While Vincenzo appreciates this support, he does believe that it is rooted in a well-intentioned and benevolent pity. Vincenzo's family wants him to attend university so that he can escape from the hardship of his present condition.

As a person with a physical (visual) disability, family members, friends, and others in the community have expected me to attend university. One reason, but not the main reason for this, is because family members, friends, and others in the community do want me to succeed in life... The main reason for others to want me to attend university, is because they see it as a "way out," or a counter-balance from my present situation. Those that know that I am living with vision loss, also know that I will also be limited in my career choices... They also know that having a higher education will allow for more opportunities. So naturally, they expect me to go to university so I can make the best of my present situation. I believe that their intentions to want me to succeed are admirable, however, their reasons for wanting me to attend university is misplaced. To sum up the reasons for expecting me to attend university into one word, "pity" would come to mind.

For some of the participants, attending university meant dealing with others' limited expectations about the inherent "incompatibility" between attaining an advanced education and having a disability. These memories were potent and had profoundly shaped the participants' university journey. Other participants received unconditional faith that they could in fact succeed at university.

Learning with Disability at University: Body-Socio Challenges

As university students, the participants discussed a range of bodily and social challenges that posed limitations to the learning process. The "language of inability" coloured the form and content of this theme, with words such as "can't, won't, and not able" sprinkling the data set. A graduate student with a visual impairment — who is originally from the Middle East — explained the difficulty he has in deciphering particular objects when the lighting conditions in campus learning spaces are not optimal. Bright light and close proximity are the only conditions under which he can see objects. This poses a challenge for his learning, requiring him to rely on sound and smell to determine form and content. Using the example of two people crossing in a university hallway— a quintessential campus experience — he states that:

If there's a strong light ... And I'm close to the person, I can tell what the object is when I learn. Normally, I can't tell. I can't identify you for example, if you passed by me in certain corridor, here or there, I can't tell that this figure is (Fiona). My hearing, I depend a lot on my hearing and my smell to get around and learn. That's too weird cause sometimes I can identify people depending on their smell (Khalil).

Carmen is in her early 30s and living with deaf-blindness. Her vision loss poses a challenge in learning environments.

I have low vision, it's called RP (retinitis pigmentosa)... I can't see a lot of things by myself I can't read for example I can't read small font, I need to enlarge the font. Larger screen, specific or special configurations like for example, the background should be black

and the font white, it's easier for me. I enlarge the font to like 70 or 60. And I used a screen reader sometimes, like "Jazz."

Jodie reflects on how her disability poses challenges to social interaction in the classroom. Since she often misses out on the nuances of social interaction during classroom activities, she has to ask other students to repeat what has happened.

Clearly I'm not the same as everybody else, I mean I miss a lot of things in class and sometimes — it's like I kind of think to myself "well I guess, I can be considered a high maintenance person because people have to tell me "oh this is what this person did and that's why we're all laughing" or "this is what happened over there" and they have to tell me these things cause I don't see them in class.

Although Josiah's intellect is "normal", his disability impacts almost all aspects of learning, including the ability to speak, move, and write. He states that ... "For my brain injury, everything in my body gets it. There are a lot of things that I can understand no problem but somethings, it just like when I'm were to write something, it takes long cause of the muscles that don't work."

The participants explained that environmental features on campus — such as the physical space — pose challenges to learning. Cloe lives with Crone's disease. For Cloe, feeling comfortable in class means "having space". Certain classrooms are designed to maximize social interaction during class; for this reason, the chairs are located extremely close to one another. This design feature increases anxiety for Cloe and makes it hard to learn.

So yeah another way it's not inclusive, I guess it's just the fact that teachers think that everyone just wants to be sitting on top of people's laps. Like I have another class where it's shaped like a U to facilitate talking but it's like I try to sit on the corner but you're still packed in and when I'm going through a bad day, I need my space, I can't move people, there's nowhere for them to go.

Lily is in her mid twenties and pursuing a degree in nutrition. As a result of a severe gastrointestinal disease, Lily suffers from fatigue associated

with low iron, low weight, difficulty absorbing food, and terrible stomach cramping. Fatigue and stomach pains at school often necessitate that she lie down in a quiet spot on campus, rather than go to class or walk home. To feel comfortable in her learning environment, she requires immediate access to a bathroom in case she has urgent symptoms. She recounts a story in which she became very ill during an exam as a result of not knowing where to find a bathroom in time ... “sometimes there won't be bathrooms on floors and I have to go downstairs and it's like that time I had to throw up during an exam, I threw up on the floor because the bathroom was so far away that I couldn't get there in time, so it is a little inaccessible.” Disability posed a range of body-socio challenges to learning at university.

“Even if I Wanted to:” Forecasting an Uneasy Future

The negative impact of disability on learning had a future dimension for all participants. The participants forecasted a difficult future upon graduation, in which the challenges associated with having a disability would impact their employability and vocational pursuits. With frustration, Vincenzo reflects on the narrow range of employment opportunities that may be available to him when he graduates.

And I mean, 90% of those jobs I can't do. Just because of the physical disability. So I need that predictability because I need to know what is going to happen after all of this study. And even more so having a disability because the, my chances, or my employability is reduced like I can't go drive a forklift or fly a plane. Even if I wanted to.

Given the stigmatizing nature of bowel diseases, Lily often misses class due to stomach cramping and worry about using public bathroom spaces on campus. In addition to describing her physical malaise, Lily forecasts that her future employability may be limited by her disability.

I think it's when I have low iron and might've been that. Also just feeling really sick that I'm fatigued and that I don't have that much energy because I don't have very much absorption of the nutrients or anything and then sleep too ... It's hard especially when so much of my career and getting an internship in my field depends on how

much my grades are. If I have friends in the class talking about grades, that's when my disability's really impacting my learning.

Jace is a psychology student who also has an intellectual disability. He reflects on an encounter with a particular psychology professor who is often condescending toward disabled students. This professor does not believe that students with disabilities are capable of becoming practicing psychologists “The professor just thought that students with disabilities don't match to what they need to be, to be practicing psychologists.”

As a result of his visual impairment, Khalil believes that the doors to many vocational pursuits may be forever closed to him. He states “for example, I can't be an engineer, I can't be a doctor, a pediatric surgeon, or whatever. You know, so, it could be claimed that it is my disability that limited this”. Some students, like Carmen, reflected on the harsh socio-economic realities that disabled students might face upon graduation, such as a lack of job prospects. She states that ... “it's true that having a disability makes most things harder but I think employment is the worst problem and daily living is pretty hard too.” Thus, due to the negative effect of disability on learning, most participants forecasted a difficult future, in which it may be challenging to acquire employment in their respective fields. The findings are discussed below, within the context of the existing scholarship.

Discussion

The findings confirm and extend scholarship in the area of disability and education. The participant's journey to university was an arduous one that began long before their entry into the academy. As youth, some of the participant's encountered collective low expectations that they would never amount to much, let alone become university students. These disabling sentiments were seared in the participants' memories as poignant moments. In contrast, unconditional faith from parents, peers and teachers had helped to pave the way to the academy for other participants, in effect mitigating others' bleak prospects. Thus, it appears that the participants had two different paths to university. While some faced a road littered with obstacles, the journey for other participants was made easier by receiving social support.

I can turn to several scholars to assist in theorizing this finding. Other scholars have theoretically discussed the concept of low academic expectations for young disabled people (Madriaga, 2007). However, this is the first qualitative study to empirically demonstrate that some disabled students attend university in the face of low expectations for academic success, in which the “doors of the academy” are barely open. Sociology of the body scholar Pierre Bourdieu suggested that bodies in culture bear particular forms of embodied capital — or value (Allen, 2004). While physical capital refers to one’s physical prowess and attractiveness, social capital pertains to the available social networks that are accessible to a particular individual. In turn, the amount of capital that we embody in culture forms the basis for our symbolic capital, that is, the degree to which a particular body is regarded to bear value and worth. Since disabled bodies depart from normative aesthetic ideals, a number of scholars have suggested that they bear little physical capital in a culture that reveres only certain forms of physicality (Allen, 2004).

As evidenced from the findings reported here, it appears that some young people with disabilities who attend university are not regarded as valued intellectual bodies that bear knowledge capital in contemporary culture. This may perhaps be due to the powerful assumption that having a disability, being intelligent, attending university, and forging an exciting future, are incompatible and irreconcilable subject positions. Further, the anti-intellectual sentiments that shape the lives of some young disabled people may also be a function of the problem of physiognomy, which arguably, still pervades today. Here, the cognitive and moral capacities of the body are assumed and derived from ones’ physical exterior. For instance, critical obesity scholars suggest that the assumptions which we have about the inherent “moral lassitude and laziness” of the fat body, stem from a physiognomy lens (Gilman, 2008). It could be that through the lens of physiognomy, a “deformed physicality” might imply “reduced cognitive ability” and the inability to engage in advanced academic studies. Further research is required from multiple stakeholders — such as parents, early year teachers, students with disabilities, and university faculty — regarding whether disabled young people are regarded as intellectual bodies that bear value in culture. The anti-intellectualism, which might still pervade when considering the learning of students with disabilities, needs to be challenged and changed.

However, other students with disabilities received much social support from parents, peers and teachers to attend university. This finding is encouraging and might speak to the gradual widening of university participation. Further, many contemporary scholars discuss the importance of social support to fostering a healthy sense of self-efficacy, that is, a belief in our ability to succeed at particular tasks. For some students with disabilities, social support from critical stakeholders appeared to shape a strong sense of academic self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982). Thus, it appears that students with disabilities negotiate different paths to university. While some face formidable roadblocks, the burden is lessened for others who receive social support. Hopefully, as the process of widening university participation continues and the ideology of ableism is challenged, more young people with disabilities will navigate an easier path to higher education.

The participants discussed the numerous learning challenges that they encounter at university. Some of these challenges were characterized as bodily or disability-related in nature. The participants, for example, described difficulty with reading, writing, interacting with others, walking to class, or engaging in small group learning scenarios. The students explained that architectural facets on the university campus hindered the learning process.

A number of scholars have discussed the learning challenges that students with disabilities face in their effort to obtain a university education. Students with disabilities find it difficult to access academic materials and note-taking services (Fuller et al., 2004). These students also encounter a lack of support and contact time with academic tutors (Borland & James, 1999). Obtaining access to assistive technologies is another significant learning challenge (Shevlin et al., 2004). The physical layout of learning spaces is often inaccessible, and, in general, students find that there is poor disability education and awareness on campus (Tinklin & Hall, 1999).

Phenomenology might be an appropriate methodological and philosophical lens to make sense of the learning challenges that students with disabilities face at university. First, most disability scholars have used an either/or, medico-social approach when thinking about the challenges that people with disabilities encounter. In the former, disability is thought to be an organic problem that is inherent to the body, that is, a problem of failed physicality. When people with disabilities fail to take reparative or

rehabilitative actions, medical approaches easily lend themselves to victim blaming. In contrast, social approaches root the cause of disability in oppressive learning environments (Allen, 2004). The goals of social approaches to disability are noble. For the first time, these scholars have forced us to scrutinize the able-bodied environment in which we live. However, environmental determinism may overlook the embodied nature of disability, failing to theorize important concepts such as the experience of pain. Critics of the social model beg scholars to invite the body back into scholarship (Allen, 2004).

From the stories told here, it appears that learning challenges are neither only bodily nor only social. Rather, an experience of disablement at university occurs when there is a “collision” of sorts between the body and the learning spaces that it interacts with. For example, for a young woman in the study with severe gastro-intestinal disease, the collision between bowel symptoms, anxiety, an over-crowded learning space, and a lack of access to bathroom facilities, challenge her learning and create a sense of disablement at university.

Phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) in particular, offers important concepts that facilitate a better understanding of how bodies interact with environments to create disability. Merleau-Ponty (1962) suggests that there are four existentials that shape humans’ being in the world. Embodied, lived experiences are profoundly shaped by time, space, and social relationships. The spaces in which bodies inhabit, the passage of time, and the network of social relationships that we are embedded in influence our bodily and human experiences (Merleau-Ponty 1962). As evidenced by the stories told here, when disabled bodies interact with learning spaces at university, the lived experience of disability is felt and learning is threatened. Since it encourages scholars to take up a body-social approach to thinking about disablement, future researchers should consider the contributions of IPA to the study of disability at university.

The students foreshadowed an uneasy future upon graduation from university. While they were confident in their ability to complete a university education, they envisioned that their job prospects would be bleak. Students attributed a lack of job opportunities in the future to the bodily effects of disability. For instance, having a visual impairment made it “impossible” to fly a plane or become a cardiac surgeon. Similarly, disability-related fatigue was thought to close the door to particular health

related fields — such as nursing — that require a surplus of energy. Because of limited job prospects in the future, the students anticipated that they would face socio-economic deprivation.

Other researchers have discussed poor career development at university for students with disabilities. Calls are repeatedly made to devote more attention to the career development trajectory of students with disabilities so that they are prepared to negotiate employment challenges in the future (Madriaga, 2007; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010). Moola, Fusco, & Kirsh (2011) also found that young people with chronic illnesses believe that they will be restricted from certain occupations in the future due to the bodily effects of their disabilities. Certainly, epidemiological scholarship shows that disabled Canadians face extremely high rates of unemployment and much socio-economic disenfranchisement (Shier, Graham, & Jones, 2009).

Disabled students' projected unemployment offers a few novel points for consideration. Although disabled students face many closed academic doors, they largely see themselves as capable of going to university and obtaining an education. However, most of the students suspect that they will not attain gainful employment post graduation. This might suggest that while much progress has been made with respect to gaining access to the ivory tower – a struggle that was long fought over – disabled students do not see themselves as having the same educational outcomes and job opportunities as their able-bodied peers upon departure from the academy. That disabled students do not see themselves as capable of attaining certain occupations means that the struggle for inclusive education is far from over. In addition to career development training for disabled students at university, employers of businesses and organizations need to implement equitable employment practices that prioritize hiring disabled people. Further, disabled students view some careers as “impossible” to ever attain. They do not demonstrate any nuance or complexity with respect to their entry into certain jobs, regarding these occupational restrictions as “facts of life”. The “impossibility” of ever having access to particular jobs was particularly striking for those occupations where there is an “incompatibility” between the skills that are currently required for the job and the “limitations” associated with one's disability. For instance, rather than envisioning a time in which performing surgery or plane flying might be possible with limited vision through processes such as accommodation and adaptation, the students accept these limitations as static and

unchanging facts. The students' sedimented views about future career limitations — and lack of nuance — might speak to how deeply engrained the ideology of ableism is in our collective, public consciousness. At one time, the academy was thought to be closed off to people with disabilities (Barnes, 2007). This study shows gradual “cracks in the edifice” by demonstrating that most of the participants did expect to attend university. This gradual ideological shift likely speaks to changes in inclusive practices and whom we believe higher education to be for. In a similar manner, collectively, we need to undo the metonymic linkage between certain jobs and certain bodies. It is important to ask “is there a way in re-envision work such that all jobs are available to all bodies”?

Conclusion

Barnes (2007) suggests that for most of history, the university —as an institution that is century's years old— has adopted a reactionary and liberal agenda with respect to education for students with disabilities. While the rhetoric of inclusion is regularly espoused, this may not be the everyday reality for disabled students on university campuses. In this article, I responded to Fuller et al.'s. (2004) call that the “voices” of young disabled people be incorporated into the dialogue about post-secondary education and disability. In doing so, I attempted to fill a lacuna in the existing scholarship by focusing on the learning experiences of students with disabilities in Manitoba, Canada, a place that is shaped by particular health care, education and socio-economic circumstances. The participant's journey to university was an arduous one. While some faced closed doors and limited expectations, the helping hands of parents, teachers, and peers eased this burden for others. At university, the students faced numerous learning challenges that were both bodily and social in nature. When the students look forward, they see an uneasy future that will be marked by bleak employment options and socio-economic disenfranchisement. This study illustrates the contributions of IPA as a body-social approach toward understanding disablement in the academy. It appears then, that while the door to the ivory tower is gradually opening for the disabled, the gateway to the future — that is, a well developed career trajectory—remains firmly locked. While there are slight cracks in the intellectual edifice, great strides and much advocacy is needed before disabled students are fully regarded as

bodies that bear intellectual value in the academy. It is hoped that this scholarship participates in the ongoing struggle for a socially just pedagogy (Madriaga, 2007).

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the invaluable support of Ms. Carolyn Christie –the coordinator of student accesibility service at the University of Manitoba– for facilitating this study. The author would also like to acknowledge the financial support of the University Research Grants Program at the University of Maintoba.

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