"AND BAM. YOU HAVE A CONNECTION": BLIND/PARTIALLY BLIND STUDENTS AND THE BELONGING IN ACADEMIA MODEL

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Abstract

Blind/partially blind people are underrepresented in post-secondary education and lack equitable opportunities to develop a sense of belonging. This study shares narratives of 28 blind/partially blind students from across Turtle Island (in what is colonially called Canada) using Teng et al.'s (2020) Belonging in Academia Model (BAM) as a conceptual framework. Thematically analyzed findings suggest blind/partially blind students' perspectives offer nuance to the BAM's conceptualization of how belonging develops through affiliation, familiarity, acceptance, interdependent relationships, and sense of equity. Based on blind/partially blind perspectives, the former trusting connections dimension was renamed interdependent relationships. By attending to the underrepresented perspectives of blind/partially blind students, stakeholders can become more responsive to the experiences of people from equity-deserving groups. Understanding facilitators and barriers to belonging could result in culturally safer and more inclusive pedagogical practices. Only when we create spaces where everyone can belong will higher education move toward being more just.

Keywords: accessibility, belonging, blind, blindness, disability, inclusion, higher education

Résumé

Les personnes aveugles/malvoyantes sont sous-représentées dans l'enseignement postsecondaire et manquent d'opportunités équitables pour développer un sentiment d'appartenance. Cette étude partage les récits de 28 étudiants aveugles/malvoyants de toute l'île de la Tortue (aujourd'hui appelé le Canada) en utilisant le Modèle d'Appartenance au milieu Universitaire (BAM) de Teng et al. (2020) comme cadre conceptuel. Les résultats analysés thématiquement suggèrent que les perspectives des étudiants aveugles/malvoyants offrent une nuance à la conceptualisation du BAM sur la façon dont l'appartenance se développe à travers l'affiliation, la familiarité, l'acceptation, les relations interdépendantes et le sentiment d'équité. En tenant compte des perspectives sous-représentées des étudiants aveugles/malvoyants, les intervenants peuvent devenir plus réceptifs aux expériences des personnes appartenant à des groupes méritant l'équité. Comprendre les facilitateurs et les obstacles à l'appartenance pourrait se traduire par des pratiques culturellement plus sûres et des pratiques pédagogiques plus inclusives. Ce n'est que lorsque nous créerons un espace où tout le monde peut appartenir que l'enseignement supérieur deviendra plus juste et équitable.

Mots-clés : accessibilité, appartenance, aveugle, cécité, handicap, inclusion, enseignement supérieur

Introduction

A strong sense of belonging is correlated with academic performance, self-perceived competence, self-worth, and retention (Freeman et al., 2007; Pittman & Richmond, 2007, 2008; Vaccaro et al., 2015). A sense of belonging in post-secondary education may be particularly important for students from traditionally underrepresented or equity-denied groups, for whom developing this sense of belonging is more difficult (Lane-McKinley & Roberts, 2018; Strayhorn, 2012). Throughout this manuscript, the experiences of disabled students will be discussed using identity-first (e.g.,

disabled person) language, rather than the person-first (e.g., person with a disability) language commonly promoted by non-disabled people across Turtle Island. Identity-first language, more commonly used within disability studies, indicates positive association with disabled people as a community of people with shared experiences (Dunn & Andrews, 2015; Hodges, 2015; Ladau, 2015). Disabled people might include folks who identify with terms such as Mad, neurodivergent, D/deaf, chronically ill, living with chronic physical or mental health conditions, and so on. Evidence suggests that for disabled students, social engagement (Foy, 2019; Konecni-Upton, 2010), relationships (Foy, 2019; Vaccaro et al., 2015; Waterfield et al., 2018), and mastery of the student role (Foy, 2019; Vaccaro et al., 2015) are in reciprocal relationships with sense of belonging. Although some studies have addressed aspects of disabled and blind/partially blind students' experiences of higher education, none have specifically described an in-depth understanding of blind/partially blind post-secondary students' development of belonging.

Blind/Partially Blind Peoples' Experiences of Post-Secondary Education

The approximately 1.5 million Canadians who have sight loss (Aljied et al., 2018) are underrepresented in post-secondary institutions and research about post-secondary education. Gupta et al. (2021) report that 46.5% of people with seeing disabilities obtained a post-secondary degree, diploma, or certificate, compared with 55.3% of the general population in 2016. Blind people currently in or having been in school in the past five years reported that related to their disability, people avoided or excluded them (46.3%), they were bullied at school (39.5%), and some terminated their education early (37.4%) due to factors such as the negative social environment (Bizier et al., 2016). Factors contributing to the startling difference in post-secondary attainment between blind/partially blind and sighted people and to these negative experiences require exploration so these underrepresented narratives can inform institutional and pedagogical changes. Moreover, although there is a large body of literature from critical disability studies and about disability in higher education, only a few of these specifically examine blind/partially blind students' experiences and their lack of full participation in higher education, including the vital aspect of belonging. This is therefore a hidden societal issue (Bishop & Rhind, 2011; Fichten et al., 2009; Hewett et al., 2017; Johnston et al., 2016; Lourens, 2015; Lourens & Swartz, 2016b; Morris, 2017; Reed & Curtis, 2012).

Post-secondary educational institutions across Turtle Island share an academic culture with only small variations from one institution to another. Powerful work has been done exploring the nuances of the culture in academia (of which post-secondary institutions are a part) and the ableism embedded within its structures. This article will not, therefore, provide an extended discussion thereof, but will rather gesture toward some of the people who have written and taught about the subject. In *Academic Ableism*, Dolmage (2017) describes how the very foundations of academia are based on ideals founded in eugenics and the segregation and academic exclusion of disabled people, Indigenous people, and racialized people. In academia, disabled people and disability have been more often the subjects of study, rather than the actors in research and teaching (Dolmage, 2017; Oliver, 1992; Snyder & Mitchell, 2010). Ableism is encoded within standards of productivity and performance of the ideal academic (Evans et al., 2017; Waterfield et al., 2018). In such an environment, disabled people are forced to perform additional labour and prove the legitimacy of their existence in this space (Bulk et al., 2017; Dolmage, 2017; Easterbrook et al., 2015; Horton & Tucker, 2014; Jarus et al., 2022; Titchkosky, 2011). Disabled students must use their energy and labour to obtain materials in accessible formats, while continuing to give the same amount of, or more, energy and labour to doing their schoolwork. Thus, their full participation in post-secondary education—from classroom to extracurriculars—is limited. How this interacts with the development of belonging is one of the gaps to be addressed within this manuscript.

The existing literature about blind peoples' post-secondary experiences tends to focus on issues of physical and digital access that influence participation of blind/partially blind people in post-secondary education, identifying barriers such as large amounts of reading, difficulties obtaining and using adaptive technology, and teaching methods reliant on vision (Bishop & Rhind, 2011; Frank et al., 2020; Reed & Curtis, 2012). Two studies specifically explored the experiences of blind people in an academic library, focusing on the importance of librarians' empathy for blind students' experiences and on the impact of students' library carrels in providing a second home (Bodaghi et al., 2016; Bodaghi & Ngah, 2013). Croft (2021) described the complexity of relationships between blind/partially blind students and those providing access support. Reed and Curtis (2012) found that blind/partially blind post-secondary students in Canada experience significant social barriers, including social

isolation, lack of understanding of blindness, and unhelpful attitudes of others on campus.

Accounts in the literature describe challenges faced by disabled people attempting to enter or excel within academic environments that demand high productivity and which perpetuate ableist assumptions and structures (Bulk et al., 2017; Dolmage, 2017; Easterbrook et al., 2015; Horton & Tucker, 2014; Titchkosky, 2008; Waterfield et al., 2018). Students with disabilities who are also from another equity-deserving group tend to have more negative experiences in post-secondary education, including perceived negative attitudes (Kim & Aquino, 2017). Moreover, disabled students associate belonging with perceived social acceptance and support from faculty and peers (Hewett et al., 2017; Vaccaro et al., 2015). Blind/partially blind students experience difficulty engaging in social and learning aspects of academia related to negative attitudes from peers (Frank et al., 2020; Lourens, 2015) and instructors (Foy, 2019; Frank et al., 2020; Ostrowski, 2016). These negative attitudes are characterized by lack of understanding about, low expectations from, pity for, discomfort around, avoidance of, staring at, and patronizing blind/partially blind students (Benoit et al., 2013; Chan et al., 2009; Foy, 2019; Frank et al., 2020; Lourens, 2015; Ostrowski, 2016; Perkins School for the Blind, 2016; Strnadová et al., 2015). Overwhelming evidence suggests that disabled students perceive attitudes encountered in academia as a major barrier to their full participation and that "inclusion" cannot be limited to access, but must also involve factors such as belonging (Bulk et al., 2017; Claiborne et al., 2011; Coriale et al., 2012; Easterbrook et al., 2015; Foy, 2019; Frank et al., 2020; Hong et al., 2015; Hong & Himmel, 2009; Hopkins, 2011; Liasidou, 2014; Marshak et al., 2010; Moriña et al., 2015; Mullins & Preyde, 2013; Ostrowski, 2016; Shevlin et al., 2004; Strnadová et al., 2015).

Belonging

Belonging is a sense of being part of some referent group. Discussions of belonging come from many disciplines, including geography (Antonsich, 2010), psychology (L. H. Brown et al., 2007; Hornsey & Jetten, 2004; Pickett, 2004), sociology (Strayhorn, 2012), and occupational science (Hammell, 2004; Rebeiro, 2001; Wilcock, 2006). Belonging can be considered with regard to micro (personal/subjective level; e.g., subjective sense of belonging) or macro (societal; e.g., formal membership) systems (Antonsich, 2010). The subjective sense of belonging has been described as having two components, whereby an individual accumulates and assesses information regarding their role in the group (cognitive component), and appraises and responds to their feelings about interactions within the group (affective component) (Strayhorn, 2008). Factors commonly associated with belonging include feeling respected, cared about, integral, valued, needed, connected, socially accepted, and important, as well as having a sense of cohesion with, and capacity to contribute to, the group (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Cobigo et al., 2012; Grimes et al., 2017; Hammell, 2004; Strayhorn, 2012; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016).

Belonging develops based on personal and environmental factors, and, especially for people from underrepresented groups, the affective component is significantly impacted by encounters with perceived negative attitudes, stereotyping, stigmatization, and discrimination (Cobigo et al., 2012; Yuval-Davis et al., 2006). Belonging often involves accepting and performing group norms (Cobigo et al., 2012). If a person does not adopt the shared (often ableist) norms, this tends to negatively impact their perceived role in the group (the cognitive component). Ableism is a form of prejudice that says non-disabled people are superior, and it describes the non-disabled body/mind upon which the norms of academia are built (Auterman, 2011). The ableist norms of academia require people to pass[1] as non-disabled, or to closely approximate the norm in order to belong. This may be an additional barrier to people who are unwilling to conform to ableist ideals of normality. Therefore, as the ableist norms of academia are constantly reinforced and recreated through the actions and inactions of those within academia, the ongoing exclusion of disabled people from academia may prevent culture change that could contribute to access and the potential for belonging.

BAM: A Model of Belonging

Whereas belonging is clearly vital to promoting inclusion, culture change, and sustained post-secondary participation (Almog, 2018), it is important to understand how students create belonging. Based on their grounded theory study with sighted individuals, Teng et al. (2020) proposed a conceptual model describing a process by which sense of belonging develops: the Belonging in Academia Model

1 To pass as non-disabled means to so closely approximate the ableist norms that appear as if one lives in a non-disabled body/mind.

(BAM). In their article, the authors described how belonging develops through affiliation, familiarity, acceptance, trusting connections, and sense of equity. While their sighted participants suggested that belonging may develop similarly for blind/partially blind people, Teng et al. (2020) suggested future research should explore if the BAM would be applicable for blind/partially blind people. The purpose of this article is to highlight how blind/partially blind students develop belonging and to elucidate how their perspectives illuminate nuances within the model.

Methods

Influenced by critical realism, this study recognizes that human interactions with social and physical environments construct individual experiences of reality and that the social world is both socially constructed and real (Fletcher, 2017; Parr, 2013). This emphasizes the collaboration and interaction between researchers, participants, and data in creating a thick account of belonging—not the *right* account (Denzin, 1989).

Author Positionality

Laura Yvonne Bulk's perspectives as a blind scholar who can pass as sighted much of the time, a Dutch settler to WSÁNEĆ territory, a woman, and a first-generation university student influence this research. She is not an objective observer, but an insider learning with other people in the blind community to build a thicker description of what it means to be blind/partially blind and belong in post-secondary. Her lived experience informed the topic chosen, the questions asked, the theoretical concepts employed, the approaches used, the analysis performed, and the representations created. One of the theoretical foundations influencing all of these is crip theory, for which this article cannot provide a full background. Particularly, this project was from its inception influenced by a desire to challenge compulsory able-bodied/mindedness and possibly build solidarities with others who resist normality (Abes, 2019).

Laura Nimmon and Tal Jarus are significant allies/accomplices in this research. Their expertise contributed to shaping this into a robust, anti-ableist, and creative research process. As they participated in the design and conduct of the study, their positionalities also influenced the process and outcomes. Tal Jarus identifies as a White settler, an immigrant, a woman, and a lesbian, with lived experience with disability. Laura Nimmon identifies as a White settler and woman, with expertise in the social sciences.

Data Collection

All 28 focus group participants spoke to their experiences as undergraduate students, although some were also able to share experiences as graduate students, staff, or faculty—Table 1 contains a description of participants. The majority (n = 17) had or were obtaining a degree in social sciences, 10 were in professions, seven were in arts and humanities, and only one was in sciences. Their post-secondary education experiences occurred at different points during the early 1990s to 2016, in the provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, and New Brunswick. While participants were not required to disclose if they identified with other underrepresented groups, eight identified themselves as racialized, one as Indigenous, and one as queer. Including current students and alumni invited more people to participate, brought in greater diversity of perspective and experience, and allowed conversations to include cross-generational interaction. Participants were recruited via emails sent through researchers' networks and accessibility services. In addition to identifying as blind/partially blind, participants needed to communicate in English and be over the age of 19.

Over the course of 10 focus groups conducted via teleconference, participants shared stories of belonging and non-belonging in post-secondary. As an early-career blind scholar, Laura Yvonne Bulk disclosed at the beginning that she is also blind/partially blind. The presence of any researcher impacts what is shared; she hoped that the presence of a blind/partially blind researcher would engender greater comfort, leading to more honest sharing. The vitality of sharing about one's relationships with disability within disability studies contexts is highlighted by O'Toole (2013). As part of the focus group process, she shared how she determined the research focus on the experiences of belonging in post-secondary and invited conversation. Her roles included holding the space, picking up the conversational threads, facilitating sharing from all conversation partners, and bringing the conversation around to the research focus.

Analysis

Inspired by Braun and Clarke's (2018) thematic analysis, this analysis involved six stages, in which Laura Yvonne Bulk moved from immersion in the data to constructing themes by which an understanding of the data could be communicated. Tal Jarus and Laura Nimmon were involved in reflective conversations throughout all stages of analysis.

Table 1

Description of Participants

Pseudonym	Pronoun	Blindness	Role(s) in Higher education experience beyond undergraduate education
Ava	her	Partial	faculty (instructor/adjunct); graduate student
Ben	him	Partial	Staff; graduate student
Casimir	him	Partial	faculty; graduate student
Diane	her	Profound	graduate student
Edmond	him	Profound	undergraduate alum
Ellen	her	Profound	faculty; staff; graduate student alum
Ellis	her	Profound	staff; graduate student alum
Elroy	him	Profound	undergraduate alum
Eve	her	Partial	graduate student
Gabrielle	her	Partial	staff
James	him	Profound	graduate student alum
Jamie	her	Profound	graduate student alum
Jason	him	Partial	current undergraduate student
John	him	Profound	faculty (instructor/adjunct)
Kendra	her	Partial	graduate student
Kevin	him	Profound	current undergraduate student
Leah	her	Partial	staff
Marilyn	her	Partial	staff; faculty
Martin	him	Profound	faculty (instructor/adjunct); staff; graduate student
Mary	her	Partial	faculty (instructor/adjunct); staff; graduate student
May	her	Partial	current undergraduate student
Melody	her	Profound	faculty (instructor/adjunct); graduate student
Mona	her	Partial	current undergraduate student
Rachel	her	Partial	undergraduate alum
Ryan	him	Partial	graduate student
Sarah	her	Profound	current undergraduate student
Stewart	him	Profound	faculty
Tracy	her	Profound	faculty (instructor/adjunct); postdoctoral fellow

Table 2

Description of Six Stages of Analysis

Stage	Description
Becoming familiar with the data.	Listening to each focus group multiple times.
Coding.	Listening to each focus group while applying codes (succinct labels identifying meaning) associated with relevant data segments in a spreadsheet. Initially applying semantic–what people seemed to be trying to communicate, *I can be my true self*—then latent codes—social values, norms, and assumptions that allowed what the participant was saying to make sense, *authenticity is important for belonging*.
Generating initial themes.	Examining and re-examining the collated data to identify significant broader patterns of meaning around a central organizing concept.
Reviewing themes.	Re-examining the candidate themes to determine if they told convincing stories about the data that addressed the research questions.
Member reflections.	Sending a summary to participants, inviting reflections and responses. Four participants responded, sharing that they felt the summary was meaningful and fit with their experience and what they heard in the focus groups.
Comparing.	The researcher examined if data related to the BAM, and how blind/partially blind students' perspectives might contradict and build upon sighted individuals' perspectives reported in Teng et al. (2020).

Findings

Analysis of blind/partially blind students' perspectives offers additional nuance to the BAM. We can reimagine the BAM, with suggested revisions, as a flower comprised of five fanned-out petals representing dimensions of belonging: affiliation, familiarity, acceptance, interdependent relationships, and sense of equity. The fourth petal (previously trusting connections) has been modified from the original BAM as a result of input from participants with disabilities. Imagining the model with multiple senses, beginning with affiliation and moving to sense of equity, each petal becomes thicker in texture, deeper in auditory tone, and darker in colour than the previous, representing increasing complexity in one's sense of belonging. The following paragraphs present findings by describing each petal with salient participant quotations (using pseudonyms). Within each, the factors blind/partially blind perspectives add or uniquely emphasize are elucidated.

Affiliation

Affiliation as a dimension of belonging involves being closely associated with the institution and is influenced by environmental factors. For blind/partially blind participants, factors such as size of department and departmental culture required careful consideration when determining whether to pursue affiliation with a school or specific program. As it does for sighted people, enrolment engenders a certain level of belonging. Leah said "when I was a grad student…I belong simply by being enrolled, just because I have a cohort, I have [a] supervisor." Blind/partially blind participants stressed that belonging is, however, more than presence or enrolment. Describing affiliation versus richer belonging, Luke highlighted post-secondary spaces "where you need to be present…but that doesn't necessarily mean you will feel included when you get there." Kendra said "membership and belonging are two different things." Thus, it is important to consider the dimensions of belonging that follow.

While both blind/partially blind and sighted students mention that external factors, such as class size, impact

belonging, blind/partially blind students more consistently emphasize this. For example, Jason's affiliation with a cohort (group of learners moving through a program together) contributes to his comfort engaging with classmates more than affiliation with a single course. He described that within his cohort he could lean over to a classmate and ask for assistance, "but outside of the classes that are part of my program, I don't think I've done that yet." Being affiliated with a cohort thus positively impacts his sense of belonging. By choosing where to place their affiliation—for example, choosing a cohort program or a specific institution—blind/partially blind students seize power to shape their experience of belonging and their opportunities for creating familiarity. While affiliation is a first step in feeling a sense of belonging, a feeling of familiarity through knowing, and being known by, one's classmates was also important.

Familiarity

Familiarity involves feelings of knowing and being known. Jamie emphasized that familiarity goes beyond affiliation—being in the same class—to when "[a classmate] knows who I am or remembers me…establishing a relationship with somebody in the classroom…I'm not just this blind/partially blind person with a notetaker and a dog or a cane…I am a person." Familiarity is built through interaction and shared occupation. Ellis mentioned, for example, shared experiences of occupational imbalance with fellow students: "We were all suffering together, that helped a sense of belonging."

A nuance added by blind/partially blind participants is the importance of people becoming familiar, not only with individuals' strengths, but also with different ways of being in the world—including blindness. Ben said "understanding [about disability] is only going to come through repetition… if it's the first time [a person or system encounters disability] every time…it can be really draining." Participants also addressed challenges to having people develop familiarity with blindness as a valid way of being in the world. Ava stated that familiarity tends not to develop because there is "awkwardness around disability. At the root of all of this is the idea…that disability is somehow exceptional and weird…. Underneath all the problems there's just a reticence to engage with disability." Teng et al.'s (2020) sighted participants expressed this reticence.

Offering another angle, Leah said "in my department… the belonging thing was little bit more, delicate, [and] I didn't participate. When they asked for participation, I would often not respond or [would] find an excuse." The relationship seems cyclical. Due to a "delicate" (i.e., tenuous or fragile) sense of belonging, Leah chose not to interact. Fewer interactions result in fewer opportunities to develop familiarity, and therefore lacking a firm sense of belonging is a barrier to developing a sense of belonging. Diane also described challenges associated with developing familiarity:

> The initial starting place is easier if you're sighted. I notice sighted people generally will comment on something visual…"that's a nice top, love your shoes." Just using a compliment is a really good way to start a dialogue with somebody you might want to connect with… when you're blind/partially blind, that's not easy…. Maybe [sighted people] notice somebody has a look on their face and they're rolling their eyes to something the teacher said…. You can use your vision to find commonalities with somebody…a look to say, "Hey, I totally get what you're saying, I think what you think." And boom, you have a connection. And when you're blind/partially blind you sort of miss out on that stuff…the initial getting connected is a lot harder.

From a strength perspective, although developing the familiarity might be more difficult, participants also found that "because some people are going to be eliminated from the pool [of potential human connections] immediately… relationships are more meaningful and belonging is more authentic" (Diane). Familiarity involves becoming familiar with peoples' strengths and unique ways of being in the world, which seems to contribute to the potential emergence of acceptance.

Acceptance

Acceptance involves freedom to be one's authentic self. Unlike sighted participants, every blind/partially blind student described circumstances in which they were unable to act authentically related to being blind/partially blind. Reflecting on his early university experiences, Elroy said "I wanted to be accepted…I thought I would be accepted if I tried to be less blind and more sighted." Being blind/partially blind, and not a blindness stereotype, is vital to being authentic. James described his experience: "The barrier for me is I didn't feel like I belong because I felt like I couldn't even be me, I couldn't even be myself because I'm a person who uses a white cane."

For many, acceptance is related to feeling understood.

Commenting on belonging, Mona said "I feel like [belonging can be created] if you can share your story and come to a human agreement that, 'this is how I live life, and can we do these things together?'" Mona described a desire to have others understand her way of moving through the world and to understand theirs, and thus be able to accept one another's differences and live together in a good way. Ben highlighted the importance of people in the post-secondary community having an understanding of his way of moving through the world as a partially blind person: "Belonging, I guess for me what that means is understanding, [and] acceptance [of blindness and my access needs] from folks." James emphasized the value of shared experience and understanding of what the experience of being in the student's "boat" is like: "the feeling of connection, maybe somewhat was even forged a bit by the commonality of our experience. We're going through this rigorous hardship together, we're all in the same boat at least…[so I] felt not so alone."

Having shared experiences also contributes to understanding and acceptance for sighted people; however, for blind/partially blind students, the shared nature of the experience sometimes shifts. They describe how their experiences of doing additional work within post-secondary fundamentally changes the experience, making it no longer shared. For example, the extra work blind/partially blind students need to do to obtain access may extend the time to completion of a degree. The extra work of being blind/partially blind has a negative impact on the sense of shared understanding because sighted people do not realize the impact of this disability-related labour, nor the impact on would-be shared experiences of post-secondary. Although not essential for it to exist, shared experiences contribute to acceptance. The next petal, interdependent relationships, also involves shared experience, but perhaps interdependent relationships are based on more intentionally created shared experiences.

Interdependent Relationships

In Teng et al.'s (2020) original conception of BAM, this petal was called *trusting connections*. Based on our data, we propose renaming it *interdependent relationships*. For blind/partially blind students, this dimension of belonging involves having relationships of interdependence characterized by mutual trust, contrasting with an emphasis on independence. This goes beyond the sense of having one's authentic self and perspectives accepted, to feeling one's whole person is embraced and trusted. This is reminiscent of Mingus's (2011) concept of access intimacy, which will be discussed later. Participants highlight feeling trusted to contribute within their sphere of influence and having those contributions valued. For both blind/partially blind and sighted students, feeling like they have something to add is an important piece of belonging. Contributions are not limited to material productivity, but included what one might bring to a relationship, for example.

Blind/partially blind students especially highlight reciprocal relationships wherein they are not singled out as the *one* needing help from another, but where it is recognized that everyone contributes in unique ways. May, for example, shared that she struggled to belong in a study group when she felt like she was unable to contribute. This changed when she found an area in which she could "shine" academically and contribute to the success of her study group: "I am successful in this area and other people are recognizing it and are actually coming to me for help studying, so I am being included in a way where I am actually needed." These interdependent relationships—in which one gives and receives—are key to belonging for blind/partially blind students. As Lynne put it, "there wasn't always people helping me. And I think that's the important part, that there has to be give and take, and you're accepted for your knowledge and your ability to contribute." Eve added "that was the ideal, where everyone is give and take and you have to respect each other…it is very rewarding when you can be framed as an equal." Jason describes an experience of belonging "to people in community, a village and being part of that village. Having a role in it. Having a social group, having support, having the ability to support others…. Humans, we want to give and receive."

Blind/partially blind students agree with Teng et al.'s sighted participants in saying that having our contributions valued indicates we are trusted as equal members of the collective. Diane described:

> Once you're in a group, sort of earning your place in the group and feeling like you're an equal part of it…we all want to feel like we're making a contribution and we all want to feel like we're valued and equal part of the team.

Adding more complexity, Stewart described how being recognized as a contributor may be more challenging: "As a blind person…. You really have to show that you're very, very capable." In our analysis of the data, blind/partially blind students expand upon the petal of trusting connections by adding further nuance to the ideas of interdependent rela-

tionships and making contributions. Blind/partially blind students also discuss how experiencing equity contributes to the capacity to make contributions, discussed in the sense of equity petal.

Sense of Equity

Feeling a *sense of equity* is a systems-level element of belonging, and includes the perception of an equitable allocation of resources and support. Mary indicated that "having everything available to me without my having to…make a big case about it, would definitely contribute…to feeling like I was worthy, and I belonged in a space, and I was no big deal." While few sighted students addressed equity, *every* blind/partially blind student addressed it. Particularly, they addressed how their experiences of ableism create additional work and diminish sense of belonging. Participants advocate for built-in access, but acknowledge that for now, seeking accommodations is the only option. Ben said

> We're not going to necessarily get [universal design] right the first time…or possibly ever.... Having tools that can help me be part of the conversation…technologies and having them readily accessible I think are also instrumental in filling in the gaps until we have something a little bit more robust. And those toys are not inexpensive.

Ben's comment regarding the expense of access technology is common among participants and relates directly to equitable resource allocation. To "be part of the conversation," blind/partially blind students expend resources beyond those spent by sighted peers, whose access needs are built into the design. As Mary said:

> It's unconscious, our societies, our world is designed for the sighted.... It's taken for granted.... I'm not sure how many people, if you were to ask them, would cite being able to read everything, being able to do my job without asking for assistance as something they would see as contributing to their sense of belonging because it's a given.... That it's all designed for sight isn't something that would contribute to how they would define a sense of belonging…whereas obviously it's a much bigger deal for me.

Because the world is designed for sighted people, blind/partially blind students carry an added burden by expending emotional and material resources to gain equitable opportunity for engagement in post-secondary. For example, constantly seeking access, educating others, reminding people to provide accommodations, and continuously disclosing access needs. Stewart said that "it's a much more individualistic sense of 'It's *your* blindness after all, you deal with it.'" Kendra said "the fact that we need to self-advocate, to fight to be here in this university, tells me that I don't *really* belong."

All of this carries an emotional toll and, in combination with the lack of accessibility, contributes to feeling like we as individuals are a burden. Many blind/partially blind students describe feelings similar to Ava, who stated:

> Something that is hard is when you constantly have to be the one to raise your hand…every time an image comes up, I have to ask again, "Can you describe what's on the screen?" That makes you feel like you don't belong because you have continually ask for the same thing… to feel like I belong I don't want to feel that I'm bothering anyone.... "Why do I have to keep reminding you about this?"… You feel like everything you ask for is a burden. You start to internalize that, and you start saying, "Well, what if this isn't a great environment for me? What if I am too much of a hassle?"

Ava goes on to describe feeling like the "blind one who has some issues and just makes all this trouble. And that's what was so hard about finally realizing that I didn't belong there." This contrasted with Mary's sense of belonging when her access needs were met and she felt as if accommodating her "was no big deal."

Finally, one nuance of equity was never mentioned by sighted participants: "Accessibility does not in any way guarantee welcoming at all, or any sense of belonging. There are places accessible to us, that does not mean we belong there" (Stewart). Luke shared that "you get the materials you need; you get to participate…but still if you aren't being talked to by your fellow students…you may not feel that you belong." Conversely, one can feel a sense of belonging without accessibility: "You can be in a very awkward situation physically, but everyone is reaching out a hand to help you and your jerry-rigging this whatever you need, and it's fine…they want you there" (Ava). Blind/partially blind students discuss equity at length in relation to access, and add nuances and layering to this petal around the added work of obtaining access and associated emotional tolls.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that the BAM is relevant to blind/partially blind students' experiences, and their perspectives build on the BAM. For disabled students generally and blind/partially blind students specifically, academic persistence depends, in part, on belonging (Bodaghi et al., 2016; Bodaghi & Ngah, 2013; Wessel et al., 2009). In the following sub-sections, we discuss connections between our findings, existing thought from the disability community and literature. As suggested by Kimball et al. (2016), we also discuss connections between lived experiences reported by our participants and the social structures and processes that may contribute to these.

"What if I am too much of a hassle?": Belonging and Labour

Perceived support from faculty and peers is a social phenomenon that disabled students associate with belonging (Hewett et al., 2017; Vaccaro et al., 2015). In a system that creates access through accommodations, thereby individualizing and isolating disabled people, one indicator of support from faculty is receiving timely and adequate accommodations (Freeman et al., 2007). Corroborating Lourens and Swartz (2016a), our participants reported receiving inconsistent accommodations. Likely multiple factors contribute to this. Educational institutions may have inadequate mechanisms in place for faculty and staff to receive training and support for the labour involved in implementing accommodations, strengthening knowledge of legal responsibilities, and improving resources and recognition for developing and enacting inclusive teaching strategies, thereby contributing to the lived experience as reported by our participants (Butler et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2010). Student affairs professionals report feeling unprepared to effectively support the diverse range of disabled people (Kim & Aquino, 2017). A few studies found that even when faculty profess positive attitudes toward disabled students and desire, in theory, to provide inclusive education, they often do not implement inclusive education strategies (Bulk et al., 2017; Cook et al., 2009; Easterbrook et al., 2015; Lombardi et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2010). Simultaneously, perceived support and respect from faculty and staff fosters students' sense of belonging (Cooper, 2009; Green, 2019). Therefore, gaps in faculty and staff knowledge, skills, resources, and supports may leave students feeling unsupported in classroom and co-curricular activities. To redress this, Lourens and Swartz (2016b) recommend education about blindness and accommodations. We suggest that this education should include strategies for making course content and pedagogical approaches more accessible, stories about experiences of blind/partially blind students, and techniques for creating a classroom climate in which students can develop interpersonal familiarity and acceptance. Additionally, it is important to provide the supports necessary to enact change and recognition of the labour involved because those expected to create change are often precariously employed within the institution, such as contract faculty.

Accommodation-dependent accessibility also requires the labour of disabled students. Self-advocacy is discussed by Bruce and Aylward (2021) "as a set of individual skills to be deployed in strategic and non-disruptive ways" (p. 22), including those involved in seeking access from individual instructors. This model of access—which depends on disclosure, medical documentation, and labour—has been critiqued (Dolmage, 2017; Griful-Freixenet et al., 2017; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Mullins & Preyde, 2013; Wood, 2017; Woolf & De Bie, 2022). Our participants problematize the necessity of self-advocacy for student success, corroborating scholarship from disability studies. Within the sense of equity petal, as described in the findings, they emphasize the need for built-in access (Dolmage, 2017). In the interdependent relationship petal, they question neo-liberal individualism. In the familiarity petal, participants discuss how the added labour and emotion work of self-advocacy detracts from time and energy to engage in belonging-building. In her creative representation of a blind experience of post-secondary education, Healey's (2021) character manages her own and others' emotions, and does the labour of putting others at ease—all aspects of emotional labour (Woolf & De Bie, 2022). Similarly, Aubrecht and La Monica (2017) address the added labour that comes with navigating disability disclosure. Self-advocacy with individual instructors can result in "acceptance, rejection, support, resistance, skepticism, and denial" (Bruce, 2017, p. 86). This inconsistent faculty support places the disabled student in a precarious position from which they question their post-secondary belonging, as our findings attest. Vaccaro et al.'s (2015) theoretical model of belonging for disabled college students includes self-advocacy (having the capacity to describe access needs and seek to have them met), mastery of student roles, and relationships as key elements of belonging. While relationships and mastery (making recognized contributions) may resonate with our findings, the

deployment of self-advocacy as key to belonging does not. Instead, our findings suggest that requirements for self-advocacy detract from belonging. While self-advocacy may be a valuable skill, our participants contend that rather than emphasizing self-advocacy (thereby putting the burden on disabled students), the system should be designed with equity in mind. Our participants' calls for institutional responsibility and more inclusive design echo those of other disabled people and scholars (Dolmage, 2017; Griful-Freixenet et al., 2017; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Mullins & Preyde, 2013; Wood, 2017; Woolf & De Bie, 2022).

"Humans, we want to give and receive": Belonging and Interdependence

In addition to calling for more inclusive design, participants imagine more, such as access intimacy and interdependent relationships. Ableism that is embedded within academia presupposes that students should conform to an ableist ideal of independence, understood as doing things alone without assistance (as opposed to a disabled understanding of independence that relates to choice) (Reindal, 1999). The notion of interdependence challenges the binary between powerful seemingly independent individuals and oppressed seemingly dependent disabled students (Abes & Wallace, 2020). Our participants' experiences reflect Mingus's (2010) description that interdependence "is not just me 'dependent on you.' It is not you, the benevolent oppressor, deciding to 'help' me" (para. 8). Reimagining Teng et al.'s (2020) trusting connections petal as interdependent relationships nods toward anti-ableism and decolonization (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012). Facilitating belonging requires an intentional move away from colonial and ableist notions of autonomy and independence toward interdependence, solidarity, and relationship.

Mingus (2011) describes access intimacy as "that elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else 'gets' your access needs" (para. 4). Perhaps access intimacy begins developing in the familiarity petal and continues to deepen as belonging becomes more robust. Interestingly, Volion (2020) found that access intimacy is most often experienced with someone who also identifies with an equity-deserving group. This suggests the value of solidarities in developing belonging: "If we do not view disabled people as intersectional beings, we cannot begin to tackle the various challenges that people with disabilities face" (Volion, 2020, p. 90). Policy makers can consider cross-movement solidarities when designing policies because "we can only truly understand ableism by tracing its connections to heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism" (Sins Invalid, 2020, para. 12).

Disability as Diversity: Belonging, Bias, and Familiarity with Blindness

One of the pieces of evidence for ableism is the lack of familiarity with blindness. Our findings indicate that mutual affiliation within a conducive environment over time fosters interactions which in turn promote familiarity. As outlined in the findings, conduciveness of the environment is emphasized in the narratives of blind/partially blind students more than sighted students. Previous literature indicates larger class size has a greater negative impact on students from underrepresented groups, including racialized and first-generation students (Beattie & Thiele, 2016); our findings confirm the same is true for blind/partially blind students. In our findings, blind/partially blind students emphasize the negative impact of larger classes on their opportunities to interact and build a sense of belonging. Once students find affiliation, they can start building familiarity with those in their sphere through interactions and shared occupation, which, in turn, tends to increase their confidence in interacting with others while being one's authentic self (Bulk, 2022; Dagaz, 2012). Blind/partially blind students emphasize the importance of embracing diverse ways of being in the world, including blindness, so they are not the first one every time. Doing so might allow people in their environment to become more familiar with, and have more positive attitudes toward, blindness, which may further decrease some of the reticence to engage. Positive attitudes toward the capacity of blind/partially blind people to contribute are shaped in part by both the quality and quantity of interactions with blind/partially blind people (McDonnall et al., 2019). Of note, McDonnall et al. (2019) found that employers' negative unconscious bias toward blindness was only impacted by exposure to above average performance by a blind/partially blind person. This corroborates our participants' sense that as a blind/partially blind person they must have above average performance to be perceived as an equal contributor.

To develop a sense of belonging, it is also important for blind/partially blind students to become familiar with their own strengths and develop a positive disability identity (Almog, 2018). Blind/partially blind students' stories reflect ways academia expects people to perform in typical

ways (Titchkosky, 2008, 2011). Some people may be unable or unwilling to conform to ableist normativity, disrupting the performance and exposing them as a person who is discreditable, which may result in stigmatization (Chan et al., 2009; Fiske & Tablante, 2015; Goffman, 1963). Having a stigmatized identity may cause distress, which can be part of a chain of events contributing to underperformance (Inzlicht & Good, 2005). Prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination—conscious or unconscious, actual or perceived—may hinder acceptance and the development of belonging. Left unchecked, prejudicial attitudes and stereotyping can lead to discriminatory behaviours which then negatively impact students' sense of belonging and persistence (Chan et al., 2009; Locks et al., 2008). As described in the BAM and our findings, a different chain of events may be facilitated in favour of belonging: affiliation within a conducive environment, development of familiarity with one another's strengths, consistent interactions, and use of strength-based approaches that embrace disability as diversity. When disability is finally embraced as an aspect of the beauty of human diversity, and diversity and relationships are prized above material formulaic productivity, it may become possible to create more spaces of belonging.

"We all want to feel like we're making a contribution:" Belonging and Contributions

While prizing other things above measurable productivity may be the ideal, both the literature and our findings suggest that in the context of an environment prizing measurable productivity, having the sense that others can rely on you and your ability to contribute is an important factor in developing belonging. For example, Whitten et al. (2020) describe how feeling able to contribute helps students develop a sense of belonging. As equal members of a collective, belonging may develop when an individual can contribute and be recognized for their contributions. Waterfield et al. (2018) state that disabled academics feel pressure to perform as the optimal productive academic contributors. Conversely, Mozqueda's (2020) disabled graduate student participants attest to the importance of making relational contributions through mentorship. Our findings indicate that contributions are not only valued in terms of academic productivity, but may also be relational in nature. Many examples did, however, focus on productivity and contribution to the neo-liberal academic project (Brown, 2020; Dolmage, 2017; Peruzzo, 2020). This is problematic, and may be a symptom of the ableist academic environment in which disabled people are framed as less productive and therefore less valuable (Brown, 2020; Dolmage, 2017; Waterfield et al., 2018). This relates to a limitation in this study, which relied on volunteers who are already experiencing pressures to be more productive. Within the ableist academic environment, some people may have chosen not to participate due to the unique pressures they face related to academic performance.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature on the post-secondary participation and success of historically and presently underrepresented blind/partially blind students in what is colonially known as Canada and may raise consciousness among stakeholders in considering the unique factors impacting belonging for blind/partially blind people. These include fostering interdependent relationships, valuing disability as diversity, and designing for access. By attending to these perspectives, stakeholders can become more responsive to the nuanced experiences of people from equity-deserving groups. Understanding facilitators of belonging could result in more successful program planning, culturally safer practices, and inclusive educational systems. For example, administrators could change systems that rely on disclosure, medical documentation, and self-advocacy, and shift the focus from training students to self-advocate to training faculty and staff, thereby creating a sense of equity. Perhaps a policy could require educators to undergo training in inclusive design and interrogate all curriculum in relation to access—addressing familiarity and sense of equity. Policy makers could examine how disability is framed within their institution (e.g., as diversity or as deficit)—addressing acceptance. To address affiliation, admissions policies and messaging could be examined to determine how they might invite or deter disabled applicants. Another policy recommendation is to develop ways of institutionally recognizing the labour involved in collaborating to provide access. For faculty, this could happen via tenure and promotion requirements. For students, perhaps students who are engaged in self-advocacy could receive course credits for this labour. Application of the BAM may lead to an increased sense of belonging and, in turn, improve student retention, motivation, satisfaction, and success. Institutions and educators can use BAM as a tool to tailor their actions and move toward fostering a sense of belonging for all members of the

learning and teaching environment. Only when we create a space where *everyone* can belong will we have spaces that are truly inclusive.

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