Making Disability Research Useful
(Practice Brief)

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Abstract

Scholarship on disability in higher education would be more useful to practitioners and make greater contributions to socially justice practice if authors made implications applicable to diverse audiences, focused on addressing ableist environments rather than changing disabled community members, promoted diverse ways of being and functioning, and was written in accessible language. Through examples, I show how implications can be written in ways accessible to and adapted for the work of multiple audiences, address barriers within campus environments, advocate for diverse ways of functioning, and use language and concepts applicable to broad audiences. Through these practices, disability scholarship in higher education can contribute to the development of campus environments that work for the broadest range of students, staff, and faculty.

Keywords: disability, research, practice, implications

The last decade has seen a marked increase in disabled students' share of undergraduate students, from 11% in 2009 (Raue & Lewis, 2011) to 19.4% in 2015 (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). There similarly has been a rapid expansion of published research about disability in higher education (Gelbar et al., 2015; Madaus et al., 2018), although the literature is still quite limited. Both quantitative and qualitative studies have been released. There is an incipient literature within higher education that addresses the intersection of disability with other aspects of social identity (e.g., Abes & Wallace, 2018; Han & Pong, 2015; Miller, 2017, 2018; Stapleton, 2015). Authors now provide greater attention to disability-inclusive methodologies (e.g., Brown & Broido, 2020; Peña et al., 2018).

Despite the increase in the quantity of literature on disability in higher education, much current disability-related scholarship and assessment in higher education has multiple limitations that reduce its ability to enhance practice. Madaus et al. (2018) noted that "though the research base has great breadth, it lacks significant depth, has poor sample and setting descriptions, and lacks methodological rigor" (p. 133). These methodological concerns are substantial barriers and limit the trustworthiness, reliability, validity, and generalizability of research findings. However, the focus of this article is not about the methodology of disability research but rather addresses how implications are framed and shared.

In addition to legitimate and significant methodological concerns, research and assessment of disability in higher education also could be more useful and actionable. At a recent gathering of higher education disability scholars, the *Making Disability Visible Workshop* sponsored by the Spencer Foundation, there was consensus that the following four concerns are consistent problems in the reporting of disability research. First, the ways in which implications are constructed limit the utility and applicability of much disability-focused research and assessment. Specifically, journal articles, conference presentations, policy documents, and internal assessments about disability in higher education often are written for single audiences, ignoring their much broader readership (Priestley et al., 2010). Joss et al. (2016) explicitly argued for the involvement of "end-users" in disability research. Second, especially in research grounded in the medical model, authors often place the responsibility for change on people with disabilities rather than focusing on ways in which the environment can be made to function more effectively for all members of the community (Shakespeare, 2006). Third, authors often reinforce stereotypes related to disability and reify typical ways of functioning. Finally, much writing about disability, especially theory, is written in language inaccessible to scholars not immersed in the specific frameworks or models in question and is even less accessible to lay readers unfamiliar with academic jargon (Peña et al., 2018).

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These barriers reduce the probability practitioners will read and incorporate disability research into their practice. But disability practitioners' work can be strengthened by grounding it in research. Practitioners can better advocate for resources if they can point to data-based empirical work demonstrating tools' and programs' effectiveness with the students they serve and they can gain more support for their initiatives by grounding their work in theory. In this article, I address each of these four concerns and describe ways in which authors can enhance the utility of their disability-focused inquiry by highlighting specific examples.

Make Implications Applicable to Diverse Audiences

Rather than writing solely for scholars or practitioners in specific functional areas, disability research should consider multiple possible audiences. This will require consultation outside authors' areas of specialty and managing institutional expectations about valued publication outlets.

Problem

Literature related to disabled college students may be read by multiple audiences in part because there is so little of it, especially in high-prestige and widely read journals (Kimball & Thoma, 2019; Peña, 2014). Additionally, what is published is often in impairment-specific publications (Madaus et al., 2018), leading authors to craft narrowly focused implications. But because there is limited research on disabled college students (and even less on disabled faculty and staff), readers may problematically apply impairment-specific findings to other disabled groups on campus or to other functional areas.

The limited amount of disability research makes it important that what is published be made relevant to multiple areas of higher education. Unfortunately, authors rarely consider the breadth of possible readers and the implications of their findings for areas they know little about. And because the literature on disability in intersection with other social identities is even sparser within higher education research, it is exceptionally rare to find scholarship that addresses the multiple aspects of disabled people's social identities.

Solutions

Authors should write implications relevant to the full range of potential readers, that might include, among others, disabled students, researchers, disability service providers, families of disabled students, funding agencies, K-12 educators, policy makers,

faculty, and administrators (Pasque et al., 2012). Given that authors are unlikely to be knowledgeable about each of these perspectives, it is helpful to consult with practitioners and scholars in related areas to develop ideas about possible implications.

For example, I was recently part of a research group looking at the influence of residence hall living on disabled students' success (Wilke et al., 2019). While all of us on the research team had at some point worked in residence life, for most of us it was in the distant past, so we asked a housing professional to go over our findings and provide input on the implications. While our first audience was housing professionals, as the research was funded by an Association of College and University Housing Officers-International grant, our findings suggest we should consider targeting future reports of the study to food services managers, architectural design firms, prospective students, small college vice presidents for student affairs, as well as disability resource office personnel.

As another example of writing implications for multiple audiences, Vaccaro et al. (2015) framed their discussion of a study about disabled students' sense of belonging to diverse higher education professionals who interact with students, writing "Disability services professionals should partner with academic and student affairs colleagues in other functional areas (e.g., residence life, orientation, student activities) to design programs, policies, and services that promote self-advocacy, mastery, and social relationships for students with disabilities" (p. 683).

A good example of writing implications that have broad applicability can be found in Stapleton (2015), in her study of undergraduate d/Deaf women of color. Her recommendations included suggestions for data collection; sharing knowledge of identity development models; providing training on audism and hearing privilege to staff, faculty, and student leaders; supporting and publicizing programming and coursework on Deaf and Ethnic Studies; and

> creating inclusive campus cultures, policies, and opportunities…Make current student spaces more inclusive and considerate of intersecting identities. For example, provide resources for d/Deaf women in the women's center, purchase books on minoritized d/Deaf people for the multicultural center library, highlight famous d/Deaf people within ethnic month celebrations, and invite a d/Deaf queer speaker for National Coming Out Week. (p. 585)

These implications are notable in that they address a wide range of offices and programs, personnel (fac-

ulty, staff, student leaders), and intersecting social identities.

Participants in a study are likely to have insight into its implications. While member checking is "standard" good practice in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018), it is rare in quantitative studies. Although certainly aligned with the goals of critical quantitative research (Stage, 2007), member checking has not yet been recommended as a research or assessment technique even in critical quantitative approaches. For multiple reasons, it can be challenging to enact member checking, especially when there is a gap between the time of data collection and submission for publication or when doing secondary data analysis. However, given the history of disability research misrepresenting the needs and desires of disabled individuals (Gere, 2005; Oliver, 1997; Shakespeare, 2014), it is critical both quantitative and qualitative findings are confirmed with the people from whom the data were solicited and that the implications have relevance for disabled participants' lives.

Writing for diverse audiences will, of course, require authors to identify publication and presentation locations and formats that are accessed by these populations and to accept that many of these outlets will not "count" as traditional publications or be in venues valued for their selectivity or reach. For those who hold traditional faculty positions, this is an important consideration. However, if we hope to do research that contributes to more inclusive and just campuses, we must accept that some portion of our scholarly contribution may well be in formats and for audiences that are less valued by research-focused departments and universities (Pasque et al., 2012).

Fix the Environment

Except in the case of purely theoretical scholarship, useful research and assessment in higher education always should explicitly address ways of improving practice. In disability writing, too often those implications focus on changing the disabled person rather than on improving ableist campus contexts.

Problem

It is not unusual for research on disabled students to take a deficit perspective: looking for ways in which students with disabilities are failing, or reinforce stereotypes of disabled students as "less than," rather than addressing inaccessible and ableist physical, organizational, attitudinal, and cultural environments (Evans et al., 2017). Authors may locate the cause of that failure in the students' minds, bodies, attitudes, and/or behaviors, implying that disabled students are inadequate, stupid, lazy, or coddled (Delaney et al., 2015).

Drawing on the thinking of Gloria Ladson-Billings, Patel (2016) argued that research on marginalized people typically is conducted "through the lens of a presumed lack or underdevelopment leading to an achievement gap, rather than being grounded in the political, economic, and historical infrastructure of inequity" (p. 42). While Patel was writing specifically about decolonizing educational research, her argument applies equally to disability research. Patel made clear the need for researchers to address systemic and local environmental barriers to students' success, asking "How might research progress differently if it searched for interventions to transform the interconnected structures that marginalize some populations while privileging others?" (pp. 22-23).

Solution

While acknowledging that impairment is real and can create limits, useful, actionable disability research will explicitly address ableist barriers in campus environments. For example, like all students, disabled students sometimes make less effective or adaptive choices, lack self-awareness, and may not be their own best advocates. However, authors should not have higher expectations for disabled students than for students without disabilities. While many students would benefit from, for example, better self-advocacy skills, greater value lies in addressing how the environment can function effectively for all students (Evans, et al., 2017), reducing the need for self-advocacy. Researchers should make clear that administrators and faculty have the greatest responsibility to create environments that function for the broadest array of students.

In another example, disability literature frequently references the fact that most students receiving academic accommodations in high school do not identify themselves to disability resource offices when entering college (Newman et al., 2011). Proposed solutions often focus on raising awareness of the need to self-identify or publicizing the services of disability resource offices to entering students. Both these strategies are attempts to change the behavior of disabled students. Neither of these strategies addresses the fact that the university environment is problematic for some students who used accommodations in high school, stigma remains a pervasive aspect of many higher education climate cultures (Evans et al., 2017), and that widespread implementation of universal design principles would mitigate many of the challenges these students face. Authors should iden-

tify ways in which the campus environment can be changed to support all members of the community, including those with disabilities.

A good example of implications focused on changing the environment can be found in the Stapleton (2015) article summarized earlier in this report. Note that all the implications she enumerated are ways to create a supportive campus environment for d/Deaf women of color, not to change them.

Promote Diverse Ways of Being and Functioning

Expanding on the precept of Universal Design that argues that good design can be used in multiple ways ("flexibility in use;" Center for Universal Design, 2008, para. 8), actionable, practical disability research in higher education should reinforce the idea that there are multiple "good" ways to function on college campuses.

Problem

Closely related to the problem of fixing the student (or disabled person) rather than the environment is the dynamic that writers of disability research often try to find ways to make disabled students "normal" or enable them to function in more "typical" ways, presuming "normal, typical" ways are inherently superior to other ways of being (Evans et al., 2010). It is rare to come across authors who suggest that non-normative timelines, ways of demonstrating competence or learning, or forms of involvement are as valid and appropriate as are typical ways.

Solution

An approach both more just and more practical is to advocate for campuses, systems, and processes that allow for and value multiple ways of learning, teaching, communicating, reading, writing, moving, and being, presuming that "expecting and encouraging all people to do things in ways most effective for them will create more inclusive, just campus environments" (Evans, et al., 2017, p. 440). Additionally, environments that facilitate members functioning in ways most suited to them should increase their success during and beyond their experience on campus. Thus, implications sections of research and assessment projects need to suggest and encourage multiple responses and solutions, recognizing the diversity of ways that students, staff, and faculty can function most effectively.

While not grounded in empirical study, Price (2013), in her book *Mad at School*, pointed out that universities expect certain levels of academic production within specific timeframes. She made the powerful argument that equitable policy would allow for variability in the amount of scholarly work that can be expected in given timeframes and provide flexibility to accommodate the unpredictable productivity that may be a consequence of disability.

The emerging literature on culturally responsive assessment (e. g., Montenegro & Jankowski, 2019) makes related arguments in the context of ways students might demonstrate their learning. Authors might draw implications from their findings recommending institutions expand the ways students might demonstrate their learning. For example, authors might recommend instructors allow students to select between exams, papers, oral, or poster presentations, as suggested by Grove (2016) and Singer-Freeman and Bastone (2016) rather than suggesting strategies focused on enabling students to perform better on single ways of demonstrating learning. Authors should be intentional in thinking creatively about how their findings might validate, expand., and support the diverse ways disabled students, staff, and faculty work, learn, and contribute on campus.

Use Accessible Language

Too often, writers present useful ideas using vocabulary and concepts that are not understandable to anyone other than highly educated and specially trained readers. Authors should use clear, unambiguous language to explain theory and implication so all potential readers can understand their meaning.

Problem

Under the best of circumstances, academic language, especially the language of research and evaluation, tends to be obscure, idiosyncratic, coded, and generally hard to understand to non-academics. The areas of disability studies and critical disability theory (CDT) have tremendous practical implications to those who work to create campuses that support the success of disabled community members. These include the importance of understanding disability from the perspective of disabled people; considering disability as, in part, a group experience of oppression rather than an individual experience of physical/mental limitation; disability as "dynamic" (Dirth & Branscombe, 2018, p. 1302), in that its meaning and experience varies across time and context; the importance of intersectional perspectives; critique of binary constructs "such as disability/impairment or society/body" (Brown et al., 2019, p. 23); and a fundamental questioning of what constitutes disability (Brown, et al., 2019; Peña et al., 2016).

Unfortunately, much of the writing in those fields (like most other critical and post-modern approaches)

uses vocabulary and phrasing indecipherable to lay readers and researchers from other disciplinary backgrounds; Brown, et al. (2019) noted that the discourse of CDT uses, "highly academic language, references to Western philosophers, and [a] verbose, dense writing style" (p. 25). Consequently, unless care is taken to clearly explain vocabulary and concepts, even readers who have access to research and assessment about disability in higher education may not understand the underlying conceptual frameworks or potential implications.

Solution

Theoretical sections in published empirical research tend to be brief, and it is challenging to explain succinctly the complexities of disability studies and critical disability studies frameworks. To make the ideas of these theories useful to diverse readers, authors need to translate the concepts into clear, unambiguous wording and define concepts that may invert or parody traditional definitions or concepts. For example, the concept of the narrative prosthesis is used within critical disability studies to understand how disabled people are represented and what they symbolize in (usually literary) contexts (Mitchell & Snyder, 2014). The narrative prosthesis is a term that if explained effectively may have value in analyzing how disabled people are considered within higher education. Without clarification, however, most readers will not understand the reference and not consider how disability can be problematically used to convey institutional messages.

Higher education researchers are just recently using CDT in their scholarship. Some effective explanations of CDT theory in the empirical higher education research literature can be found in Abes and Wallace (2018, p. 548) and Miller (2015, pp. 379-380). However, even these authors explicitly use CDT almost exclusively in the theoretical framework portion of their writing rather than in the implications.

Conclusion

To help create higher education environments where disabled student, staff, and faculty can fully benefit and contribute, higher education disability research must become relevant to a broader range of practitioners and policy makers, focus on changing campus environments, support diverse ways of functioning, and be understandable to all possible readers. If the authors of disability research and assessment can make these changes, their studies can be effective tools in addressing the ableism pervasive in higher education.

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