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Dissecting “Disability” Through The Eyes of Ability-Diverse Post-Secondary Students

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ABSTRACT

Addressing existing gaps in literature regarding ability-diverse students while dissecting current disability policy using an ableism as well as hegemonic lens through the eyes of the students themselves is necessary. The focus was on creating a strong voice and improving future policies. Eleven participants self-identifying as disabled were recruited from Sault College in Sault Sainte Marie, Ontario, Canada. From the interviews, there were five major reoccurring themes voiced by all participants; thoughts on the connotation of the word disability in today’s world, feelings about perception by the College community and the community at large on disability and those who are disabled, the importance of recognizing individual differences, how well supported they feel (in their personal lives and at the College), and overall recommendations from the participants about what needs to change to better their lives and experiences as well as the lives and experiences of future ability-diverse students across the PSE system.

Keywords: Ability, diverse, disability, post-secondary education, policy

INTRODUCTION

Disabled (ability-diverse) students have faced many challenges over the years at the post-secondary level and throughout history in their lives. They have not only been marginalized but also ignored, judged, or altogether forgotten at the post-secondary level, and are “largely absent from discourse in the domains of higher education scholarship, research, and practice” (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012, p. 40). The underlying focus should be on hegemony and ableism as correlated to the hindrance of the ability-diverse from reaching their full potential. They are in need of a voice, advocacy, recognition, and equity in order to excel phyiscally, academically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually at the post-secondary level and in life itself. Increased awareness of these issues has proven difficult over time.

A comprehensive analysis of current journal articles published between 1951 and 2012 conducted by Gelbar et al. (2015), suggested that specifically students with physical challenges were mentioned in only 81 of 615 databased articles and no articles investigated the effectiveness of program specific supports or accommodations for students with various disabilities. They state:

> While students with physical disabilities were a major impetus for the birth of the postsecondary disability services field, the current examination of the literature base highlights a dearth of studies related to this cohort, few that provide evaluative data related to practices, and fewer still that are experimental or quasi-experimental. Furthermore, the current research base is fragmented and does not focus solely on the experiences of college students with physical disabilities, as they were often included with heterogeneous samples of college students with disabilities. Fortunately, the current trend over the past five years suggests that more studies are now focusing on the population [students with disabilities]. (Gelbar et al., 2015, p. 12)

Still in 2024, this indicates the need for more discussion regarding students and people with disabilities. Furthermore, Stewart Craig (1991) used the term ability-diverse decades ago because he thought it to be a friendlier term for the differently-abled, and that ‘disabled’ acts as a hindering label. Therefore, the need for empathy, understanding, and policy updates at all levels is important in order to eliminate and minimize the use of outdated terms like “disability”, “disabled”

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etc., and move to more inclusive language such as the above suggested ability-diverse.

UNDERSTANDING THE TERM ABILITY-DIVERSE: THE NEED FOR CHANGE

Utilization of the term disabled could be considered offensive and in promotion of an ableism perspective within the non-disabled community. While one researcher conducted an interview with an abilty-diverse post-secondary student, it was noted that able-bodied individuals make associations and paradigmatic assumptions about ability-diverse individuals, for example, that a person who uses a wheelchair with a headrest has other "problems" such as cognitive impairments (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012). This same thought can be applied to a non-disabled person's perspective of individuals termed "disabled".

Stewart Craig (1991) notes this as he mentions that "the labels placed upon disabled students have an effect upon the teachers responsible for their education" (p.142). For the purpose of full disclosure, the information from Craig above is taken from an article based around elementary school physical education teachers and the perspectives they have when they encounter and have to teach physically disabled youth. However, a correlation in the use of this label knows no age category and still could have just as much of a negative impact and connotation with students at the post-secondary level. If Craig is correct in stating that placing these labels on disabled students effects a person's perspective of them, then when using the term "disabled" the focus is negatively placed on a person's disability. Based on this premise, inexperienced people that have very little experience with the ability-diverse, or only have experience with those who have extreme limitations, may make prescriptive and paradigmatic assumptions founded upon those experiences.

This supports the sweeping generalization that all those with disabilities are incapable and unable to function in society and in the many facets of their lives. To minimize this close-minded way of thinking it is important to be cognisant of perspective taking and remember that for some, their scope of experience with the ability-diverse is very limited and that more understanding and education is needed. Part of this education is done through informed/reflective action to attempt to correct flawed ways of thinking and burdens of injustice when stating a person is "disabled". Referring to someone as ability-diverse puts an emphasis on the things a person can do rather than the things they cannot. This is the first step in educating people and decreasing the myopic view or idea that those who identify as ability-diverse are "disabled". This is imperative so that able-bodied/non-disabled individuals feel comfortable, unthreatened, and understand the ability-diverse; the disabled body in 2024 is still threatening to those unfamiliar with it (Disability & Society, 1998), therefore, knowledge, understanding, growth, and empathy can empower all parties involved and create greater cognisance and open-mindedness for everyone at the post-secondary level as well as in society.

Positive growth and success of the ability-diverse regardless of limitations (or lack thereof) often begins with confidence and the recognition of self-worth. This idea in itself can often be problematic for the ability-diverse as "Limited ability to socialise at university should be considered one of the 'socially imposed restrictions' affecting disabled people" (Papasotiriou & Windle, 2012, p. 936). The confidence and above discussed socialization of someone identifying as ability-diverse is impeded by the many struggles that said person goes through while attending post-secondary school. In a specific study in particular, one participant mentioned suffering from depression and self-imposed isolation while attending university because of the negative responses and perceptions of the disabled by his peers (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012). Another participant in the same study reported such a level of "suffering" because of negative peer relationships while at school that his emotional anguish began to cause him physical pain (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012). When discussing assumptions and the prevalent ableism exuded by peers, another ability-diverse student discussed the importance of demonstrating confidence and value in order for the voice of the ability-diverse population to be heard (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012). The difficulty lies in finding a vehicle that promotes the magnification of the voice in order for all societal groups both inside and outside of the PSE system to understand and gain knowledge about the complexities of the ability-diverse. One component within the research that continually arose was the need for increased awareness about the ability-diverse, the individual nuances of each person, and their disability.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this qualitative study was to address existing gaps in literature regarding ability-diverse students and dissect current disability policy using an ableism as well as hegemonic lens through the eyes of ability-diverse students. The focus was on creating a strong voice and improving future policies.

METHODS

Techniques rooted in epistemology help to analyze current policy and attitudes impacting the ability-diverse at the post-secondary level. Further exploration from a phenomenological lens will include how they feel they are viewed by their professors, friends, colleagues, and how that impacts them physically, socially, emotionally, and even spiritually. The hope is to understand the shared experiences of students with disabilities and how they perceive the world in which they exist, while creating a safe space and addressing any need for change. This study had been previously approved by the Sault College Research Ethics Board.

Participant Selection Process

Recruitment took place at Sault College (Sault Sainte Marie, Ontario, Canada). Criterion-based sampling was used to select several current College students who recognize themselves as disabled; this was to avoid the need for any medical documentation and to demonstrate understanding that every student’s perspective as well as definition of disability and journey could be different. This process of self-identification has been positively utilized in previous studies such as Hutcheon and Wolbring (2012) and many others. It was the hope that these varying perspectives and journeys would foster more meaningful interviews with depth and a myriad of opinions, answers, and life stories. Electronic posters were used to recruit participants from this institution; they were posted on multiple forms of social media and the internal email system by supportive individuals and entities within Sault College. Lack of human resources compounded with challenges of time and availability made obtaining participants initially difficult (n = 7). With the help of social media, email, discussions with former students, along with the local and College community, n =11 participants were obtained from multiple programs and disciplines across the College. Like Subedi (2021) and other studies with similar participant numbers, it was deemed that eleven was an appropriate number of participants as to allow for proper in-depth exploration of responses (Vasileiou et al., 2018). It was not a requirement for participants to disclose any official medical diagnosis, although they were asked with the opportunity to decline, to share the reason(s) why they felt they qualified for the study, and to discuss any specifics of which they were comfortable sharing during their interview. Eleven participants were students in either diploma or degree programs at the time of recruitment. Each participant was given an invitation to participate outlining their expected involvement in the study and any risks they might experience if they voluntarily agreed to be a part of it. Participants had to sign a consent form and were given the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time or refuse to respond to any question they were not comfortable answering; partnered with this was a welcoming space and environment along with periodic checking with each participant throughout their interview to make sure they were comfortable with the question(s) being asked at the time. Participants were also given an opportunity to review a draft of the written manuscript before it was disseminated to any other individual or entity, public or private.

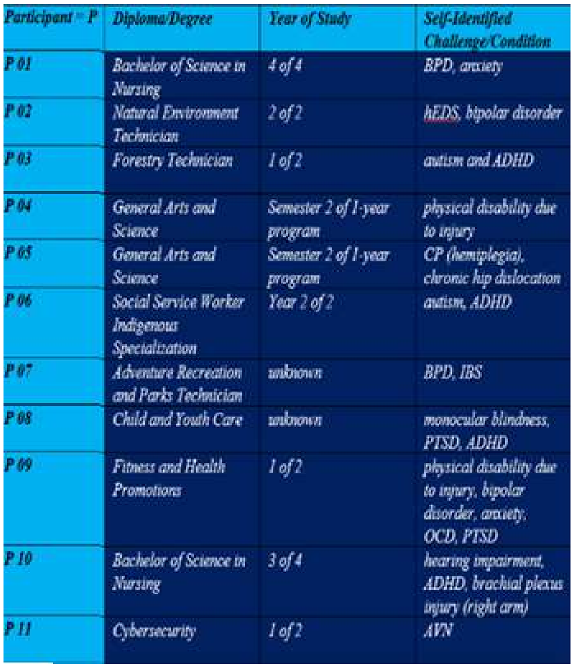
Data Collection

Semi-structured comprehensive interviews were led to uncover common themes using phenomenology to understand the shared experiences of students with disabilities and how they perceive the world in which they exist. Interviews were electronically recorded and transcribed verbatim. It was the expectation that these students would provide an understanding of how they view their disability and the role it plays in their post-secondary journey. There were several set questions asked, and interviews ranged in length from fifteen minutes to one hour depending on participant responses and the other discussions that initiated from said responses. Data was collected over a three-week period in February and March of 2024. Questions asked included:

I. How do you feel about the use of the word disability in 2024?
II. In relation to your disability, how do you believe you are perceived by your peers, classmates, friends, and professors?
III. How do you conduct research when completing papers/projects? Does your condition influence the process at all?

Participants were also asked what they hoped would come out of this study to help them and future ability-diverse students. Recordings were dissected to uncover common and reoccurring themes within the participants’ answers which were then organized into categories for further exploration:

Table 1 Participant Sample Analysis



Participant = P	Diploma/Degree	Year of Study	Self-Identified Challenge/Condition
P 01	Bachelor of Science in Nursing	4 of 4	BPD, anxiety
P 02	Natural Environment Technician	2 of 2	hEDS, bipolar disorder
P 03	Forestry Technician	1 of 2	autism and ADHD
P 04	General Arts and Science	Semester 2 of 1-year program	physical disability due to injury
P 05	General Arts and Science	Semester 2 of 1-year program	CP (hemiplegia), chronic hip dislocation
P 06	Social Service Worker Indigenous Specialization	Year 2 of 2	autism, ADHD
P 07	Adventure Recreation and Parks Technician	unknown	BPD, IBS
P 08	Child and Youth Care	unknown	monocular blindness, PTSD, ADHD
P 09	Fitness and Health Promotions	1 of 2	physical disability due to injury, bipolar disorder, anxiety, OCD, PTSD
P 10	Bachelor of Science in Nursing	3 of 4	hearing impairment, ADHD, brachial plexus injury (right arm)
P 11	Cybersecurity	1 of 2	AVN

RESULTS

Eleven participants lent their own distinct voice about their disability, life journey, and personal growth to this study. Within each individual's uniqueness, five common themes were uncovered; a) thoughts on the connotation of the word disability, b) perception by the College community and the community at large on disability and those who are disabled, c) the importance of recognizing individual differences, d) how well supported they feel (in their personal lives and at the College), e) overall recommendations from the participants about what needs to change to better their lives and experiences as well as the lives and experiences of future ability-diverse students across the PSE system (see Figure I below).

Figure I: Common Themes within the Collective Particpant Voice

Connotation of the term Disability

Thoughts on the term and use of the word disability were consistent amongst most participants, what echoed within many of the responses was how the potential negative connotation of the word made them feel and how it was used by non-disabled members of society.

P 01 discussed how the word did not leave them with a good feeling and it made them feel "less than"; P 02 had the same sentiment as they believed it was a big umbrella term that should not be a way to describe someone anymore, that it makes a [disabled] person feel something about themselves that they should not have to feel while simultaneously creating a negative perception in the way a non-disabled individual views a person with diverse-abilities. P 02 thought shifting this negative perception to the positive would come with changing the term. P 03 noted the term could be considered offensive because those without disability think a "disabled" person is incapable, when the focus should be on discerning what is different in others to create equity and to give a person the specific assistance they need, as some may need more help than others.

P 04 had a very unique perspective as their disability occurred later in life through injury due to a bad fall; this has given them an overall greater sense of empathy for ability-diverse students and their struggles; because of this, they are not "100% okay" with the use of the word disability, they feel it "makes them, [people] with disabilities different, who wants to be different?" Their injury has created a "ripple" in their life and has even impacted them mentally. They do not even feel comfortable walking in front of their husband since their gait has become more pronounced, therefore, when others question their disability or the way they walk in other settings such as at school, it makes them "just [want] to vanish" and they find these day-to-day scenarios challenging. P 11's ideas on disability were akin to P 04, stating, "We can have some other term instead of using the word disabled because we are able to do everything… through perseverance." P 11 did mention that Canada is better at creating equity than their home country, in their view, despite this support, many non-disabled people need to realize those with disabilities are doing the same as others, just differently ("differently-abled").

Participant 05, as well as 09 voiced like-minded standpoints on disability, mirroring the other study participants mentioned above. The word disability and its use causes P05 to think that people see them as "a person who can't do anything", or "handle big roles." P05 found the transition from high school to post-secondary particularly challenging with fewer supports available compared to their k-12 experience. These challenges are compounded with their struggles as a young indigenous adult trying to find themselves as they grow and mature. He finds that people assume things about him just by looking at him, making assumptions about his cultural background and his gait, causing him to often become frustrated and annoyed. P 05 authored his own paper on what it was like to be an indigenous person with a disability to try and create more awareness while strengthening the collective voice of the ability-diverse. P 09 necessitates creating more awareness as well, as she believes people without a disability will look at the disabled after hearing the word with the assumption "they have something really wrong with them." Her notion is that an ability-diverse person may have a more complex life, but it does not mean they are "disabled." In part of her interview, she discussed how some people abuse their disability and let it define them when they are capable, her counter to this was in saying that "many disabled people are very successful. You can't necessarily [link] disability to failures or success," though she did acknowledge the ability-diverse can struggle, a person with a disability should not use their challenges to gain assistance or advantages they do not need when they can succeed on their own.

Contrastingly, participants 06, 07, 08, and 10 had a slightly different view on the connotation of the word disability. Participant 06 who is a mature student, discussed how they used to hate the word disability when first diagnosed with autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD); to them, it carried an internalized stigma of not feeling "normal", but now the sentiment is that the word can empower when individuals are able to complete tasks and succeed within the parameters of equity and their accommodations. They further opined that people with lived experience should demonstrate that the word disability can give people power. Although it can come with protecting and othering, the meaning behind the word can change to difference of ability, diverse abilities etc. Therefore, to them it is about changing the connotation of "disability" more positively while gaining understanding from all people in the PSE system and beyond.

P 07 was very matter of fact when discussing disability, stating that it is simply a word that describes what it needs to (referring to classification of condition or disability), and it is a word with which they are comfortable using as well as hearing. P 08 voiced a concurring opinion with P 07, viewing disability as a more clinical term used to describe a person's limitations, stating, "I'm not able to see, it doesn't make me invalid." She continued, "I'm just not concerned [with its meaning]." However, P 08 concluded this portion of the interview by acknowledging words or terms can be misused to attack others and that is wrong. Similarly, P 10 had like-minded opinions on the term disability. She mentioned being comfortable with the term her whole life and her parents were a huge influence on her sentiments because they made it, "not a thing." This participant also frequently lets people know about her brachial plexus injury, saying, "I have a disability in my right arm, you might see me do things differently." To her, the word carries no negative weight because, as she puts it, "it's just the reality for me."

She did recognize in a larger sense, from the perspective of society, how disability could make people feel inferior if it is not treated fairly, asserting, "society feels uncomfortable when it comes to disability, whether physical or invisible… I think just making the conversation around it a lot more casual would help." She furthered this when discussing the need for more general inclusion and understanding by opining, "although it's important for people with disabilities to be included, it's almost as if the focus on it creates some sort of divide… disabled versus a regularly abled person." She called her response a "double-edged sword," fearing this divide, when in actuality, people with physical disabilities often just do things differently and others do not often notice otherwise. She tries to create opportunities to talk about her disabilities because she thinks it is important to talk about them in a positive light. To her, it is about educating people so they are less uncomfortable; her disability is not negative, "it's just part of [her]."

Perception, Recognizing Differences, Support

Participants were asked to comment on how they felt they (and their disability) were perceived by friends, colleagues, peers, professors etc. within the College and greater community.

Participant 01 recalled her first experience requesting help at the College was not a good one, she originally did not feel supported and felt diminished by her first point of contact. A close family member within the College advocated and helped her connect with a different counsellor, this person she describes as her "angel." She noted that this counsellor made her feel safe, unjudged, as well as welcomed, and this is how all people should be in situations like this all the time. When thinking of the negative experience with her first point of contact coupled with other incidents of feeling "exposed" while on placement, she indicated that:

> There's a big thing about feeling safe, because I think like knowing, yeah, like when you're about to be vulnerable or you're going there [student services], sometimes it can be in crisis or a time of really just needing someone and that's how you're received. I don't think a lot of people like, I feel like it's hard enough for people to go do that [talk about their disability].

P 01 is not sure she would have gone through seeking support if it had not been for certain family member(s) advocating on her behalf. She commented on how she feels safe when people are non-judgmental, accepting, and open; in her mind, sometimes this is just a vibe or feeling of compassion or kindness and her counsellor went above and beyond. P 10 also talked about how accessibility has been "huge" for her as she had no previous support. She too has had mostly positive experiences apart from placement where her physical abilities were called into question during a situation where she asked for help with a lift because of her brachial plexus injury; she deemed the comments to be hurtful though the other person (clinical instructor) did apologize. P 01 cited this study and other discussions are part of the conversation for change as well as exposure to make it [disability] "not weird, because it's not weird."

P 07 felt that post-secondary institutions can be too "cookie cutter" when it comes to accommodations, explaining their borderline personality disorder (BPD) by recounting, "I don't have like standard mental illness like there's like, the way that colleges deal with mental illnesses. It's very much like cookie cutter. You have depression, you have anxiety. That's pretty much it." P

07 felt that because they did not fit into this certain standard, they were not heard. During an incident with residence, they mentioned, "all I legitimately wanted was a compromise, I wanted time. I wanted space. That was all I was asking for, and they weren't giving either of those to me." They stressed that BPD is very complex, that it is "a trauma-based disorder and it [very] much reflects into your personality… it presents differently [from person-to-person]."

On a similar note about support, P 06 discussed how they believed communication is the key and they consider themselves very supported within their program because of this open communication. They feel respected and empowered but think youth trying to understand their neurodivergence need help and they are trying to create a support group as a foundation for a safe space through the Alliance of Neurodiverse Students, wanting to connect this across the PSE system. Their reason for doing this is so they can understand each other and "speak the same language." P 06 referred to themselves as an elder neurodivergent identifying as they/them and discussed neurodivergent females as "the first generation of women who were allowed to be diagnosed and not put in a sanitorium, not taken, and not othered." They "have a different choice, to use [their] voices and [their] powers to shift the systems that are keeping [them] in these holes." They ended this thought on safe space by stating, "it is absolutely imperative that students have a place, especially neurodivergent students, where they can come together with each other and with elders in the community." P 03 also mentioned the need for someone to talk to but is not sure it should be counselling with a sentiment that peer mentoring might be more helpful as people in that setting might be closer to her in age. She opined that "authority figures seen as like a professor or something like that can be intimidating, but like being a peer, they're in the same shoes as you currently."

When talking of support and comparing her experiences here to her home country of India, P 04 discussed "Canada and seeing the culture and the people and how the people interact, it's, it's, it's entirely different. And I'm glad that everything is different here because it's so refreshing for me." She went on to say how women are still being pushed aside in Indian culture, that "it's how it is and it it's changing gradually, but still there is a lot to change [in India]. So, coming from there to Canada and experiencing all this, I'm really glad to be here."

P 11, also an international student, had a similar opinion after coming to study in Canada. Although her condition has created challenges for her at the College and in her personal life, she has found some relief here. She mentioned her counsellor has been very good to her and she feels very well supported; she was even given a special portable chair called a "chairless chair" for comfort and pain reduction that she is now able to use at home. Her classmates in her program are very supportive of her and she is happy to be able to study, be a mom, and not be dependent on anyone. To her, "Canada has done something in her life," and she feels "Canada is very supportive of people like me [a person with a disability]." She continued, saying, "people are not seen as [different] here compared to back home." In her mind, all of this has allowed her to gain confidence, and she desires to be an example of growth and perseverance for other ability-diverse students. When finalizing her ideas on support, she discussed how she would ask for help if needed but feels much stronger now because of the opportunities she has had at school and here in Canada in general. Though their journey was very different, P 08 had a positive experience like P 04 and P 11 when it came to supports afforded to her here at the College; she feels very well supported by accessibility services, they helped her get certain diagnoses for her diversities, and they were also willing to help her before her diagnoses were official.

P 02 has had a different experience here at the College overall but does feel her counsellor "gets stuff done" for her. Other than being supported by her counsellor, she stated she feels she has not been properly accommodated at the classroom level, like it is in one ear and out the other, unfortunately. P 09 had comparable thoughts to P 02 as to how she feels she is supported within the PSE system as well; in her words, she is supported "alright." She has accommodations for longer deadlines and a notetaker, however, the notetaker is a student and their attendance has been sporadic at best; she has a recording device to try and circumvent this problem but mentioned that listening to recordings does not help her retain information, and the transcriptions are rarely accurate. Due to these issues and others relating to post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after her injury, she cannot always be present and sometimes falls behind. P 09 also discussed how certain courses addressing topics of injury can be triggering because it causes her to replay her own accident over in her mind. This has further been exacerbated because she feels that certain professors use words that minimize her injury in class through unintentional comparison to other injuries deemed to be more "challenging." P 09 made her thoughts known on specific course evaluations and these issues have seemed to have gotten better in the most recent semester.

P 05 had mixed thoughts on support when it came to their life here at the College. He uses the testing center when he needs to and has accommodations for classes that he deems as enough. Contrastingly, P 05 finds the physical accessibility of the College building(s) to be frustrating. He uses a mobility device and stressed in his interview that he wanted to bring awareness around the fact that the on-campus residence (3 floors) where he resides does not have an elevator. He believes there should be an elevator because not having one leaves him with a sense of being "segregated" to the first floor and with thoughts that he is not "normal." He also discussed how there should be a more solid contingency plan in place when elevators are out of service in the actual school itself. P 09 and 11 also echoed his words, discussing how they felt older areas of the building (A-wing) needed to be updated while stressing the importance of being more mindful of student needs regarding the physical layout and accessibility of the building. In P 09's words:

> The college specifically for me is OK for my disability, but for like other disabilities I've seen, like it's not OK at all. Like handicap. It's not a handicap accessible school at all. When I come to school in the morning the handicapped side of the door is locked [referring to the automatic door in A-wing].

She went on to explain how the handicapped button at the A-wing entrance is never activated when she arrives at school, which is 8AM most mornings. She furthered this with her belief that maneuverability in the A-wing is particularly challenging because there are a lot of corners, specifically in those old bathrooms. P 11 had similar thoughts in her interview discussing the need for more strategically placed accessible grab bars like those at Sault Area Hospital for people who have a tough time getting up (or down) from a seated position. P 09 closed out this part of her discussion by saying that the ramp outside of A-wing appeared to be blocked off for over a week in the wintertime because the snow was not removed in a timely manner.

Participant Recommendations

Participant recommendations varied from person-to-person based on individual opinions and needs, however, all participants resonated a collective idea on what they envisioned would enhance both their personal and academic lives in the modern PSE system; more education, discourse, and understanding for and by everyone at all levels of post-secondary institutions; fellow students, faculty, staff, and administration.

Participant 01 hoped this study would engage senior management to help change the culture even more; she talked about how people are generally accepting but there needs to be more acceptance of ability-diverse students and to "normalize different diversities." Relatedly, P 02 talked about how people need to be more understanding and employees need to be educated; she discussed the idea of having a position more tailored to accessibility and the nuanced needs of students with diverse abilities. She went on to say that offering more professional development for *all employees* would be helpful and what is being offered now is not good enough because people need more knowledge on how to help ability-diverse students/individuals. There were likeminded sentiments from P 03 who hoped there would be more care and consideration for people with disabilities so struggles could be minimized for future students.

P 04 felt there should be more initial info for new staff and students during orientation about accessibility and what supports are available. She also wanted to make it known that being a student with a disability is difficult and as an international student her challenges as an ability-diverse student are magnified. P 11, also an international student, hoped that through proper assistance and advancements, society can become more comfortable with disability by evolving to continue to help those in need. She stated that ability-diverse students can then lead by example through confidence and attitude by saying, "[if] they are able to do, why not me?" This, paving the way for future ability-diverse students to have belief in themselves to "[show] their talents."

P 06 raised the point that those in the PSE system should not only look at how students can be accommodated at school but also once they graduate. They mentioned the need for some kind of bridging program or liaison within the community linked to the schools; this would then leave ability-diverse students with a more solid foundation to succeed after graduation, allowing *all* individuals to grow in society. Further, they discussed that accommodations should not only accommodate the learning, but also get the student(s) to a point where the accommodations can be applicable in real life, something they do not believe is happening now. This idea was finalized with the thought that PSE system employees should talk to ability-diverse individuals with lived experience to foster growth and success for the future generation.

P 07 wanted to make it known that accessibility services need to be open to the idea that not everyone fits into the same box and felt that as the person accessing the services they should be shown more empathy and have more of a say regarding their specific needs so they can live up to their full potential. P 08 had thoughts mirroring P 07, discussing how everyone is different whether they have a disability or not, opining everyone needs to *want to* understand, be educated, and demonstrate empathy; in her words, "you can't force that on somebody else," but a person can always try and impart knowledge on others.

P 09 talked numerous times in her interview about her injury's impact on her mental health and how there needs to be more support groups created in schools as she discussed this institution's thoughts on mental health from her perspective; "I find they encourage it but they're actually not really encouraging anything for it."

She went on to talk about how the College says they care about students' mental health, but it is just lip service and no action, calling for "more action instead of just voice, talk." Adding to this, she mentioned how her own mental health is also often negatively impacted by general school stress; "Yeah, like because if I am not doing good academically, I'm not doing good mentally at all. As soon as I see it like that, I'm doing bad. My mental health is just out the window."

P 10 too requested a call to action discussing how representation is important; she discussed how this College is very present on social media but there is not a lot of focus on disability. She provided the example of including ability-diverse students (referring specifically here to those with physical diversities) in an ad to help normalize disability because "disability still sticks out to people if you haven't been exposed to it." P 10 did say although it is important to try and make disability normal through ideas like these, it should seem natural and unforced which can be challenging.

Limitations

There were a few factors which created several limitations to this study; first, there were time constraints placed on the researcher as the study had to be completed within a specific time frame. More time would have allowed for a closer review of transcriptions, recordings, and previous research, thus potentially altering the findings and conclusions of the study. Second, participants were current students recruited from one northern Ontario College who could not be subordinate to the researcher; a greater effort to obtain recent graduates as well as ability-diverse students from other institutions across the PSE system would have potentially added more perspective and variance in data collected from the interviews. Moreover, having a larger sample size in general could have also helped diversify the thoughts and views of participants with a wider range of responses and overall findings. Lastly, despite more research being done on this topic over the last number of years, locating quality peer-reviewed sources for a point of reference and to legitimize this study was still a challenge in 2024. Within these parameters, it is thought that there was still quite a spectrum of different viewpoints from the participants agreeing to be a part of this study along with their many unique and diverse abilities, allowing for high level and quality responses from everyone. It is the hope of this researcher to continue to expand on studies like this one in the future and attempt to mitigate many of the limitations mentioned above.

DISCUSSION

The participants of this study provided all individuals within the PSE system with much to discuss. One thing was made clear through their collective voice, that objectively, that voice is needed, and it needs to be strengthened. As they evidenced, disabilities and diversities impact everyone in different ways and this is always in flux and varying from person-to-person. Each individual student who took part in these interviews made their view(s) on the word disability known, how it made them feel, and why. What was also very evident was their desire to feel a sense of belonging, a strong sense of self, and be understood as ability-diverse students, and growing, contributing members of society; this, a part of the human condition, and what makes everyone exceptional. Many echoed the idea that their disability, though unique, is not something defining of their person, but simply a part of them and their life journey; something to respect and celebrate in the PSE system and beyond.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Like so many studies before this one, discourse and information about students and people with disabilities is lacking in discourse and professional academia (Gelbar et al., 2015). Further attention to ability-diverse individuals is necessary as the Canadian population ages. Almost 30% of Canadians currently identify as having one disability (or more), nearly double the previous decade, suggesting disability and diversity will have a personal impact on nearly everyone within the PSE system and in everyday life as time goes on (Armstrong, 2023).

The PSE system plays a major role in not only understanding and respecting disability, but also providing appropriate and ever-evolving support as well as equity to ability-diverse students. The students are not only the clients but are also the very life blood of the system itself; without them, the system would collapse and cease to exist. Therefore, these students deserve care, consideration, and understanding. After reading concerns such as the ones raised by the ability-diverse students in this study, it is often the kneejerk reaction of key stakeholders in the system to balk with vision blurred by ego and a defensive voice attempting to draw attention to what is already being provided. It is imperative that the words of the participants are looked at fairly and objectively without unnecessary bravado or personal bias. Whether or not the system is meeting a certain standard, either set out by government or the institutions themselves, improvements can always be made. Like technology, students and their diversities are in a constant state of change, consequently, their wants, desires, and needs then also change. The PSE system, its policies, employees, and stakeholders have a duty to change right alongside them to create a positive influence on their school as well as life journey. This could include updates to policy, accommodation, accessibility, and general upkeep of schools, while being mindful of varying diversities within each student population. This is only the beginning as the ability-diverse still need a stronger more consistent voice for change, both in the world of academia, and in society. This will help foster greater success, belonging, sense of self, and ultimately self-actualization, something every human being wants and needs.

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