

Experiencing Disability in Undergraduate Mathematics Education

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Dolmage (2017) made an argument that historical studies of disability created a knowledge base devoid of the disabled perspective. The field of disability studies emerged out of “institutions in which disability as a negative concept, as a form of disqualification, was invented and applied and cemented” (Dolmage, 2017, p. 6). From this, the medical model of disability was created, which seeks to pathologize disability, insinuating that the individual is innately flawed. The expectation, then, is that the individual should overcome or compensate for this difference (Lambert, 2019). Another model of disability is the social model, which separates the body (impairments) from disability: “Disability is reserved to describe how society disables individuals, in the form of inaccessible environments that do not allow disabled people to participate fully in society.” (Lambert, 2019, p. 280). Both models do not consider the lived experience of a disabled person but rather they create a binary between social worlds and impairment, essentially isolating the disabled individual from their own experience.

Instead, we used both the Complexly Embodied (Siebers, 2008) and Political/Relational (Kafer, 2013) models that were employed by Lambert (2019). The complexly embodied model is defined as “a social location complexly embodied,” understanding disability as both within the bodymind *and* our social worlds (Siebers, 2008, p. 14). Kafer (2013) proposed the political/relational model of disability to assert that disability is socially negotiated, inseparable from politics. This model “views disability as a site of shifting definitions that is felt, particularly in relation to concepts of normalcy” (Lambert, 2019, p. 283). Both theoretical models allow us to investigate undergraduate mathematics education through the lens of disability research. Therefore, we asked the following research question: How do disabled undergraduate students understand their identity as disabled in the context of postsecondary mathematics education?

Five students who self-identified as having a learning, intellectual, or developmental disability from a research university in the Mid-South were interviewed for roughly one hour. Eight interview questions were developed using Siebers’ (2008) and Kafer’s (2013) models of disability. Hypothesis coding (Saldaña, 2013) was used to analyze the interview data, and the predetermined codes were either complexly embodied, political, or relational.

Due to space, we share a complexly embodied example. Alex (he/him), unable to receive accommodations through the ADRC due to a lack of health insurance, struggled to finish his math exams in the time allotted to him. At first, Alex did not think anything beyond “well maybe I just hadn’t studied enough.” However, he began to worry when he looked over his graded exams, and “noticed that the questions that I did answer I largely got right. So that was also a contributing factor in the maybe this isn’t such a studying problem but something else.” This related to Lambert’s (2019) study who categorize themselves and others into one of two categories: “those who *get it fast* and those who *struggle slow*” [emphasis added] (p. 285). Alex, unable to finish his tests in the given time, began to understand his “slowness” as a disability. We intend to share more examples, limitations, and implications for the classroom in our poster.

References

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